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Asia's Surplus Sons and Missing Daughters

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A prejudice against baby girls has been part of many Asian societies for centuries. The Chinese text known as The Book of Songs offered this advice from over 1,000 years ago: "When a son is born, let him sleep on the bed, clothe him with fine clothes, and give him jade to play with." On the other hand, "When a daughter is born, let her sleep on the ground, wrap her in common wrappings, and given her broken tiles for playthings."

This ancient prejudice against baby girls is now combined with technological innovations that allow many Asian parents to select boys and avoid the birth of girls. Some parents are using advanced technologies such as sperm sorting and embryo selection. "New technology, of course, is not the only factor," explains the Chronicle of Higher Education: "In some rural areas, old-fashioned female infanticide still lingers."

Some researchers believe that more than 100 million women and girls are now missing from the populations of India and China alone. These are the so-called "missing women" identified by economist Amartya Sen. As Sen explains, the prejudice against girls is directly related to the low social status held by women in many Asian societies. As an economist, Mr. Sen's concern is with the impact of these "missing women" on the economic development of these nations. Valerie Hudson and Andrea den Boer point to an even more ominous danger.

According to these two researchers, the new sex-selection technologies have produced a generation of young men who will never marry.

The presence of millions of unmarried young males in a society is not only a problem for social stability, but an indicator of social pathology. Canadian psychologists Neil I. Wiener and Christian G. Mesquida have documented a correlation between a society's "male age ratio" and social violence. The "male age ratio" refers to the ratio of men age 15-29 compared to men age 30 and above. Where younger males predominate over older males, a society is much more prone to violence. Furthermore, Wiener and Mesquida argue that young men share a predisposition for "coalitional aggression" as they compete for social status, mates, and scarce resources.

Many observers of Asian cultures had hoped that, over time, the "missing women" problem would be resolved as the social value of women would increase and families would desire wives for their young sons. Unfortunately, this is not the reality in nations like India and China. In "A Dangerous Surplus of Sons?" reporter David Glenn of the Chronicle of

Higher Education explains that, in the language of demographers, a “high-sex-ratio” society is skewed toward males and a “low-sex-ratio” society is skewed towards females. Worldwide, the sex ratio is estimated to be 101, indicating that there are 101 men for every 100 women. The situation in Asia is altogether different.

In *Bare Branches*, the authors report that in 1993 and 1994, the ratio of boy babies to girls was 121 to 100. In recent years, the ratio of boy to girl birth in India has been 111 to 100. In 1990, a town near New Delhi reportedly recorded a sex ratio of 156 to 100.

David Glenn explains that the predisposition to sons is deeply rooted in sex roles, common to Asian societies. “A powerful Chinese social norm, especially strong in rural areas, holds that sons must care for their parents in old age,” he reports. “In both India and China, various folk hold beliefs that only a son can perform the religious rituals that will ease a deceased parent’s way into the afterlife.”

When sex-selection techniques fail to work or are unavailable, many parents resort to female infanticide or offer their girls up for adoption.

Another important factor behind the “missing women” phenomenon is China’s “one child only policy” that severely penalizes couples for producing a second child. When parents expect to have only one child, the cultural preference towards sons is exaggerated and produces a gender imbalance of dangerous proportions. Valerie M. Hudson and Andrea den Boer argue that the skewed birth ratios have produced “surplus” boys born in the late 1980s that are just now reaching adulthood. “With every passing year, these surplus males will become more and more an important social factor.” This is likely to lead to an “unstable context” that is likely to produce male hostility and even violence.

The central thrust of Hudson and den Boer’s argument is that unmarried young men, grouped together in mutual frustration, are likely to be attracted to the military or to militant organizations. The term “bare branches” refers to Chinese men who cannot find spouses. These “bare branches” are likely to demonstrate militant frustration with their lack of spouses, unspent sexual energy, and lack of family prospects.

The researchers point to historical precedent in making their case. The Qing Dynasty in 18th-century China was marked by rampant female infanticide. The dynasty responded by calling upon young single men to colonize the island of Taiwan. As David Glenn summarizes the research, “As a result, Taiwan developed an extremely high sex ratio and soon was swept by groups that combined banditry with anti-imperial rebellion.”

Valerie Hudson argues that the problem could be a precipitating factor for global conflict. “In 2020 it may seem to China and India that it will be worth it to have a very bloody battle in which a lot of their young men could die in some glorious cause,” she says. Neal Weiner agrees with the central thrust of the argument in *Bare Branches*. “Males cause trouble,” he commented. The presence of tens of millions of unmarried men in Chinese society “is potentially extremely disruptive for these societies.”

The argument in *Bare Branches* is directed toward the geopolitical reality and the prospect of military instability caused by millions of frustrated “surplus males” in Asian societies. These researchers are concerned about social pathology and the likelihood that violence will result. Christians should look at this same phenomenon with a far deeper concern.

The very idea of sex-selection should be abhorrent to the Christian conscience. An imbalance between males and females is not merely a factor behind potential social conflict, it is a dramatic demonstration of the human creature’s rebellion against the design of the Creator. A prejudice against baby girls is actually a prejudice against humanity, for God made human beings as male and female for His glory, and established marriage as the central organizing institution for human happiness, healthiness, and holiness. The very presence of “surplus males” and the phenomenon of “missing women” are reminders that human tampering with the divine design brings inherently dangerous consequences.

Christians do not need demographers to prove the fact that unmarried men need wives. This is God’s intention as reflected in the very order of creation and confirmed explicitly in the Bible.

Critics of the research undertaken by Ms. Hudson and Ms. den Boer argue that the researchers present false stereotypes of men and masculinity. Joshua S. Goldstein, Professor Emeritus of International Relations at George

Washington University, suggest that the term “surplus males” is both offensive and sexist. Professor Goldstein may be offended, but few rational observers would deny that unmarried young males have a greater tendency to violence and militance than young men who are married and establishing families.

The evidence from India and China should serve as a graphic warning of what could happen in the United States and other Western cultures if modern sex-selection technologies are applied in widespread use. The result of tampering with God’s order in creation is not merely a matter of danger—but a recipe for disaster.

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