

Gender Preference in Culture and Tradition

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One Saturday night, in August 1990, in Xiamen, Fujian Province, where I was teaching, I decided to take a walk in the park. It was a lovely summer evening and many young couples with their one child were cooling off from the hot day's sun. All around were young fathers and mothers doting on their healthy, jolly, little emperors, but only here and there could I see a little girl—and I had been told by one of my students that people in Xiamen preferred little girls to little boys. If such indeed was the truth, my eyes could not easily verify this as fact.



The 1990 census in China revealed that the male sex ratio at birth was abnormally high (about 114 boys to 100 girls). In some rural areas or in densely populated provinces such as Guangxi, Zhejiang, Anhui, Sichuan, Shandong and others, the male ratio reached as high as 125, 132, and even 149 to 100 girls.

Nature has fixed the ratio of male to female births. Nature dictates that the ratio of boys should be slightly higher than that of girls: 102-106 males to 100 females. China's tampering with na-

ture has resulted in a constant increase in the ratio of male births to female births.¹

In one city in Shandong, it is estimated that the ratio reached 163.8 boys to 100 girls. What happened to the girls? Where are they? They evidently have gone missing. The number of "missing" girls in China is already in the millions, and a Chinese source estimated that by the year 2000, that number might rise as high as 70 million.² The 2000 census will no doubt reveal the present extent of the problem. The causes of this imbalance are easily explained. They are girl infanticide, gender selection abortions, abandonment of baby girls who may never be registered with the government, as well as baby girls who are not abandoned, but neither are they registered. This imbalance is also a fallout of China's one-child policy.

Women in feudal China and gender preference

Gender preference in China is deeply rooted both in culture and in tradition. For centuries, China was a feudal society. Feudal societies are always male oriented and male centered. Vestiges of that society, along with the Confucian concept of the superiority of the male, remain even today, deeply engrained within the Chinese psyche.

In China's feudal society a son was an absolute necessity to carry on the family lineage. The son bore the responsibility of supporting and caring for his parents in their old age. He was responsible for seeing that they had a first class funeral, and to offer sacrifices for their spiritual needs after their death. The daughter, on the other hand, was expected to get married, and stay married, no matter how undesirable the match might be. Divorce for the woman was out of the question. When she married, she left home to live with and to serve her in-laws. She was "lost," useless to her own family.

In China's feudal society, it was generally assumed that women were neither intelligent enough, nor ever mature enough, nor sufficiently resourceful to care for themselves. The woman

was the private property of men, expected to bear sons for her husband, and to cater to his every wish.

A vivid symbol of female subservience to men was the practice of binding women's feet first introduced during the Tang dynasty (618-907). The practice lasted nearly 1000 years, and during the Ming (1368-1644) and the Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, a woman whose feet had not been bound was considered ineligible for marriage.³

Within the confines of a feudal society, women had no role whatsoever in the marketplace. Work outside the immediate home area was reserved solely to men. Women could not inherit family property or money. The male, therefore, controlled whatever sources of income came into the home. Women were left with no economic status, and as a consequence, without power.

Women in the New China 1949-1979

The New China made great strides in trying to eliminate discrimination and bias against girls and women. Its laws emphasized that the female of the species enjoyed the same rights as the male in all areas of life: birth rights, familial rights, political, economic, cultural, educational and social rights. China laws eliminated arranged marriages. Both men and women were now free to choose their own marriage partners; widows, previously forbidden to remarry, were now given the option of remarriage. Women could inherit the family property, and receive equal pay for equal work.

During this thirty-year period, China was a closed society. It had very little contact with the world outside. Within the country itself there was little competition; wealth was fairly evenly distributed, crime was almost non-existent since no luxuries were available, and everyone was clothed and fed, albeit at a rather low standard.⁴

As China opened up to the outside world, the leaders realized the need for competition within the marketplace. Some workers worked hard and others were lazy, but all received the same pay. Dissatisfaction caused stagnation. Political movements such

as the anti-rightist campaign (1957), and the "Cultural Revolution," (1966-1976) had left a bad impression on the people and the world. It was obvious that drastic reforms were badly needed.⁵

Acceleration of reforms

Reforms started in earnest in 1978. China opened up to Western technology and began to make great strides in economic development. The Chinese government was conscious of the value that the feminine contribution could bring to its modernization program. In 1988, the government passed the "Regulations governing labor protection for female staff and workers." The "Law of the People's Republic of China on Protection of Rights and Interests of Women" was adopted at the Fifth session of the Seventh National People's Congress on April 3, 1992, and the "Beijing Declaration" was passed on September 15, 1995, at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women. All of these when adhered to can go a long way towards eliminating discrimination against women. With China's new openness came increased opportunities for both men and women. This new situation also made for fierce competition between the sexes and presented major challenges for women in particular.

In spite of these very good laws and regulations, inequality is still rampant in most areas of life beginning with birth, education, the work place, government posts, and in all spheres of management and decision making. The problem of gender preference is most acute in the rural, and especially in the poorest and underdeveloped rural areas of China. In these locations the moral as well as the demographic implications of gender preference give way to immediacy, pragmatism and the desire to maintain traditions that glorify the male and dishonor the female in the human family. Where there is more openness to new ideas, as in China's larger cities, gender prejudice is gradually diminishing.

In these locations there is the desire to modernize and leave behind those structures which make China vulnerable to criticisms from the West. Still, the battle is far from won. Protective policies and regulations are often ignored. Male employers

prefer to hire men who will not be absent for maternity leave or to take care of children. Women, therefore, are often forced to work for lower salaries than are men doing the same jobs.

Having given only a brief overview of the general gender situation, I would now like to focus more specifically on a few factors that militate against the female in China getting her equal share of the equal rights guaranteed her by the State.

The one-child family

Back in the 1860s, a Chinese official called for millions of young men and women to become Buddhist monks and nuns as the most humane way to solve China's overpopulation problem. At that time China had some 400 million people. Over the next decades, the population increased at an average rate of 0.4 per cent. After 1949, public health improved, food was generally better distributed, infants were less likely to die, and people multiplied. Chairman Mao said, "People are the most precious thing under heaven." As a result the government did not begin to encourage small families until the late 1970s.

In January 1980, when the population was nearing the one billion mark, the government issued *Document I* which called for a national campaign to promote planned parenthood and legal, administrative and economic strategies to limit married couple to one child. A mix of rewards for those who signed the one-child pledge, and penalties for those who did not, cut birthrates in both the cities and countryside. A billboard in Beijing displayed a smiling couple holding a baby girl. The Chinese caption read, "To bear one child only is best." Underneath the English translation read, "You had better have only one child."

In setting up the one-child policy in 1980, the government was intent on regulating population growth. The government, now feeding its entire people for the first time in its history, saw the continually expanding population as an insuperable obstacle to maintaining this goal, and detrimental to the whole of its modernization program. A statistic constantly quoted by the government in

the eighties was, "China must feed 22 per cent of the world's population on 7 per cent of the world's arable land."

In promoting the one-child policy, the government did not intend to reactivate feudalistic and Confucian concepts of the inferiority of the female sex, or to reinforce the absolute necessity for a married woman to give birth to a male child. Yet this is precisely what happened. If a couple could have only one child, the sex of that child became all-important. So important, in fact, that although not condoned by the government, the one-child policy has become responsible for an unknown but significant number of girl infanticides, gender selection abortions, and the failure to register female births. Non-registration makes little girls non-persons because they are non-existent in the eyes of the government. Efforts of the government to legislate or carry out well organized and convincing programs to curb these practices have had very little effect.

Girl infanticide

Girl infanticide has a long history in China. Missionaries were well acquainted with the practice before 1949, especially among the rural population where males were obviously more useful than females.

The results of a survey issued on April 3, 2000, by the Buddhist, Muslim, Catholic and Christian Groups on Human Rights, initiated by the Asian Human Rights Commission, show that between 1970 and 1980, female infanticide in China reached the alarming figures of nearly 800,000 baby girls killed or abandoned in one region alone.⁶ About 82,000 boys were also missing, but the researchers believe that these were adopted or transferred to other families, but most of the little girls were killed. A 1978 population report in three counties of Zhejiang province noted the discrepancy between male and female births reflecting the "recurrence in recent years in some places of abandoning and killing little girls."⁷

During the 1980s, in spite of laws promulgated against girl infanticide, the number of missing little girls, and the incidence of infant girls' dying shortly after birth kept on increasing.

Additional surveys in the early 1980s revealed that more and more men were having difficulty finding a wife in certain provinces, e.g. Anhui. That province had for several years registered a very high number of infant girls' deaths.⁸ There were indications that many had used the most common way of getting rid of little girls: to drown them shortly after birth.

Throughout Chinese history, superstitions have had a hand in discriminating against the female child. Some people believed that if a girl was killed, the next child to be born would be a boy. A woman who gave birth to four girls in a row was thought to be possessed by the devil. The fourth child had to be eliminated. In South China, some believed that to give birth to a girl in certain months would bring death to the father or the eldest son. All these superstitions protected and favored the male offspring.⁹

Gender selection through technology

Another form of girl infanticide flowing from the one-child policy is gender selection through abortion. New technology, especially ultrasonography introduced in the mid-80s, continues to play an important role in gender selection. The original purpose of ultrasound was to assess diseases, and ascertain the health of the fetus, but women in China by the thousands, even millions, aware that they are allowed to have only one offspring, undergo ultrasonography to determine the gender of their unborn child. If the test reveals that they are carrying a female fetus, they often choose to have an abortion. This makes it possible for them to have another pregnancy, hopefully that will produce a son.

The one-child policy is not solely to blame for girl infanticides in China, but the policy joined to modern technology has helped to spark a cultural reflex within the Chinese psyche awakening once again, certain deep rooted traditional conditionings that it is preferable to bear a son than a daughter.

Failure to register and abandonment of girls

Another reason for the skewed ratio of female births to male births can be attributed to the failure of parents to register a

female birth. Many parents cannot begin to imagine killing their own flesh and blood. These often fail to register the birth of a girl with the government hoping to be able to try again, and give birth to a boy. Without the birth registration, these little girls are totally disenfranchised.

Some parents desperate for a boy child actually abandon their little girl, often somewhere where she will be found and rescued.

When Catholic missionaries arrived in China in the last half of the 19th century, they immediately recognized the problem and opened up orphanages. These orphanages were not orphanages in the strict sense since most of the parents were alive somewhere. At that time, besides the cultural necessity of having a male child, the people were very poor. As a result they abandoned their little girls. Today, poverty cannot so easily constitute the real reason for abandonment, yet the phenomenon remains.

A visitor to China's "orphanages" today, whether state or church operated, is struck by the similarity between China's present orphanages and those at the beginning of the 20th century. Today's orphanages like those of yesteryears are filled with little girls. The rare male child in these institutions is always handicapped. Since the handicapped little boy cannot fulfill his traditional Confucian duties towards his parents, he is of no more value than a girl.

Before 1949, and even today with the reopening of convents and churches, parents abandoning their little girls leave them at the church's, the bishop's or priest's door, by the Sisters' convent or even in the dark corners of temples where they are likely eventually to be found.

In 1944 during the Sino-Japanese War, Sister Richard Wenzel, a Maryknoll Sister at the Loting orphanage, wrote in her diary that the Sisters "were receiving an average of 400 to 500 children each month, from one to 15 years old—dying of rickets, dysentery and smallpox¹⁰. Many of these, of course, were war orphans, but I personally know that the practice still goes on today.

A short while ago, I was visiting a home for elderly and ill women religious, in a village in South China. Just before supper, a young couple arrived and deposited their baby girl in the arms of an elderly Sister. They said they were going to the mountains for a while. The Sisters all understood the meaning of the statement. They were abandoning the child to go somewhere where they were not known, where they could try to have another child, who this time, hopefully would be a boy. Since they were going to a strange place without any child, they would not be fined for violating the one-child policy. They left without looking back. The Sister looked at the little baby girl lovingly. The child was pale and had a bad cold. Sister said, "We will never see them again." She gently cuddled the abandoned child.

Girl infanticide, gender preference abortions, the abandonment of little girls and failure of registration, all have deep roots within China's history and culture. They will neither easily nor quickly be eradicated.

The same policy with a twist

In its new directive on family planning issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on May 7, 2000, "the government allows a certain flexibility in the application of the one-child policy," explains Chen Shengli, a spokesperson for the State Family Planning Commission (SFPC). "The one-child per couple pattern," he says, "has never been an overall family planning policy imposed on every couple everywhere. The pattern is a general guideline mainly for cities and areas with high population density, while different places have followed different patterns with regard to their respective realities."¹¹ Chen also maintains that gender preferences of boys to girls is also being abandoned in urban areas. "A total of 212 out of 360 families polled earlier by the Tianjin Education Research Institute in north China regard having a girl as 'a pleasure' the same as having a boy. Seventy-three families even prefer to have a girl because girls 'are more caring for their parents' when they grow up."¹²

In spite of these “assurances,” a careful look at the new document strongly reiterates that the population target for 2010 remains 1.4 billion. “This objective will be achieved by maintaining the one-child per family policy which began 20 years ago. However, new family planning controls for ethnic minorities are also on the cards.” Previously, ethnic minorities, whose birth and infant death rates are very high, had been given a certain leeway in the application of the one-child policy. He added, “The country will continue to encourage marriage and child bearing at later ages and call for one child per couple.”¹³

The role of the Church in fostering equality

The Bible tells us clearly that men and women are equal, “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.” (Gen. 1:27) But what happened in Christianity’s interpretation of this equality in the Bible? After 20 years of research, feminist theologians have come to the conclusion that the Christian Churches’ misogynist interpretation of the Scriptures has justified the oppression of women.¹⁴ The Old Testament especially is obviously androcentric. All Sacred History was written from a strong patriarchal mindset. As a result, Christian Churches of all denominations are guilty of sexist attitudes by minimizing the role of women in society, and by portraying them either as temptresses, e.g. Eve, or Jezebel, the wife of Ahab, the King of Israel, who was a wicked and shameless woman. These attitudes find their roots in Hebrew culture from which much of Christianity originates. These attitudes were re-enforced in medieval times in the West through ignorance of biology and the science of medicine. Thus we find even the great St. Thomas talking about women as the inferiors of men. He saw them as an accident of nature, an imperfect creature, and the result of the bad south wind.

Who will change these attitudes?

In the Scriptures we read, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, ‘here I am; send me.’ And he said,

‘Go...’” (Is. 6:8). Christian women today educated in the Scriptures have a grave responsibility to their sisters everywhere to rectify the longstanding, long accepted, one-sided interpretation of Scripture. The Gospel of Luke, carefully studied, can go a long way to show that Jesus, contrary to the customs of his day, never looked down on women. Some of his most complimentary statements were reserved for women. Although his heart went out in compassion to the multitudes, his heart’s compassion went out especially to women for whom he reserved his most important revelations. He manifested himself as the risen Christ to Mary Magdalene before he did so to his disciples. It was to her that he gave the task to announce his resurrection to his apostles. It was to the Samaritan woman, a foreigner and a sinner, that he first revealed himself as Messiah.

Although Confucianism, Buddhism and Christianity, three of the major world’s religions, give lip service to the equality of the sexes, the reality is that their actions usually favor the male of the species, giving him more importance, power and privilege. “Confucianism reinforces the ethic structure that a wife should follow her husband, and the doctrine of three values to obey from the idea of the predominance of men over women in the Yin and Yang theory. Buddhism reinforces the idea of male superiority through the idea that woman cannot be a Buddha, since only the male body can be a Buddha. The only way a woman can be a Buddha is by changing her physical body into a male form.”¹⁵ In Buddhism, therefore, the female nun is inferior to the male monk. Christianity must also bear its share of the blame and responsibility. Almost from its beginnings, Christianity, taking root in patriarchal societies, re-enforced patriarchal concepts of the superiority of the male over the female. Until recently, when liberationists discovered the strength and force of Our

Lady’s Magnificat, she was always portrayed as sweet, silent, and as totally submissive, the knight’s lady who always needed to be protected. This concept led the Christian churches to limit the role of women to being good submissive wives and devoted mothers. They were never encouraged to be individuals in their own right

with their own dignity. They were to be the faithful and dutiful handmaids, always subservient to the male of the species. There have been many changes, but until very recently, this was the woman's definitive and accepted role everywhere in society.

One of the best ways for women to overcome discrimination is for women of all religions to band together in a common effort to conscientize church leaders and men to the unjust patriarchal structures present in all religions. Calling attention to sexist language can go a long way to increasing this awareness. The words we use carry our mental attitudes and concepts. In China, the struggle for greater democracy can also be a powerful force for equality.

Han Kuk-Yom, the director of the Institute for Asian Feminist Theology, has formulated the task of religious women for transformation to equal culture with the following aims:

1. empowering women to challenge oppressive structures in their church, their country, and in the global community;
2. affirming (in shared leadership and decision making, theology and spirituality) the decisive contributions women are already making in churches and communities;
3. giving visibility to women's perspectives and actions in the struggle for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation;
4. enabling churches to free themselves from racism, sexism and classicism, and teachings and practices that discriminate against women;
5. encouraging churches to take actions in solidarity with women.¹⁶

Unless women win their God-given right to full participation in society and the church, they will never enjoy equality. Full participation of women in the life of society and the church can give birth to new insights and approaches to the concept of cosmology, reconciliation, and the mission of the church in society. When women win, and are given their rightful place as equals among equals with men in the public arena, the whole of creation will have found a key to a deeper integrity of life with nature. When

the theological reflections of women of all religious persuasions are taken seriously and within all the societies, the world will be a more human place in which to live.

Endnotes

- 1 Yi Jeung-seun, "Preferences for Sons and Male Chauvinism" in Workshop 2 Religion and Culture, Second East Asian Women's Forum, August 22-24, 1996, Seoul, Korea
- 2 Religious Perspectives on Human Rights, E-Newsletter, Vol. 2. No. 14, initiated by the Asian Human Rights Commission.
- 3 Xie Heng, "The Changing Role and Status of Women in China," <http://dae.com/1990/ISUPAP8.html>.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Religious Perspectives on Human Rights, op. cit.
- 7 Croll Elizabeth, *Changing Identities of Chinese Women*, Hong Kong University Press, Zed Books, 1995, London, New Jersey, p.112.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid. p. 143.
- 10 Wiest Jean Paul, *Maryknoll in China*, (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1988).
- 11 Ma Guihua, *China Daily*, November 1, 2000.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Yu-Fen Chen, "Towards a Balanced Spirituality for Confucian Women," Second East Asian Women's Forum, Seoul, Korea, August 22-24, 1996.
- 15 Man Kuk-Yom, "The Task of Religious Women for Transformation to Equal Culture," Workshop 2, Religion and Culture, Second East Asian Women's Forum, Seoul, Korea, August 22-24, 1996.
- 16 Ibid.