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Invisible Gender Inequality in Rural China: Exploring the Reasons for Son Preference and Daughter Preference

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Invisible Gender Inequality in Rural China: Exploring the Reasons for Son Preference and Daughter Preference

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Abstract- Son preference seems to be disappearing in the current discursive environment, replaced by the emergence of daughter preference in social communication. Different from previous studies of son preference in China that focus on quantitative data, this paper is based on an ethnographic study of a remote rural village in Shanxi Province, China. Through the use of participant observation, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews, the paper concludes that patriarchal systems persist, and son preference develops dynamically. Among others, the author concludes that (1) the patriarchal system is a necessary foundation for the existence of son preference, (2) the concealment of son preference is an aftereffect of gender reproductive selection and a major variable of marital stress, and (3) daughter preference is a variant of traditional gender expectations.

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I. Introduction

With the development of feminist movement and up-to-down implementation of gender equality policy in China, women's positions have been upgraded over time, especially in the public sphere. For example, there are more women in higher education and primary education than their male counterparts in China based on the collected data of Global Gender Gap Report 2020 (World Economic Forum, 2019). At the same time, there are also more than 50% women in the workplace even though women's participation has been reduced since the 1978 Reform and Opening policy (China Briefing, 2016). However, the sex ratio of birth between men and women in China is still skewed, for instance, the sex ratio of birth between men and women is 105.302 to 100, which implies to men still have more 37.17 million than women in 2020 (United Nations, 2021). Behind such a fact, son preference seems to be one of the obvious reasons to understand this gender issue, which was rooted in the Chinese family patriarchal system.

Son preference, by definition, means that people hold the belief that boys have more values than girls, which is an embodiment of gender bias (Jayachandran, 2015; Yan, 2003). In practice, son preference detailly embodies birth-selective abortion and female infanticide. At the same time, families and societies usually consider males to have better achievements than their female counterparts. In China, son preference has existed for a long time in both practice and policy. Meanwhile, the existence of son preference has connected to other current gender issues and biases. In this way, the one-child policy in the 1980s has been the main reason for curbing people's son preference ideology in some researches, even though there were a series of female infanticide and sex-selective abortion in rural China (Hesketh et al., 2011).

Until now, son preference is still a common social phenomenon, even though the changes of women in workplaces, official educational or other policies, and the mechanisation of agriculture have played roles in reducing the ideology and practice of son preference (Murphy et al., 2011). Except for birth selective abortion in one-child policy period, there is a new type of son preference in China, which does not emphasise on only having boys after implementing two-child policy or three-child policy. Conversely, gender expectations and reality have changed the traditional son preference and turned it into a new type in China. Namely, in common sense, women should be treated as protected persons and men as protectors. When referring to birth selection, many would value girls more than boys in modern families. At the same time, there are different upbringing ways for genders, for example, a Chinese proverb says that 'raising a son should be economically and raising a girl should be generously' (窮養兒，富養女). Superficially, the gender inequalities have been changed, or more detailed, current society emphasises girl preference, for example, some families would prefer to have girls rather than boys. When considering this contradictory argument between current gender issues and the so -called "daughter-preference" phenomenon, it is necessary to explore the deeper reasons.

The purpose of this paper is to deeply understand whether son preference has been missed and the behind reasons for daughter preference. This paper mainly contains five parts. Introduction would give a brief social reality of son preference and its development. Literature review concludes the history of gender inequality and son preference in China and its relationships with other factors. Following, this paper

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starts to collect data with ethnographic methods, which focuses on a small village of Shanxi province, China. Based on collected data, the result section and conclusion mainly summarise and provide relative implications and suggestions.

II. The Brief Review of Son Preference in China

In China, the preference for boys over girls has been around for a long time. Starting from agricultural societies, human societies began to value men due to the increased demand for labour and the differences in the physiological functions of men and women (Das Gupta et al., 2003). In ancient China, which has always been an agrarian society, a small peasant economy with the family as the unit has been the mainstream of feudal society. In this case, more males in the family meant more labour to increase the family property, so the idea of son preference was passed down from generation to generation. As a result, it has a profound impact on family decisions such as fertility, human capital investment, marriage, and savings (Lin et al., 2021).

Son preference is a characteristic of patriarchal family systems in many countries in East and South Asia (Hesketh et al., 2011). In particular, son preference is still closely related to Confucianism (Hesketh et al., 2011). In the ideology of Confucianism, it divides people into different social classes and types. In particular, men and women are strictly divided into two extreme spheres. For example, Confucianism stipulates that women should follow the rule of "three obediences and four virtues". By following such rules, women have no choice to participate in personal, family, or even public decision-making. The way women were valued led to the oppression of women until now.

Later, after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, gender inequality seemed to change. During this period, China's gender policy was influenced by Marxist feminism, and it can be concluded that gender blindness replaced the topic of gender with a program of class liberation (Ferguson, 1997). In the Maoist era, gender policy was of a particularly revolutionary nature. Basically, throughout the Maoist era, women's issues and revolution were closely related. For example, the basic concept of women's policy during this period was that "both men and women are the same" and that "women can hold up half the sky". On the one hand, this policy had the advantage that women were considered equal to men, and they were both subjects who enjoyed many social rights equally. On the other hand, however, it is flawed in that "equality between men and women" requires women to be the same as men, and it presupposes a potentially standard image of the subject as, in effect, male. It is important to note that during the Maoist era, women's domestic work, and especially her gender role, was rarely discussed (Zuo & Bian, 2001). At the same time, another important feature of the Maoist era was that it largely did not reflect patriarchy. In that era, the way society as a whole was structured was essentially a patriarchal structure. Beginning in the 1980s, China began a family planning policy that was essentially designed to effectively control the population, but it also contributed, to some extent, to the development of gender equality in childbearing. For urban households in particular, the imposition of family planning coercive measures led many families to accept a single girl. However, in some provinces, the idea of son preference is equally incorporated into official fertility restriction policies: in rural areas, parents can try again for a boy if the first child is a girl (Greenhalgh, 1993).

Son preference is inherited from patrilineal social networks, family systems, and related sociocultural practices (Murphy et al., 2011). son preference has always been closely linked to agricultural society, and after the reform and opening up, China entered into a multi-sectoral development model, which also contributed to the formation of different work identities. At the same time, the gender choice of parents in urban areas changed significantly during this period due to the juxtaposition of the reform and opening up and the implementation of family planning policies. In addition, as parents' education increased, they had more acceptance of gender equality (Stromquist, 1990). In Wang's (2005) fieldwork, it was found that urban children who lived with educated parents would be less exposed to gender bias in the family.

Also, the presence of son preference affects families' investment in human capital, with families showing a clear son preference in their investment in children's health. For example, son preference leads to shorter breastfeeding times for female infants because mothers are more likely to become pregnant again (Jayachandran & Kuziemko, 2011). Meanwhile, when it comes to gender differences in educational investment, some studies have shown that girls suffer from higher risk of late enrolment and early dropout (Zhou & Yuan, 2014). Also, individual son preference often leads to discriminatory behaviour (Murphy et al., 2011). For example, the availability of sex-selective abortion technology allows parents to act on son preference in a way that is arguably less emotionally costly than postnatal interventions, such as fatal neglect of girls (Murphy et al., 2011). However, research has similarly indicated that son preference and its impact on human capital investment may diminish over time as economies and societies develop (Chung & Gupta, 2007).

In contrast to previous research on son preference, which has focused on quantitative analysis, the merit of this study is to explore the current development of son preference using a qualitative research approach. In particular, this paper focuses on

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questioning the existence of the contradiction between daughter preference and gender inequality and trying to find the answer. Thus, the main questions of this study are:

i. Does son preference still exist today?
ii. What has caused the prevalence of daughter preference?
iii. Do changes in fertility policies allow for the redevelopment of son preference?

III. Methods

Different from previous research that focused on the quantitative methods, since there is no accurate message about the trends of son preference, in this way, this paper focuses on a deeper understanding in a selected rural China area using qualitative methods. For this research, I mainly focus on a small village of Shanxi province, China. It is in Northern China, which usually is labelled as conservative. A qualitative methodology was adopted in this study in order to gain a deeper understanding of son preference and gender expectation while avoiding culturally and contextually naive generalizations. Data was collected through participation observation and individual interviews. Author chose to engage in the data collection via the process of ethnography. The ethnographic approach has been described as "documenting the invention and decomposition of communities" (Parker, 2004: 36). Ethnographies describe the ideological, behavioural, relational and contextual factors that define these communities (Lofland, 1995). Therefore, the author's intention in using this framework is to detail a specific socio-relational context and make connections to character narrative, ideology, and behaviours. Ultimately, the purpose of this paper is to provide insight into the son preferences and their manifestation in a particular context.

a) Context and Participants

A study of ethnography aims to understand the activities, interests, rules, and styles of interaction of small groups of people (Blomberg et al., 2017). In this study, I have investigated a small town from Shanxi province, China. Data was collected via participation observation, focused group, and semi-structured interviews.

The participants were from a small village focusing on the parents who aged from 20 to 65, which are divided into two generations. Parents between the ages of 20 and 32 were born since the implementation of the family planning policy, and parents between the ages of 40 and 65 were born in the era of having more children, but most of them were the main participants of family planning. The authors' main purpose in investigating these two groups was to see if they differ in patriarchal and gender expectations across age groups affected by the same policy. This study was mainly divided into two phases, in this first phase, the author uses participation observation for data collection. And the second phase, after establishing a closer connection, uses both participation observation, focused group, and semi-structured interviews for 8 households in the small village.

Table 1: Methodological Summary

	Phase I	Phase II
Location	A remote small village in Shanxi Province, China	
Participants	A small village and 8 households for main investigation	
Data collection	Participation observation Semi-structured interviews	Participation observation Focused group Semi-structured interviews
Analysis	Ethnographic Description	Ethnographic Description Discourse Analysis

Since the main way of life in this village is based on agriculture, it is a good reason to understand the relationship between agrarian society and son preference in current times. At the same time, based on the reasons for working and studying, the large proportions of young people and labour force of the village have migrated to bigger towns or cities. Usually, these people come back during vacations or festivals. Therefore, this study is divided into two main phases. The first phase occurs in April-May 2022, and the main observation targets are the elderly group in the village. The second phase occurs from July-August 2022, and through the preliminary contact and communication with the village people, the authors have established contact

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with 10 of the households, whose families will have young people coming home to live during the summer vacation, so during this period mainly use the participation observation, focused group, and semi-structured interview to collect data. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, two households did not return to the village in this year, so the data for this study relied on the other eight households. At the same time, due to work, some middle-aged people (mainly 20 to 50) in these households only stayed for 1-2 days. In this way, the author mainly uses these two days for semi-structured interviews. Accordingly, it may lose enough evidence to understand deeper thoughts for these parents about their practices.

The author's connection to the village came mainly from a conversation with a migrant worker in the village, and thanks to her help, the author was able to participate in the village and conduct observations and research. Other than that, the author has no contact with the rest of the village's population. The author made the practical leap from outsider to insider depending on the level of familiarity with the participants prior to starting the fieldwork.

b) Analysis

In the first phase of the study, author mainly collected the data by using participant observation method, which was mainly included in a notepad. Since author was not fully involved in the village at this stage, author intended to understand the collective management and basic patterns of living together in the village. At the same time, the analytical approach here was primarily ethnographic description. In the current ethnographic research, narratives are considered as reconstructing perceptions of lived experiences and also shaping the identity of characters (Gadd, 2003). The notes in the notebook were read and analysed several times before being condensed into specific themes, and as the main part of the analysis, the narratives were stories that unfolded during the fieldwork, and author identified key and particular phenomena from the data as an accurate description of village life. These ethnographic narratives were able to shed light on the village's shared values, perceptions of gender and their treatment of men and women.

Subsequently, in the second phase, author mainly used a combination of participant observation, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews. After gaining a basic understanding of the village in the first phase, author went deeper in the second phase of data collection through a combination of notetaking and cell phone recordings. Different from previous analysis of ethnographic description, the phase two mainly emphasises the importance of discourse or narratives. Basically, discourse analysis describes the relationship between the individual and society (Denzin, 1997; Edley, 2001). In social discourse, people are represented by mental representations of one another. Discourses are reflected in their language and behaviours. Based on this explanation, it is essential to take the discourse analysis into consideration for better understanding their interactions. In this process, after considering the fundamental situations and culture of this village, it is important to consider their detailed views about son preference and gender.

IV. Dynamic and Evolving Patriarchy and Gender Inequality

In reference to the manifestation of patriarchy in the new era, current research has shown that the connotation of patriarchy has persisted even though its implement has changed yet. With the implementation of the one-child policy and the popularity of the idea of gender equality, it can be understood through both interviews and focus groups that son preference is usually rarely mentioned in reproductive choices. However, through the current survey in the village, son preference has become an invisible phenomenon, meaning that people rarely directly mention that boys are more valuable than girls, but rather continue the dynamic of son preference in many ways. In short, people still perpetuate gender bias and gender stereotypes ideologically. The current results fall into three following main categories.

a) Patriarchal Management System

China still retains a patriarchal system to a large extent, especially in peri-urban or rural areas (Wong, 2016). The village currently retains a traditional patriarchal management system through a participatory survey using ethnography description. The main person in charge of the village is a 55-year-old male, but after the participatory understanding it was found that many things in the village are also communicated and finally decided with other retired males. It is clear that the older men usually have an advantage in the management of the village. In other word, this village inherits a patriarchal system of management. Wang, as the village chief of the village, once answered this question,

> "*Women may have trouble being leaders... They are too emotional... Of course, I don't deny that there are female leaders, but men may have an advantage over women ..... Just like in stress resistance...*"

Similarly, this perception that men have an advantage over women in management comes from women themselves, and is held by women in the same age group as Wang, whose wife Liu (50 years old) believes that women and men are different in many ways, including management skills, "*Gee... Men are really better than us in many ways... There are times when a male is needed to make decisions, which I can't do*." At the same time, when author asked why men and women are different, Liu did not attribute it to social or

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historical reasons, but rather to biological selection or theological reasons, arguing that "*that's how God made people*." Thus, to a large extent, some people have internalised gender inequality into biology itself rather than looking for social or historical attributions.

This patriarchal system of governance at the meso level also continues at the micro level in the household, and in author's interviews and participatory research in the village, author likewise found that women were not usually present at the table when there were guests, and that the younger children in the household were likewise absent. The men acted as the representative of the family at this time to answer or socialise.

b) Birth Selection Abortion Aftermath and Marital Stress

As it has mentioned earlier about the current sex ratio, the current problem of passive surplus men has started to become serious, especially for rural areas, and male marriage choice has become a serious issue for some families. Therefore, when author mentioned "Do you have an any preference for having a boy or a girl?" For example, Chang (28 years old) did not state very clearly whether he had a preference or not, but replied, "*A boy can probably carry on my family name. If I could afford it, I would want both boys and girls. But now I can't afford to raise a boy*." It is important to note that seven households in this investigation linked "boys" to "not being able to afford". Wu (55 years old) said this is actually happening in his family, where he has a son who is 29 years old and is having difficulty finding a 'suitable' spouse.

> "*My family lives as farmer, and it takes too much money to get married now... My son has to buy a house for him to get married, otherwise no one will choose to find my son... (I) say it's better to have a daughter... With a daughter, you don't have to worry so much...*"

The different attitudes of families toward sons and daughters in marriage is not a short-term process; for many families, a daughter is not a member of their own family, as she (they) belongs to another family after marriage. At the same time, the marriage ritual popular in the region requires the man to pay a certain amount of bride price (彩禮) and promise fixed assets to the woman before the marriage can be approved by the woman's family. This custom is largely a remnant of the traditional patriarchal society in which two families exchanged women as equivalent property. Even though many families no longer clearly adhere to the son preference attitude, this attitude is actually a compromise in reality.

c) Daughter preference as a Variation of Traditional Gender Expectations

Among the families investigated in this paper, the younger generation of parents (20-40 years old) usually have more examples of having two or three children. Four of the younger generation mentioned in this paper were two-child families and one was a three-child family. Zhang (36 years old) and her husband Lin (38 years old), the most affluent of the families author interviewed, referred to them as a "gender equality" and "daughter preference" person and had different standards for sons and daughters.

> "*(I) can't coddle my son, but my daughter can. Everyone knows I love my both kids; my daughter is very sweet. My son can protect his little sister... I cannot treat them same…(I) have different standards for sons and daughters, and the old saying is right, daughters need to be raised rich, sons need to be raised poor. If a son suffers now, he will be able to take responsibility later, and if a daughter is raised rich, she will not be curious about things…Of course, I wish my children can have better achievements in the future.*" (Zhang)

When asked why they had different expectations for sons and daughters, Lin believed that men and women have different tracks in the future. He saw himself as a daughter preference person, and he talked about how he loved his daughter more than his son.

> "*I love my daughter very much, partly because she is still very young (3 years old), and partly because I think when a girl is loved enough in her family of origin, she won't have low self-esteem in society or in her future in-laws... Of course, I also love my son, but he needs to take the responsibility of the family in the future, and I hope he can protect his sister and can make his mother and me not to worry*."

When it comes to gender equality, it is undeniable that attitudes towards boys and girls are now gradually changing. For example, families no longer mention the contrasting value of boys and girls but begin to think of them as having shifted from son preference to daughter preference. As Lin mentions that he loves his both kids and he want his daughter can have confidence through raising her generously. However, based on the analysis of the discourse, it is clear that Zhang and Lin have different expectations of their two children, believing that boys need to take responsibility, while girls should be protected. To a large extent, the ideology of "men as breadwinners, women as housekeepers" has been transformed into different gender expectations for boys and girls. Ultimately, the current so-called daughter preference is just a variation on traditional gender expectations.

V. Conclusion

Son preference has long been an issue of gender inequality in China, and previous research has focused on both sex-selective reproduction and educational preferences. In the context of the current development of gender perceptions in China, son preference has always been dynamic and perpetuates patriarchal social perceptions. While the patriarchal system has been the main framework of the family and

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society, the social structure under the patriarchal system is also changing dynamically to adapt to the development of modern society. In this paper, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the existence and changes of son preference, which focuses on a remote rural village in Shanxi Province, China, the author uses ethnographic methods such as participant observation, focus groups and semi-structured interviews to gain insight into the reality of the village. From the results, both ethnographic description and discourse analysis, the authors conclude that the village has traces of a patriarchal system, such as the common belief that men and women need to work in different occupations, and that men tend to have a greater advantage than women in leadership. The reasons for the gender division of the different occupations are not attributed to social and historical reasons but are considered to be inherently different for males and females.

In addition, son preference is shown to still exist in this study, but it is not expressed in an obvious way. No interviewees in this study directly suggested that they were son preference, but rather many families reported that having daughters was better than having sons. In understanding the specific reasons for this, the authors found that some families believed that having a daughter was better than a son because having a son required a greater investment in human resources, especially since the persistent skewed sex ratio had created a problem of marital stress for men. Although women appear to be on the initiative side from this result, in reality they are still the ones who lack a voice in the price negotiations between the two families. In other words, the current freedom to marry is still the result of the involvement of two families. Therefore, at the root, the family is not aware of gender equality, but rather connotes son preference by making compromises in real life.

Finally, in understanding the causes of what is currently called daughter preference, the authors recognize that daughter preference is only a variant representation of traditional gender expectations. In this daughter preference meaning and representation, women are defined as the protected and men as the protector under the family structure at the beginning. When parents position boys and girls in different roles, they assign more responsibilities to boys than to girls from an early age. And the different gender expectations are more behind the position of males as the main participants and heads of family and public affairs.

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