



# The New York Times

*The New York Times*, June 21, 2002 pA3(L) col 01 (33 col in)

**Desire for Sons Drives Use of Prenatal Scans in China.** (Foreign Desk) *Erik Eckholm.*

**Full Text:** COPYRIGHT 2002 The New York Times Company

In greater numbers than ever, China's villagers are using inexpensive prenatal scans and then abortion to prevent the birth of unwanted daughters and to ensure that they will bear a son, recent studies and census data show.

Through the last decade, a time of rapid economic growth, the gap between male and female births only widened, giving China the largest gender disparity among newborns of any country in the world. In pockets of the countryside the imbalance is staggering, with births of as many as 144 boys recorded for every 100 girls.

Decades of Communist rule and recent pell-mell development, far from uprooting the male bias in the Chinese countryside, have yielded new pressures to have sons.

In this southeastern region of close-knit hamlets, as in much of rural China, daughters move away to their husband's family at marriage, and the government no longer provides even a pretense of old-age or medical care.

"People around here depend on their sons to provide for them in old age because you can't rely on anyone else," said Zheng Anban, 40, the father of two sons and two daughters, as his wife nodded in agreement.

China's strict family planning limits, which in rural areas often involve stiff fines for bearing more than one or two children, can add to the pressure to prevent female births, even in an area like eastern Guangdong where the two-child limit is flouted by people like Mr. Zheng who are willing to pay fines to have extra children.

But the main reason for the surge in female abortions in the 1990's, researchers say, is the spread of ultrasound scanners to every corner of the country, offering couples an easy way to learn the sex of a fetus.

Though the government has tried to outlaw the prenatal determination of sex, the procedure is readily available at countless small-town hospitals and the growing number of for-profit "maternity clinics." Many will perform ultrasound tests, no questions asked, for as little as \$4.

The issue of China's "missing girls" first caused an outcry in the early 1990's, after the 1990 census found a nationwide ratio of 111 newborn boys to 100 newborn girls.

Debate raged over whether the reported disparity was largely an illusion, the result of underreporting of female babies by parents evading the one-child birth limit, or the result of widespread abortion and infanticide of females.

But subsequent research has indicated that the recorded imbalance is largely genuine and is deepening. By 2000, to the alarm of demographers, the recorded disparity in births had grown to a national average of 117 boys for every 100 girls.

This compares with the international average of about 106 boys to 100 girls. The ratio is still more skewed in the villages and towns of southeastern and central China. In one central county, a Chinese scholar reported last year, couples that already had a daughter, and discovered that their second baby would also be a girl, turned to abortion 92 percent of the time.

"People have realized that it's not just a matter of underreporting, that the imbalance is real," said Gu Baochang, deputy secretary general of the semiprivate China Family Planning Association. "This is a problem that we need to address."

The gender imbalance is negligible in some of the poorest areas, including Tibet and the largely Muslim western region of Xinjiang, where ethnic minorities are subject to less stringent birth limits.

In the 2000 census, the largest provincial imbalances were recorded in two of the more prosperous southeastern provinces, Hainan and Guangdong, with reported newborn ratios of more than 130 males to 100 females.

In the villages of Chaoyang County here in eastern Guangdong, the gap is bigger still. In 2000, parts of Guangdong showed an average sex ratio as high as 144 boys for every 100 girls, or about three boys for every two girls, according to a report by the official New China News Agency.

Last year, Guangdong issued its own ban on screening to determine the sex of a fetus, seeking to bolster a rule the central government had issued for the nation years earlier. Although clinics around the country have occasionally been fined for informing parents of the sex of a fetus, the law is hard to enforce.

At private clinics in eastern Guangdong, where a prenatal scan is offered for \$4, the abortion of an unwanted female can be arranged the same day for \$15 to \$120, depending on the complexity of the procedure and the "gift" required by staff members, villagers say.

Sex determination by ultrasound is commonly possible in the fourth, fifth or sixth month of pregnancy. Because of the timing, abortions usually occur in the second or even third trimester of pregnancy.

A detailed study of one county in central China by Chu Junhong of Beijing University's Population Research Institute showed an astonishing frequency of scans and abortion.

In this unnamed county, where family planning rules permit couples to have a second child if the first is a girl, but forbid more than two, couples screened for sex in more than half of all pregnancies.

If a couple already had one girl and discovered their next would also be a girl, they resorted to abortion 92 percent of the time, Ms. Chu found in her study, published last year in *Population and Development Review*.

As in other countries with similar problems, including India, South Korea and Taiwan, the strong preference for sons reflects a mix of traditional and modern forces.

Here in rural Guangdong, where kinship and ancestor worship remain strong, the multistory houses are grouped by clan, and married sons are expected to bring their brides to live with their parents.

"If you have a son who can go out and make money, then the whole family will be secure," said Mr. Zheng, the villager. "If your daughter gets rich that's a different thing altogether, because the money goes to her husband's family."

The government's stringent family planning policies, then, can put extra pressure on couples who are desperate for a son.

"If you're rich and you want a big family, you can just keep having babies until you get a boy," said Wu Zheng, a 30-year-old farmer from another nearby village. "But if you can't pay the fines, or you don't want all the burdens of a large family, then you go get the test."

Demographers predict serious practical effects for Chinese society as a result of the growing imbalance. The abduction of women in remote areas, for sale to villagers desperate for a wife, is already a chronic problem and could intensify.

Social scientists also speculate about the disruptive effects another decade or two from now, when there will be tens of millions of excess men in a country with a population of more than 1.3 billion, unable to marry and likely to be concentrated on the bottom rungs of society.

In the biggest cities, the excess of male births is surprisingly low despite the existence over the last two decades of a strict one-child policy. In part, the low urban disparity reflects the more effective enforcement of laws against prenatal gender determination.

But it also reflects a greater acceptance of female children, not least because many urban couples can expect that daughters will be more apt to assist them when they grow old.

The evidence of a worsening sex ratio is one of several factors leading Chinese scholars and officials to rethink population policies, said Mr. Gu of the Family Planning Association.

Pilot projects to shift programs from numerical targets to offering better health services and other social aid have already shown promise in curbing abortion rates, Mr. Gu said. The emphasis on numerical targets, he added, provides incentive to officials to ignore illegal sex screening and abortions.

"We need to address the gender issue, we need to address the problem of old-age support for rural people, and we need to address the abortion issue," Mr. Gu said.



[Copyright and Terms of Use](#)