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Sex Ratios and Family Life in China

SPECIFIC AIMS

A demographic revolution of sorts has been occurring in the People's Republic of China. A longstanding cultural preference for sons over daughters and sharp reductions in fertility have converged with more proximate factors, including particularly the widespread availability of sex-selective abortion technology, to create an astounding shortage of girls in China over recent decades (Banister 2004; Cai and Lavelly 2003; Goodkind 2004). As these cohorts have aged, and as they continue to do so, China has and will continue to experience a dramatic overabundance of adult males relative to adult females (Tuljapurkar, Li, and Feldman 1995; Poston and Glover 2005). The consequences of this impending imbalance in the numbers of adult males and females are thought to be profound and far-reaching (Poston and Morrison 2005). Some observers have gone so far as to suggest that this surplus of Chinese males threatens U.S. national security and global political stability (Hudson and Den Boer 2002; 2004) and will contribute substantially to the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (Tucker et al. 2005).

Our focus in this project is on somewhat less dire but nonetheless consequential repercussions of imbalanced sex ratios in China, namely, their implications for various dimensions of family life and women's and men's social and economic roles. We focus specifically on the potential impact of community-level sex ratios on four broad dimensions of family life and social roles: *family formation behavior* (including age at marriage, likelihood of divorce, and assortative mating by age, education, and social background); *women's socioeconomic status* (including their educational and occupational attainment and labor force participation); *sexual behavior* (age at first intercourse, whether engaged in premarital intercourse, whether engaged in extramarital intercourse); and *internal family dynamics* (including the division of household labor, marital quality and commitment, and domestic violence). Our conceptual framework is grounded in influential but still controversial theories linking imbalanced population sex ratios to family-related demographic behavior (e.g., marriage, divorce, and fertility) and to women's and men's familial and economic roles and statuses. We propose to test hypotheses drawn from these and other theories using data from the recent Chinese Health and Family Life Survey (CHFLS), a large, nationally-representative survey of Chinese adults, to which we will append information from Chinese censuses and other sources describing the relative numbers of women and men in their local residential community. By capitalizing on the substantial geographic variation in sex ratios across sub-areas of China, and by applying statistical techniques appropriate for the analysis of multilevel data structures, the proposed analysis holds promise for substantially enhancing our understanding of how China's increasing overabundance of males relative to females will affect multiple dimensions of family life.

In keeping with the guidelines of the R21 mechanism, we view this project as both exploratory and developmental. It is exploratory inasmuch as this is the first effort to link community-level sex ratios with the CHFLS (or, for that matter, any other recent social survey conducted in China). The project is also exploratory insofar as it represents the novel application of sociological and demographic theories of imbalanced sex ratios to the unique and timely case of contemporary China. In both application and method, then, the project holds the promise of breaking new ground in our understanding of the consequences of recent and profound demographic changes in China. The project is developmental in that it lays the analytical and substantive foundations for further research on the consequences of imbalanced sex ratios in China. Highly imbalanced sex ratios among recent birth cohorts portend markedly skewed adult sex ratios in subsequent decades. This project will develop a methodology for exploring the impact of such imbalances in adult sex ratios, as well as for anticipating which dimensions of family life are most likely to be affected by these imbalances.