

The Continuous Positive Trend Away From Son Preference in China

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ABSTRACT

The son preference phenomenon was a widespread and serious problem in ancient China. The patriarchal family system made people prefer sons over daughters due to economic factors, social influence, and the belief in generational continuity. Fortunately, this phenomenon was changed along with the development of China. Various policies and regulations implemented in China have given economic value to Chinese women and reduced the original economic picture of patriarchy. As Chinese society developed, the concept of hierarchy faded away, making the value of sons less significant. Chinese women have shown their values, and generations of progress have laid the groundwork for a bright future for Chinese women.

Keywords: *Son preference, gender inequality, gender equality, China, feminist, female education, patriarchy, family responsibility*

1. INTRODUCTION

A few decades ago, son preference—the favoring of a son rather than a daughter—was a major problem in the rural areas of China. However, as we look to the future, the son preference situation in China offers hope because this outdated concept has shifted over generations to value Chinese women’s place in family and society. This article is to investigate the major causes to son preference and discuss the factors reducing this phenomenon and the outcomes of the reduction through generations.

One of the contributing factors to son preference was the economic conditions at the time. Sons were preferred because they could bring more economic benefits. According to *Marriage Form and Son Preference in Rural China: An investigation in Three Counties*: Sons are more likely than daughters to provide labor on the family's farm or in a family business, earn wages, and support their parents during old age. Upon marriage, a son brings a daughter-in-law into his family, and she provides additional help around the house as well as economic reward in the form of dowry payments (Jin & Li & Feldman, 2007, p.512).

Since the rural areas in China were primarily an agrarian society (a society based on agriculture and labor), the strength of males allowed them to work more, and make money more efficiently than females. Additionally,

a majority of Chinese parents believed that only sons would support and take care of them when they were old. Also, the fact that a son could bring one more laborer, in the form of a daughter-in-law, would bring more significant benefit to the family. In contrast, according to Sandra Burton: Until a few decades ago, the drowning of infant girls was tolerated in poor rural areas as an economic necessity. A girl was just another mouth to feed, another dowry to pay, a temporary family member who would eventually leave to serve her husband's kin (Burton, 1990, pp.1-2).

Due to the economic situation at the time, a daughter would only cost a family extra money, and she would be less likely to bring economic benefits than a son would. And the belief that the daughter was eventually an outsider and would become a member of her husband’s family also affected this son preference: “parents marry out all of their daughters to other families; daughters belong to their husbands' families after marriage and have no substantive rights or obligations beyond their emotional bond with their natal parents” (Jin & Li & Feldman, 2007, p.513). This tradition made the daughter not able to take care of her own parents even if she wanted to since she was primarily required to look after her parents-in-law. Due to these factors, it was believed that female children would cost a family a lot of money, only to move out and serve another family while male children would bring lots of benefits.

The second factor creating son preference is the social influence on the concept of generation continuity and social status. The patriarchal family system in China led to gender preference when considering generation continuity: "In the patrilineal and patriarchal family system, having one son is essential for the continuation of the family line" (Jin & Li & Feldman, 2007, p.512). Because of this, family names were only passed down through sons, and this was part of the reason why there was a preference for male children over female children. In addition, social status and the community environment also influenced son preference:

Having many sons provides additional status to the family. The power structure of the community favors men and having a son in the family provides a sense of security and higher social status, while families without a son are ridiculed by community members (Jin & Li & Feldman, 2007, p.512). This led to the belief that having more sons was an honor, and having sons brought families higher social status, which was a pride enjoyed by many families.

2. THE POSITIVE TREND ON REDUCING SON PREFERENCE

2.1 The laws and policies adopted by Chinese government that help increase Chinese female's economic value

Fortunately, the phenomenon of son preference is changing in a positive way and the future outlook for women in China can be inferred as bright and hopeful. China's development and many policies led to the positive economic values of women, which weakens the reason for son preference. "The advent of new laws granting women equal rights with men occurred with the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949" (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2010, p.2). The Chinese government started to address the gender inequality problem in the 20th century by adopting different policies: "The Communists sought to change all that in 1949 by freeing women from the household, putting them to work in fields and factories, and giving them the right to inherit property. Suddenly a girl could have positive economic value" (Burton, 1990, pp.2). From the job opportunities given to females in China in 1949, girls were allowed and encouraged to work and make money which helped their families. Therefore, the old thought that girls only cost money was gradually dispelled. The Chinese government also adopted a law of "equal pay for equal work" focusing on the gender inequality in jobs:

It was successful in decreasing the gap between men's and women's salaries. In 1960, the total number of employed women nationwide increased to over 10 million, almost three times as many as the number of employed women just three years earlier (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2010, p.3).

After this, the financial difference between sons and daughters was reduced, which began to reduce the preference of having sons over daughters. Although the problem of son preference was still not solved completely at this time, Chinese daughters had taken a big step towards equality by proving their values. "Despite the negatives connected to this era, women made substantial gains. The Cultural Revolution re-examined the notion of female inferiority and challenged patriarchal female oppression" (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2010, p.3). The ability of women to work and earn money had broken the traditional social stranglehold on women, elevating their status and contributing to the elimination of patriarchy.

2.2 The positive impact from one-child policy

Among many policies adopted by the Chinese government, the one-child policy played a particularly important role in balancing the care for boys and girls. Because all the families were asked to only have one child by the government, all their love and attention were focused on their only child regardless of their gender: "the one-child policy eventually makes every scion -- male and female -- precious to parents" (Burton, 1990, p.2). Also proved by the quote, "In the only-child society, both sons and daughters are highly prized and equally relied on by aging parents due to the irreplaceability of the only child, which might moderate the effects of the traditional culture of son preference" (Wang et al., 2019, pp.539-540), both daughter and son were now precious and irreplaceable to their parents, and therefore, the hope of having a son faded away subtly in most of the families.

2.3 The decline in the cult and obsession with generation continuity

In addition, the belief in the continuity of generations through the last name carried by sons was weakened because of: "the declining importance of patrilineal rituals to the younger generation. Participation in ancestral rights by the young is becoming less gendered" (Bossen, 2018, p.3). Now, fewer Chinese parents are obsessed with the belief of ancestral rights, which demonstrates that sons carrying their last name is now less important than it was a few decades ago.

2.4 The opinions on gender preference of offspring from three generations

The positive trend in the reduction in the phenomenon of son preference is revealed in the opinions on preference through generations. In an investigation conducted by Hagedorn and Zhang in 2009, they interviewed the three female generations: grandmothers, mothers, and daughters. From the interview of those grandmothers, they experienced the inequality in their families; However, "none of them reported a preference for boys, but they did indicate such preference was

common among people in those days and their husbands did value sons more than daughters” (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2010, p.16). Unfortunately, society and their husbands still had the thought of son preference. Nevertheless, those grandmothers themselves no longer had a preference for sons. Similarly, “none of the mothers reported a preference for sons and believed sons and daughters were equally important to them. Interestingly, they did mention that their husbands were inclined to have a son and think boys were superior to girls” (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2010, p.17). Although many of their husbands still preferred a son to a daughter, the thoughts of the overall society and those mothers had changed to an equal view of son and daughter. Recently, “the daughters all expressed a neutral attitude and none of them had a strong statement for either boys or girls” (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2010, p.17). Nowadays, there are only a few Chinese families that believe a son is superior, and a majority of the young generation has already gotten rid of this belief. The development of different generations’ thoughts provides an apparently positive trend regarding son preference. “Thus the generation of ‘only children’ has been short-lived but will have left its mark on gendered outcomes in China” (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2010, p.17). The development of thoughts is leading to a brighter future for Chinese daughters.

2.5 Daughter’s parenting rights and responsibility

The daughter’s responsibility for taking care of her elders had changed as well. The responsibility of elders was not only a positive consequence of the reduction of son preference, but also a contributing factor to further reduce the preference. In the investigation of three generations, grandmothers “viewed their childhood families as temporary. They ‘married out’ and became members in full standing of the family of their husbands” (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2010, p.16). In their generation, daughters were still considered temporary family members, and they were more expected to take care of the parents-in-law in their new family. Those grandmothers agreed that “after marriage they were considered as members of their husbands’ families and the responsibilities of taking care of their own parents were left to their brothers” (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2010, p.16). The old parents completely relied on their sons to take care of them, and this reduced the values of their daughters. However, “different from the grandmothers, none of the mothers reported that they were exempt from taking care of their own parents after they were married. The mothers confirmed that they shared the responsibilities with other siblings” (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2010, p.17). In the generation of those mothers, they began to have the opportunity and responsibility to take care of their own parents, which negated the old belief that sons had more value than daughters in taking care of their parents and revealed the status of women was

elevated, and they were no longer only the members belonging to their husbands’ families. Additionally, “the daughters confirmed that they would take full responsibility of taking care of their parents in an old age or split the responsibilities with their siblings” (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2010, p.17). Nowadays, the new generation can have the full responsibility to take care of their parents, and the fact is that: Parents of sons cannot expect to have a young, inexperienced daughter-in-law who will live with them and serve them in old age. Now their new daughter-in-law is more likely to be a full adult, with a high school education, outside work experience, some income of her own, and plans to run her own household (Bossen, 2018, p.3).

This shift helps successfully combat patriarchal thoughts. Overall, the successful and promising trend has not only created Chinese daughters with the same parenting abilities as sons, but also reflects the changing status of Chinese daughters in their families.

2.6 The rise of female education

There is also an obvious and positive trend through generations toward female education as an outcome, and further evidence of the reduction in son preference. In the same investigation conducted by Hagedorn and Zhang, according to the grandmothers, “In their generation, the ability to pursue education and work were privileges held by men” (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2010, p.16). The generation of grandmothers typically did not get equal rights compared to their male counterparts: “Their brothers, conversely, received great attention from parents and were provided with educational opportunities. The grandmother either did not receive any education or only learned the basics of reading and writing” (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2010, p.16). Education inequality in a family was a widespread problem in the generation of grandmothers, but things changed when it came to the generation of mothers. From the interview of those mothers, “all of them reported that they were provided equal opportunities and encouraged by the government to go to school. They all received some type of secondary education... but unfortunately, none of the mothers went to college” (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2010, p.16). Supported by the Chinese government, and the decreasing son preference, those mothers were getting more educational opportunities than their mothers. Even though most of the mothers still did not have the chance to get higher education, “the mothers all expressed a great eagerness of learning and admiration for knowledge” (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2010, p.16), and carried that hope to their daughters. This created a great trend that these mothers would try their best to value their daughters’ education to make up for their absence. “Compared to their mothers and grandmothers, the daughters were given considerable attention and received the best their parents could provide for their education and growth” (Hagedorn & Zhang,

2010, p.17). Supported by their family, the daughters have abundant opportunities for their education and growth. As a result, “the daughters participating in the study obtained at least a bachelors’ degree from a four-year college or university in Central China” (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2010, p.17). The level of education received by these daughters has improved significantly. Encouragingly, this positive trend continues to develop: “The daughters also highly valued college education and pointed out that they would fully support their children’s education.” (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2010, p.17). The progressive view of daughters’ education from generation to generation reflects the decline of son preference in Chinese families and offers a bright and hopeful future for the daughters of China.

3. CONCLUSION AND PROPECTS

“It cannot be denied that today’s generation of Chinese women enjoys unprecedented favor and opportunity to for the current generation of women, the future is bright [women] got full and equal love from their parents and grandparents, and they would never know how it feels like to be secondary to brothers” (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2010, p.18). There is also a Chinese proverb: “One generation plants the trees, and another gets the shade.” Through the improvement through generations, this continuously positive development and outlook of the status of Chinese daughters offer hope for the future generation. And this does not only matter to China, it matters to the world. There are still a lot of countries that have a preference for sons over daughters. As a country that has tremendous influence in the world, China with its progress would lead to positive changes in other countries, all around the world, contributing to the way toward gender equality.

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