

## Missing Girls, Land and Population Controls in Rural China

CEPED-CICRED-INED Seminar on Female Deficit in Asia: Trends and Perspectives, Singapore, 5-7 December 2005.

**Draft paper before publication; please do not use it as reference.**

## Missing Girls, Land and Population Controls in Rural China

©Laurel Bossen (Oct. 25, 2005)  
Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology  
McGill University, Montreal, QC, Canada H3A 2T7  
Tel: 1-514-398-4289, fax: 1-514-398-7476  
Email: [laurel.bossen@mcgill.ca](mailto:laurel.bossen@mcgill.ca)

*Abstract.* In the study of China's rural development, social scientists have tended to focus on changes in property rights, or changes in family planning and birth control policies. The literature often treats each separately, as if they were unrelated. Economists and political scientists look at land policy, while demographers, sociologists and anthropologists look at family planning. Yet it is obvious that the two domains are, in real life, closely related as households attempt to match and manage their land and labor resources. In this paper I bring together questions about land and family planning in relation to both policy and practice. In this context, I also examine the significance of lineage revival. I draw on my own fieldwork in rural north China and comparative material to examine local and regional variations and their significance.

## **Missing Girls, Land and Population Controls in Rural China<sup>1</sup>**

“The dearth of girls is now more extreme in the PRC than anywhere else in the world.”

One of the toughest challenges is to modify China's rigid custom of patrilocal and patrilineal marriage, the restriction of land rights to the males of the patrilineal clan.”  
Banister (2004)

### **Missing girls**

Despite the growing media and scholarly attention that missing women in Asia have received, there is remarkable uniformity in the explanations and remarkably little challenge to received wisdom. For China, three basic explanations for gender discrimination reoccur in scholarly and popular discourse. These are that sons are necessary for heavy labor on the farm, to support their parents in old age, and to carry on the family line. All are problematical.

1) Heavy labor. Rural women have contributed a large proportion of the farm labor in China for nearly fifty years. The fact that farming has become more mechanized challenges the “heavy labor” argument, particularly at a time when many men have left farming to women and migrated to towns and cities in search of better incomes.

2) Old age support. The patrilineal family system requires that sons stay home to support their parents, and that daughters marry out to support their husband’s parents. Nevertheless, it is not uncommon to find cases where parents receive as much or more economic and personal-needs support from their married-out daughters living in another village or district than from their sons or daughters-in-law.

3) The family line. Continuing the family line from father to son is a mandate and perhaps even a mantra.. China has a long cultural history of writing and teaching about patrilineal traditions. Without doubt, the concept of the family line is a powerful force in Chinese society. But the communist government had worked hard to displace it, to suppress the power of lineages, and to create an independent source of opportunities. Why has it re-emerged and become so important in some areas? Why do some regions and groups place much more importance on lineages than others (M. Han 2001, Cohen 1990)? Why does the search for expanded networks and social relationships often continue to exclude women from its formal mapping?

In addition to the three explanations above, social scientists have probed more deeply. Demographer Judith Banister (2004) has provided one of the most comprehensive reviews of the

---

<sup>1</sup> I gratefully acknowledge the support of the National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka, Japan for support as a visiting scholar in 2005, enabling me to write this paper. Nobuhiro Kishigami, Hiroko Yokoyama, Min Han and many others were very helpful. The Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada funded my research and trips to China between 1987 and 2004. I am grateful for this support.

problem. She examined a series of reasons for China's growing sex imbalance. They include poverty, the political or economic system, socio-economic development, educational level, Chinese culture, the one-child policy, low fertility, and ultrasound technology. She found that China's shortage of girls cannot be explained by poverty, political or economic system, by the level of socio-economic development or by educational level as these variables do not correspond to the demographic evidence. However, the distribution of daughter shortage within China is closely associated with the distribution of Han Chinese culture within China Proper, while the peripheries and most minority areas have more balanced sex ratios. Banister argues that the introduction of the state family planning policy is associated with rising proportion of sons, and that this rise became even more marked once ultrasound technology for sex testing became available (though illegal for this purpose), followed by abortion for sex choice. The recent demographic data support the view that female disadvantage in mortality has been transformed into female disadvantage in natality. Prenatal female mortality (through abortion) is obviously less distressing than female infanticide. As a result, the sex biases inherent in the culture can be expressed more easily, and the proportion of girls has plummeted.

“One of the toughest challenges is to modify China's rigid customs of patrilocal and patrilineal marriage, the restriction of land rights to the males of the patrilineal clan, the traditional weakening of daughters' ties to their natal families after marriage, the dependence on sons but not own-daughters for old age support, and other customs that make daughters worth little in the eyes of their natal families (Das Gupta et al. 2004). So that China's daughters may survive and be valued as much as sons, they need rights and responsibilities to have lifelong close ties to their natal families. The government has promoted some of these changes and has passed egalitarian laws. The need now is to more vigorously enforce the laws giving daughters equal rights and responsibilities.” (Banister 2004:15).

Banister, citing Das Gupta, makes one of the few clear references to the property system as a factor in China's son preference. I argue that it is more than labor or the family “line” that is at stake. The system of family property and the political institutions for holding and transmitting land and property rights need to be more carefully examined.

My aim is to consider the links between property rights and population control to see how these two policies work together to produce the enormous deficit of daughters. Who exercises *de facto* control over land and property? Despite government efforts to legislate gender equality, patrilineal institutions retain considerable power in many rural areas. Their workings within the village power structures need to be made more visible. The close ties to women's natal families

that Banister advocates would be stronger if daughters were in line for a share of the family house and land.

Although China has a long history of practicing female infanticide (Lee and Wang 2001), in the post-revolutionary period the missing girls problem arises simultaneously with increased wealth (Croll 2000). The sex imbalance can be seen as a product of development and a problem for development. As with environmental degradation, social institutions can propel societies to follow a pattern of maximizing immediate advantage that can have negative consequences for the future. Targeting girls as a lesser good harms women throughout their lives, and creates a cohort of males assured of their superiority, yet unable to find wives and form families. In a variant of the law of unintended consequences, the rootedness of the male population as the basis for son preference ends up creating a class of rootless males.

While it is common to point to son preference in traditional culture, sex ratios evened out during the collective years (Banister 2004, Greenhalgh and Li 1995), with the surplus of males only reappearing during the reform period. Clearly, questions about the family line, the patriline, and the lineage are relevant here. Why is patrilineal culture still so compelling in reform China?

The period of rural collectives (excluding the Great Leap Famine of 1958 to 1961) witnessed rapid population growth. For two decades, up to 1980, collective resources supported children so that economic incentive for couples to keep reproduction in tune with household resources (or else become poorer) was lifted. In China as a whole, the growing population consumed economic gains without improving standards of living (Huang 1990).

The 1980s reforms gave the rural population more incentives for production, and more responsibility. To stabilize rural society (and avoid massive urban migration), the revival of family farming meant that the government had to limit land holding by instituting a system of village-based land allocation, and limit reproduction by instituting the one-child policy. Otherwise, large variations in family economic and reproductive outcomes would rapidly lead to large social inequalities in rural areas, exactly the conditions the Chinese Communist Party originally promised to eliminate. Rationing land and rationing children was the answer. Rural families would get equal amounts of land to use (not to own), and would have equal numbers of children. This would provide social insurance for all, and prevent the reduction in resources and income per capita caused by population growth. What policy makers very surprisingly forgot to consider (or did consider but dismissed), was that children are not equal, and in Chinese society, men and women are not equal.

Before I illustrate how these linked policies work out in a particular village (the ethnographic portion of this presentation), I review the simple gender probabilities implied by the

family planning policy in rural China. Not surprisingly, there is a big gap between the abstract way the national government envisioned family planning and land contracting, and the local understandings of the rural population.

In local understandings of gender, marriage was followed by patrilocal residence and patrilineal heirs. Parents supported sons by giving them houses and land, and sons supported parents in old age (Croll 2000). The link between them was property. Daughters had economic value, or not, according to the value of their current labor. Parents did not form a multi-generational contract involving land with daughters, although they might love them and otherwise treat them well. These local understandings were the products of long-standing patrilineal tradition in most of China, supported up to mid-century by organized lineages and clans. These lineages and clans, when politically and economically successful, often supplanted local government (J. Watson 2004b, R. Watson 2004). The local practice might be more flexible in some parts of China than in others, but these local patrilineal models remained intact. Thirty years of Maoism disrupted many lives and youths destroyed many lineage temples, but they left intact the tradition of making daughters marry out while keeping sons to inherit their parents' living space and their father's kinship ties. Sons were considered crucial to the contract between generations and to defining village membership as well. "Outside" men were distrusted by Chinese villagers who had reason to fear bandits and rival clans.

Under these local understandings, the policy of limiting parents to one or two children directly affected the ability to obtain sons. Its impact in society, however, was differentially felt, according to what Attwood (1995) has called "demographic roulette" or to what peasants had traditionally called "fate" – that element of life that they could not control.

Taking this knowledge of the importance of sons, the family arithmetic is apparent. At the birth of the first child, roughly 50 percent of the families will get a son and be satisfied. The remaining 50 percent will eagerly await the birth of the second child. At the birth of the second child, half of these will get a son, bringing the total number with sons to 75 percent. This is an important figure. Because most of rural China has been limited to two children, it means that a 75 percent majority have their basic demands met, and 50 percent of the population will have two sons. On the less fortunate side of the roulette table are the 25 percent whose first two tries give them daughters. These are the families that will strongly oppose the family planning. They are the ones who will break the quotas, hide or give away girls, or even abandon, neglect, or kill their infant daughters in their concern to get a son. To these families, ultrasound machines and abortion of female offspring are very attractive, low-cost alternatives in their quest to get a son, just like the other 75 percent of the population whom luck has favored.

With only a minority of 25 percent directly discontented within the villages, perhaps the government thought that would be a small price to pay for the stability of land and population. The formula overall would be a fair one, and “chance” or “fate” rather than the government would be to blame for those who did not get a son. The formal arithmetic would contain no provision for gender bias. Still, because local officials who enforce policies from above also live among angry villagers demanding the right to have sons, the policy has not been easy to enforce on the 25 percent who feel cheated. Thus, China now faces the problem of millions of missing girls and women and millions of bachelor men, worrisome for both sexes. Girls are raised in a culture where they are second choice, where they are a minority throughout their lives, and always feel less worthy. They are the easiest group to exclude or victimize when competition or conflict erupts. The rules and structures of village life combined with those of the national government produced the unforeseen consequences that embarrass and concern China today.

### **The Yellow Earth: Huang Tu Village, Henan**

I began fieldwork Huang Tu Village in spring, 1989 with brief visits in the 1990s and again in 2004. Interested in gender and rural development, I selected this farming village in Henan for two reasons. First, as early as 1981 the census data for Henan Province showed a demographic pattern favoring sons, with a birth sex ratio of 110 males per 100 females (China Official Yearbook 1984:420-427). Sex ratios that rise above the expected norm of 106 male births per 100 female births are a warning sign that female children are endangered in a particular region.<sup>2</sup> In 1989, Henan’s birth sex ratio rose to 116, the third highest in China ( Zeng Yi et al (1993:294). Second, the village was located in a traditional wheat-growing region, like most of the north China plain, with cotton as a subsidiary crop. In the early twentieth century, this region was associated with a relatively strong system of gender discrimination against women in the labor force compared to parts of southern and southwestern China. When I arrived in 1989, over 80 percent of Huang Tu Village labor force was employed in farming, with construction as the next largest occupation. The communist revolution had required women to become an active part of the agricultural labor force during the Maoist era (1949-1976) and in the reform period women still did much of the manual farm work, as I observed in 1989. Huang Tu Village seemed like an

---

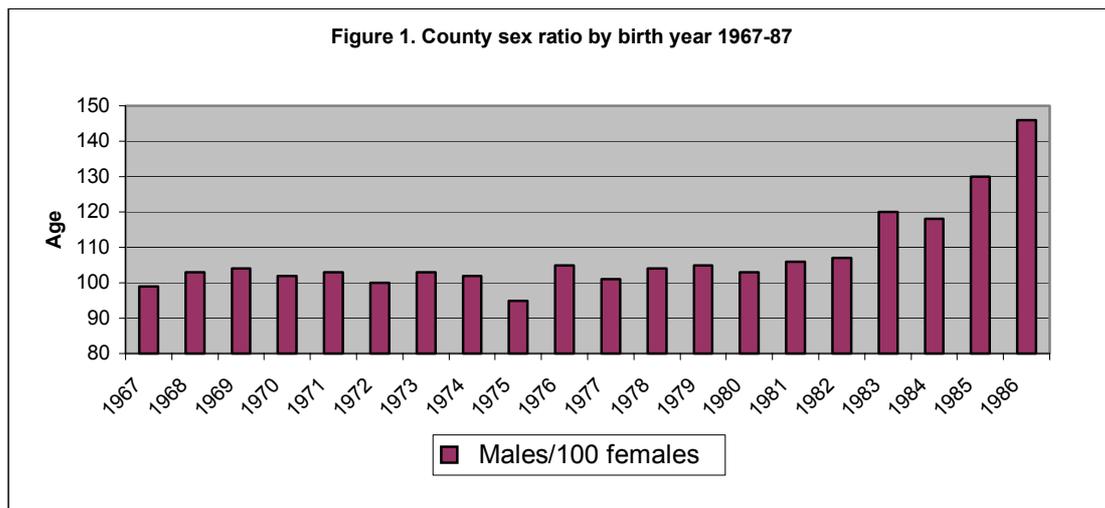
<sup>2</sup> See Croll (2000), Drèze and Sen (2002: 257-262), Miller (1981), Sen (2000:104-107), and Banister (2004) for explanations of this standard and for an introduction to the general problem of missing girls. Throughout this paper I use “sex ratio” to measure males per 100 females as this is the standard usually used for China. Studies for India often use the inverse ratio of 94.3 females per 100 males to represent the normal birth sex ratio. In the latter case, birth sex ratios below 94 females per 100 males suggest discrimination against daughters.

appropriate place to examine the extent to which development contributed to or undermine what has been called “fierce” patriarchy (Drèze and Gazdar 1996).

### Henan Province and local county: population and missing girls

By 2000 Henan Province had become China’s most populous province, with a total population of more than 91 million and a density of 554 persons per square kilometer (Henan 2005). The sex ratio for the total population in 2000 was 106 males per 100 females, having risen from 104 in 1981.<sup>3</sup> The sex ratio for children aged 1-4 in 2000 had shot up to 136 males per 100 females, with nearly ½ million girls missing for the previous four years, 1996-1999.<sup>4</sup> Henan’s disturbingly high child sex ratio is among the highest in China.

The county in which Huang Tu Village is located had about 529,000 people in 1988, and reached nearly 643,000 in 2000 (China Census 2000). A breakdown of population by age and sex at the county level shows that sex ratios began to rise in the mid-1980s, shortly after the one-child policy was established, and rose rapidly at the end of that decade.



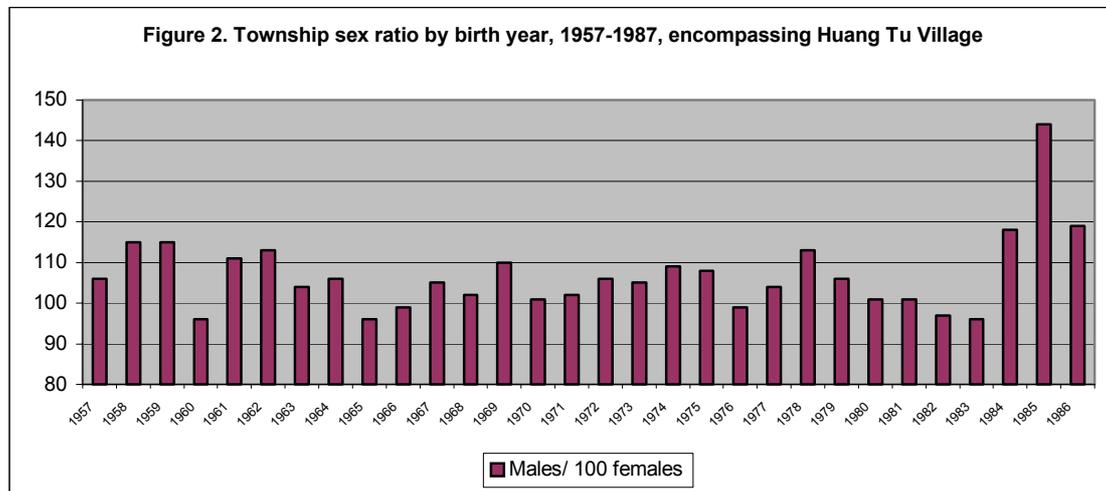
Source: county police records, 1988

Starting in 1985, a similar rise in the proportion of boys was recorded at the township (administrative village) level, a unit that encompasses more than ten large villages. Abnormally high sex ratios thus appeared in this rural area fairly soon after the family

<sup>3</sup> This is an abnormally high sex ratio for total population. Normally, sex ratios for total population are much lower due to the greater longevity of women.

<sup>4</sup> The population of boys age 1-4 in Henan in 2000 was 2,360,487. Dividing this number by 1.06 gives 2,225,939, the expected number of girls. The reported number of girls was only 1,731,048, a difference of nearly 1/2 million.

planning policy was introduced, and before ultrasound machines were commonly available in rural areas and county hospitals (see Figure 2).



These county and township data show that the broad pattern of missing girls was not acute until the 1980s. In 2000, the pattern of elevated child sex ratios persists. When compared to the provincial child sex ratios (aged 1-4) with an alarming ratio of 136 males per 100 females, the county shows an even higher sex ratio of 146 males per 100 females for children aged 1 to 4. Based on the number of recorded male children, 23,244 females were expected, but only 16,859 were counted. An estimated 6,385 female children were missing (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Population, child sex ratios, and missing girls (age 1 to 4) for Henan province and county, 2000**

Place	Total population	Children aged 1-4	Sex ratio (M/100F)	Estimated* missing girls
Henan province	91,237,000	4,091,535	135	494,891
County	642,000	41,508	146	6,385

Source: county police records 1988.

\*Estimated by dividing number of male children (N=24649) by 1.06, a conservative standard for the normal sex ratio, and subtracting the reported number of girls (16,859) from the expected number of girls (23,244).

Two sets of local demographic data, from 1989 and from 2004, supplement the official data on sex ratios from higher levels of government and offer a glimpse at local

conditions. In 1989, I conducted a survey of 50 households selected from each of the 8 teams. My sample of 83 children aged 0 to 15 shows evidence for skewed sex ratios, with a sex ratio of 152 males per 100 females. Due to the small numbers in the sample, the ratios fluctuated quite a bit from year to year, but they suggest that the sex bias may have been present even before the family planning policy began to be strictly enforced in the early 1980s.

**Table 2. Child sex ratios by age (M/100F) for Huang Tu Village, 1989**

<b>Year born</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Sex ratio</b>
1984-88	0-4	24	200
1979-83	5-9	19	57
1974-78	10-14	30	233
<b>1974-88</b>	<b>0-14</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>152</b>

Source: author's interview sample of 50 households 1989.

Another opportunity to examine village age and sex data came in 2004 when I was given access to the household registration records for one of the eight teams. These records also show that Huang Tu Village sex ratios are roughly comparable to the abnormally high sex ratios reported in census data for the township, county, and province up to the year 2000.

**Table 3. Huang Tu Village sex ratios for one team, 2004**

<b>Years born</b>	<b>Ages</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Sex ratio (M/F*100)</b>
2000-03	1-4	21	50
1995-99	5-9	26	189
1990-94	10-14	40	122
1985-89	15-19	43	115
<b>Total</b>		<b>130</b>	<b>113</b>

Source: village officials and village records, 2004

Table 3 shows that there were quite a few more boys born from 1990 to 1999. After the 2000 national census revealed the shocking scarcity of girls across China, government promotion of girl children through propaganda may have made local officials and villagers realize that they needed to have daughters (or simply that they needed to conceal the birth of sons because illegal abortions of females could be inferred from improbably high sex ratios). Given the small numbers of births recorded, we can merely conclude that the data for Huang Tu Village are consistent with the larger trends.

The local demand for sons is also reflected in family composition. With the team data from 2004, I calculated the number of households with children who remain sonless and daughterless. Out of 88 households, 66 had children under age 15. In these 66 households, 36 had a child of each sex, leaving 30 couples with children of only one sex. There were 18 couples with no daughter, but only 12 had no son. Seven of the sonless 12 had only one daughter and would be able to try again. Only five of the daughterless 18 would be allowed to try again. Thus at a minimum 13 families end up with no daughter, and 5 end up with no son, unless either have a child outside the quota or adopt one. This gives a rough measure of the number of families that have already broken the rules, as well as those that might want to do so. Nine of the daughterless couples have not born a child in 10 years, suggesting their reproductive period has ended. Of the five couples who have no sons (and already have two daughters), only two have not born a child in ten years, suggesting the other three may still want to break the quota. This exercise in numbers resembles the kind of thinking that family planning cadres across China must conduct if they are to keep village reproduction within the quotas. Yet a glance at the family composition within this same team shows that 17 households have couples who have gone over the quota of two children in the past 17 years. Nine of them had several daughters followed by a son. Only one had sons first with a daughter as the final child.

### **The Women's Director**

In 2004, the problem of imbalanced sex ratios had clearly been publicized in the village and officials were concerned about it. The wall of one central building carried a large banner proclaiming, "Girls are as good as boys." The Women's director told me that she did not have any exact statistics on village family planning because she simply passed these data on up to the authorities. However, she told me, "The population must not increase. We must keep the proportion of births to 1 percent of the population per year." The director also affirmed that for everyone, the third birth is the last. "If a woman is pregnant with the third, she must get an ultrasound test (*B-chao*) and see if it's a girl. If it's a girl, she must have an abortion (*yin chan*).<sup>5</sup> If it's a boy, she can have it and pay a fine." This statement suggests that family planning officials are colluding with the private use of ultrasound tests in order to meet their quotas and allow villagers to meet their demand for a son.

---

<sup>5</sup> She corrected her use of the term, *liu chan*, implying that they do the post ultrasound abortions rather late.

### **Land, landholding group, and lineage**

“The god of land brings a lawsuit against a farmer who has too many children.”  
Li Hongkui, fine-arts teacher, Beiguodong Village, Wuzhi county, Henan  
(*People’s Daily* Jan. 1, 2000)

Each of the 8 teams in Huang Tu is associated with a section of a large rectangle formed by the grid of streets that compose the village. Each team has its own household registration records, conducts its own land allocation, and is responsible for its own family planning. The village as a whole has a village council, a set of leaders responsible for managing local government, with the most authority vested in the Party Secretary. Land was first contracted to individual households in 1980. In 1985 land was re-divided and administered by the eight teams, so that each team had its own leaders who would reallocate land among the constituent households. Team subgroups, or *xiaozu* (groups, not clans), subdivide land according to population changes. Each group has slightly different amounts of land per capita, according to population growth or decline. These are the groups that readjust the amount of land, by drawing lots, each five years.

In 1988 the village had 4155 *mu* of land with about 1.7 *mu* of land per person. In 1980 when they first divided the collective land, everyone – male or female, young or old – got exactly the same amount distributed to her or his family.<sup>6</sup> By 1985, due to family variation in births and deaths, differences in the amount of land per capita had emerged. In addition, some teams lost members due to official outmigration for urban jobs. The village redistributed land but only within each team in 1985. Thus, some teams had larger or lesser amounts per capita according to whether they had gained or lost population. The village conducted a second land redistribution in 1990 and at that time the variation ranged from 1.8 *mu* to 1.3 *mu* per person, with the average amount of land per capita of 1.55 *mu*. In 2004, population growth had reduced the amount of land per capita to 1.25 *mu*. The team with the least land per capita had dropped down to .9 *mu* per person, while the team with the most had almost twice as much, with 1.5 *mu*. The population was now 3207 and the farmland had declined to 3953 *mu* because some land was converted to residential house plots for new families (see Table 4).

---

<sup>6</sup> A *mu* is 0.0667 hectares.

**Table 4. Huang Tu Village changes in land per capita by team 1989-2004**

Team	Mu per capita		
	1989	1993	2004
1	2	1.8	1.4
2	1.7	1.6	1.1
3	1.9	1.7	1.3
4	1.8	1.6	1.5
5	1.5	1.5	1.5
6	1.3	1.3	.9
7	1.5	1.3	1.0
8	1.9	1.7	1.4
Total	1.7	1.6	1.2

Source: village records from various years, from party secretary and team leaders.

As informal institutions, lineages often exercise considerable power over property rights in rural China. Lineages are not officially part of the government, but are maps of kinship networks within the community that affect alliances and group membership. Outlining the kinship structure is thus an important part of understanding power and property relations within a village.

When I first came to Huang Tu Village, it appeared to be a multi-lineage village, even though it bore the name of a dominant lineage, here called “Huang.”<sup>7</sup> Table 5 shows lineage distribution; lineage “A” refers to the most numerous name, Huang.

<sup>7</sup> The pseudonym, Huang, was chosen to indicate that they are the dominant family, as well as to suggest the pervasive Yellow Earth of their environment.

**Table 5. Huang Tu Village distribution of lineages among 8 village teams, 1989.**

Primary lineage	Percent	Secondary lineage	Percent
A	77	H	14
A	70	B	8
A	56	B	8
A	46	B	30
A	45	C	17
B	43	A	32
D	48	E	27
F	62	G	17

Source: village household registration records for head of household.

The numerical dominance of the Huangs was over 50 percent in three of the eight teams, but it did not reach the level of 80 percent, a convenient benchmark for considering a village a “single lineage” village. Thus, even though the Huangs were the most numerous of the diverse surnames in Huang Tu Village as a whole, three other lineages were the most numerous in other teams, and none seemed have enough members to be a completely dominant lineage. This impression was reinforced by the fact that the Party Secretary and Vice Party Secretary and the majority of the village council were not named Huang.

Names can be misleading, however. In this case, the village method of keeping track of household heads unintentionally concealed the lineage affiliation of a portion of the households. The household registration booklets record the eldest male of the senior couple as head, and when he dies, the widow is regarded as household head, even when she is living with adult, married sons. Because women do not take their husband’s surname at marriage,<sup>8</sup> the registers list these female household heads by their natal surname, which differs from the surname of their children. Thus, the listing for female heads of household does not reflect the lineage affiliation of the next generation. This inadvertently disguises the degree of lineage concentration among the males of the village. Because I could not obtain registration information for all 2,500 individuals in 1989, a method of reducing the distortion regarding lineage concentration is to omit the female-headed households from the sample and analyze just the surnames of the male heads. This is reasonable if there is no systematic bias to make some surname groups likely to have more widows or female-headed households than others.

<sup>8</sup> Before the 1949 revolution, women took the surname of their husband when they married, and were known by the two lineage surnames, their husband’s and their father’s plus “*shi*” which, like “Mrs.” denoted a married woman.

**Table 6. Huang Tu Village: surname concentration among male household heads for each of the eight teams (1989)**

Primary lineage %	2ndary lineage %	Primary & 2ndary lineage %
83	10	93
82	12	94
78	20	98
77	18	95
64	36	100
57	36	93
53	20	73
50	35	85

**Source:** Village registration books. Shading marks primary lineages with over 70 percent, and the sum of primary and secondary lineages with over 90 percent of team population.

Re-examination of the 1989 evidence (see Table 6) suggests that Huang Tu Village is not best described as a multi-surname village, but as a village with strong surname concentration in each team. Structurally, the eight teams resemble “natural villages” (a term used in China to suggest they all descended from the same founding family, and defining patrilineal descent as “natural”) composed of a dominant lineage and a secondary lineage. Each team has a single surname that accounts for 50 to 83 percent of the households, and a secondary lineage comprising from 10 to 36 percent of the total households. Together, the two main surnames accounted for 73 to 100 percent of the male household heads in each team.<sup>9</sup>

In 2004, I collected household membership from the registration books for every member (total 408) of one team, including the households headed by women. Classifying them according to the surname taken by the children of the household showed that 70 percent of the households belonged to the dominant lineage, supporting the evidence for surname concentration from 1989. Huang Tu Village thus resembles an association of eight single-lineage communities (three of them dominated by non-Huang lineages) with a few minor lineages distributed among them. The fact that each landholding team is very strongly associated with one or two surname groups suggests that son preference in this area is related to the social significance of lineages and not just to the labor, old-age security, and lineal continuity concerns of individual families.

<sup>9</sup> This is very similar to Hu Mingwen’s description of Liuxia village (Jiangxi Province, Wannian county, Huyun township). Liuxia village is composed of four “natural villages” in which each has a different dominant surname (2004:6).

### **Land for houses**

One couple that I interviewed is a case of endogamous marriage in Huang Tu Village. Both the husband and the wife have become state sector teachers with household registration in the township. Neither receives farmland. Nonetheless, they built a new house in the village two years ago. They explained, “All sons born in the village have a right to a house lot (*zhajidi*) of 3 *fen* (0.3 *mu*, or 200 square meters).” When I asked about daughters, they said that an *unmarried* daughter in theory also has that right, but the ones who actually receive it are sons, married or not, whether they work outside the village or not. For example, a married son of the village who has urban registration and has lived in the city for more than fifteen years told me he no longer has a house, but he still has 3 *fen* of land in Huang Tu Village. According to local rules, however, a married daughter loses the right to inherit the house plot.

Another example of gender and land transfer comes from an extended family with two married sons, each with a child. Several years ago, their daughter married out to a neighboring village. Because the land has not been redistributed yet, their daughter has no farmland in her husband’s village while her two sisters-in-law in Huang Tu Village have received her share of the farmland, until they are each given a full portion at the next land adjustment. These examples show how rural communities continue to exclude daughters from direct inheritance of farmland or house lots, and require them to marry in order to obtain land rights through their husbands.<sup>10</sup> In this setting, it is no wonder that many village women expressed the view that bearing a son is their duty or obligation (*ren wu*). It often sounded as if they were describing a job they were hired to do. Bearing a son creates the next property owner, and secures a woman’s claims to land in her husband’s village. This is vitally necessary for her because, as a married woman, she loses these rights in her natal village.

### **Land control policy in practice: the lineage as land entitlement arbiter**

Over the years, I have spoken with villagers and officials about anomalous household situations such as uxori-local marriage and widow remarriage to better understand how well families or individuals outside the patriline were tolerated with respect to membership and land rights. In one team, I found that uxori-local marriages accounted for only two percent of all marriages. When I interviewed a leader about uxori-local marriage in his team, he seemed extremely embarrassed, speaking of the two cases in hushed tones. I comment on the embarrassment because it contrasts so greatly with the many cases of uxori-local marriage I encountered in a Han village in Yunnan province where uxori-local marriage was an accepted

---

<sup>10</sup> See also Bossen (2002) and Jacka (1997) for descriptions of rural women’s land rights.

alternative even in families with both sons and daughters (Bossen 2002). In Huang Tu Village, one case of uxori-local marriage occurred in a household that had three daughters and no son, and another in a household where a virilocally married widow with young children remarried. Years earlier, I was told about another case of a widow with young children who attempted to bring in a husband from outside the village. In the first attempt, the husband mysteriously died (drinking himself to death in the company of another Huang Tu villager), and in the second attempt the man was beaten up and driven out by the nephews of her deceased husband (Bossen n.d.).

Some have predicted that the one-child policy would eventually lead to the acceptance of uxori-local marriage in rural communities (H. Han 2003). This is because roughly half of all families would have a single daughter and, without a son, this large group of parents would view their daughter as their heir and source of old age support. However, the two-child policy and the use of sex-selective abortion seems to have delayed any such transition by providing the large majority of families with at least one son.

In addition to a very low incidence of uxori-local marriage in Huang Tu Village, divorce is exceedingly rare. In Chinese villages, variations in local practice such as the acceptance or rejection of uxori-local marriage or of divorced women as entitled to a share of the marital property are linked with the strength of patrilineal organization. Where villages are dominated by a single lineage in numerical terms, whether or not it announces itself as a corporate group (by constructing lineage temples, for example), it still has considerable informal power to police its boundaries and exclude outsiders. One of the major principles of the lineage as an institution is its exclusion of men who are not members by birthright.<sup>11</sup>

### **The village itself as corporate property**

I suggest that debate about whether or not Chinese patrilineal groups require “corporate property” in order to qualify as lineages, may not recognize that the village itself is, in some way, patrilineal corporate property as long as the village leadership can make decisions about who can or cannot become a member. This sense of “ownership” does not depend on title deeds, but on lineage strength in using political connections or force if need be to defend village interests. The strong lineage, with its control of written records, can include or exclude members. While membership in a village or in the Communist Party is officially lineage-neutral, the bonds that bring people into relations

---

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of Chinese patriliney and patrimony, see Harrell (2002). Regarding lineages that lack corporate property in the northern part of China, see Cohen (1990, 1992), and M. Han’s study of a lineage (2001) in Shandong. For south China, see J. and R. Watson (2004, 2004a, 2004b).

of trust with one another are still greatly strengthened by lineage affiliation, reinforced by a history of family and residential ties and obligations as brothers, and neighbor-cousins (often called “brothers.”).

Lineage theorists tend to think of property as belonging to the individual or household, or lineage and to look for signs of joint ownership of land, temples, schools, or other buildings.<sup>12</sup> But the village itself is a unit whose property is managed by a leadership operating largely under patrilineal rules. Even though individuals contract property for household production, the land remains effectively the property of the corporate group headed by village leaders (Guo 1999:74-75). These leaders also represent their lineage interests. Over the years, as the status inversions of the Maoist years that elevated men of poor families are forgotten, the influential leadership positions of party secretary and the village head often return to members of the dominant lineage (M. Han 2001:146). In regions where there is no dominant lineage and many different surname groups compete for power, the enforcement of gender rules strictly delimiting lineage membership may be less stringent (Li Shuzhuo et al 2000, 2003, and Bossen 2002).

How is power actually exercised within the village? Is party membership strong enough to counter lineage membership as a basis for power? Gao (1999:201) wrote about clan power in terms of family planning, and made some interesting comments on the relationship between clans and the party.

“We must be cautious not to overstate the similarities between the periods before 1949 and that in post-Mao China. For one thing, the clans and the Communist local officials have not yet totally merged as one political body. ... in present-day China clan power and the local official authorities still comprise two distinct political entities. Nonetheless there is a great deal of overlap. Furthermore, if the state chooses to, it can still exert power over the local authorities. A clear example of this is the implementation of family planning policies. Since the early 1990s, a large number of abortions and IUD operations have been forcefully carried out in Qinglin and Gao Village, and local clan power has been unable, and in fact has never tried, to stop these brutal measures” (1999:201).

While it is important to note that much of the birth control burden falls on women who are outsiders to the lineage, Gao’s point is still valid. Perhaps the view here should be the optimistic one that when the state sees its vital interests at stake, it is capable of projecting power to the village level. As long as missing daughters are not seen in this light, however, the state is prepared to accept the power of lineages and other local elites.

---

<sup>12</sup> See M. Han’s comparison of lineage models (2001).

## Conclusion

Some scholars have explicitly linked China's family planning policy to missing girls (Greenhalgh and Li 1995) but few have linked the household responsibility system to increasing sex ratios. Households are now in charge of their own labor force and their own social security. Their security comes from their land and their land rights are enforced by lineage-dominated groups. There is clearly a relationship between the land system and the son system.

How high will the sex ratio go? Amartya Sen (2003) seemed relieved that it has not risen above 120. If we assume everyone has two children and the 25 percent who are "boyless" carry on to have one boy, with the third (and subsequent) girls being aborted, unregistered or something else, then the resulting ratio is 125. If we limit the number of pregnancies to five, then the sex ratio is 122 males per 100 females. I suggest that a sex ratio of around 125 is an upper limit allowing all families to have at least one son. The danger that it could go higher would seem to depend on a condition where girls *per se* represent a disadvantage to their parents – as when they are expected to provide an expensive dowry – as has been the case in India.

Son preference in rural China is exacerbated by population control. Insistence on having a son is importantly motivated by land allocation practices and patrilineal rules of male land inheritance. The significance of the patriline is not merely that the "line" is a ritual link between ancestors and descendants, but is very importantly about land, local territory, and territorial integrity, concerns that fall within the traditional domain of lineage interests.<sup>13</sup> Lineage ties that prescribe loyalty and solidarity remain a potential source of village political power and brute force.

In rural China, patrilineal groups retain power for several reasons.

- The central government is weak on the ground. It cannot enforce its regulations without cooperation from local leaders who are surrounded by patrilineal kin groups with claims upon them. This, of course, is a specific instance of the classic observation that "Heaven is high and the Emperor far away."
- Private property in land is not allowed, so local allocation is the practice by which villagers' property rights are defined, with patrilineal principles operating to determine who belongs to the community and can contract farmland. While the introduction of private property in land will not solve this problem as long as the lineage system remains intact in rural areas, the current system unquestionably devalues daughters.

---

<sup>13</sup> See J. Watson (2004b) for a description of the role of lineage militia in defending lineage interests.

- Although the state systematically works to eliminate other centers of power, rural lineages are “below the radar” and “traditional,” often operating as an agent of the state. They thereby pose a relatively low level of threat to state power. Lineage organization thus enters the vacuum which exists where the institutions of civil society otherwise would be.<sup>14</sup>

While there are of course cultural elements in this formulation, son preference can best be seen as a response to specific policies and circumstances.

The land reform of the 1950s stressed that women were to have equal rights to land, and they were counted in the distribution of land to households in its first phase. Collectivization, however, erased those rights for men and women as they became landless workers on larger collective farms managed by village committees under the direction of the state. Decollectivization did not bring a return to either the pre-revolutionary situation of larger and smaller landowners, nor to the immediate pre-collectivization situation where women were supposed to have gained title to land. Rather, as explained above, decollectivization brought a mixed system of contracting to households based on patrilineal birthright, with the village government as the effective owner-allocator of the village land. Because current village practice still treats daughters' land rights in the family and village as temporary, the accepted way for women to regain a claim on land and housing is to raise a son for their husband's family and patrilineage. The reform period has witnessed the revival of patrilineal control over village land rights and the implementation of a national birth control policy. Acting together these developments have contributed to the extreme shortage of daughters in rural China.

Missing daughters are a human development problem *per se*. The Chinese government and outside development workers are increasingly seeing them as a problem with respect to development as well. The argument that a generation of bachelor males risks being a challenge to social stability is one element.<sup>15</sup> Missing daughters' devalued sisters may also have less to contribute to society than had they been raised in a more female-friendly environment. Interestingly, neither the United Nations Human Development Index nor the related Gender Development Index contains a sex ratio measure. The significance of skewed sex ratios to human development needs to be recognized.

---

<sup>14</sup> See Hu (2004) and Zeng Guohua (2004) for opposing positive and negative views on the revival of lineage and clan strength in Jiangxi, as well as Ruf (1999, 2000) for Sichuan.

<sup>15</sup> Watson (2004b) noted the link between involuntary bachelorhood and violence in South China. Hudson and den Boer's broad examination of the historical role of unmarried males in China concludes, "Throughout Chinese history, men at the margins of society have been available for work that involves violence. Occasionally they changed the destiny of a nation" (2004:226).

## References

- Attwood, Donald W. "Inequality among Brothers and Sisters," STANDD Working Paper published Centre for Society, Technology and Development, McGill University, 1995.
- Banister, Judith. 2004. Shortage of Girls in China Today. *Journal of Population Research*. May.
- Bossen, Laurel. 2002. *Chinese Women and Rural Development: Sixty Years of Change in Lu Village, Yunnan*. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Bossen, Laurel. n.d. Village to Distant Village: The Opportunities and Risks of Long Distance Marriage Migration in Rural China. In press. *Journal of Contemporary China*.
- China Census 2000. National Bureau of Statistics. China Data Center, University of Michigan
- China Official Yearbook, 1984.
- Cohen, Myron, 1990. "Lineage Organization in North China." *Journal of Asian Studies* 49, no.3.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1992. "Family Management and Family Division in Contemporary Rural China." *China Quarterly*, (130): 357-77.
- Croll, Elisabeth, 2000. *Endangered Daughters: Discrimination and Development in Asia*. London: Routledge.
- Das Gupta, Monica, Sunhya Lee, Patricia Uberoi, Danning Wang, Lihong Wang and Xiaodan Zhang. 2004. State policies and women's agency in China, the Republic of Korea and India 1950-2000: lessons from contrasting experiences. In Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton (eds.), *Culture and Public Action: A Cross-Disciplinary Dialogue on Development Policy*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. Pp. 234-259
- Drèze, Jean and Haris Gazdar. 1996. "Uttar Pradesh: The Burden of Inertia" In Drèze, Jean and Amartya Sen, ed. *Indian Development: Selected Regional Perspectives*. Oxford and Delhi: Oxford University Press. Pp. 33-127.
- Drèze, Jean and Amartya Sen. 2002. *India: Development and Participation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gao Mobo. 1999. *Gao Village: A Portrait of Rural Life in Modern China*. Aberdeen, HK: Hong Kong University Press.
- Guo, Xiaolin. 1999. "The Role of Local Government in Creating Property Rights: A Comparison of Two Townships in Northwest Yunnan. In Oi, Jean and Andrew Walder, eds. *Property Rights and Economic Reform in China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 71-94.
- Greenhalgh, Susan and Jiali Li. 1995. *Signs*.
- Han Min. 2001. *Social Change and Continuity in a Village in Northern Anhui, China*. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, SES 58.
- Han Hua. 2003. "Sexuality and Uxorilocal Marriage in Rural North China: Impacts of the One-Child-One-Family Policy on Gender and Kinship." *Journal of Family History*, Vol. 28, No. 3: 443-459.
- Harrell, Stevan. 2002. Patriline, Patriarchy, Patrimony: Surface Features and Deep Structures in the Chinese Family System. 2002. Paper draft  
<http://www.anthro.washington.edu/Faculty/FacultyPages/stevehar/PPP.html>
- Henan 2005. Basic Data.  
<http://www.unescap.org/esid/psis/population/database/chinadata/henan.htm> 6/2/2005.
- Hudson, Valerie M. and Andrea M. Den Boer. 2004. *Bare Branches: Security Implications of Asia's Surplus Male Population*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Huang, Philip. 1990. *The Peasant Family and Rural Development in the Yangzi Delta*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Hu Mingwen. 2004. "Analysis of Village Power Structures in the Period of Transformation." *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology*. 37(1): 3-33.
- Jacka, Tamara. 1997. *Women's Work in Rural China: Change and Continuity in an Era of Reform*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Ku, Hok Bun. 2003. *Moral Politics in A South Chinese Village: Responsibility, Reciprocity, and Resistance*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Lee, James, and Wang Feng. 2001. *One Quarter of Humanity: Malthusian Mythology and Chinese Realities*. Harvard University Press.
- Li Shuzuo, Marcus W. Feldman, and Nan Li. 2000. "Cultural Transmission of Uxorilocal Marriage in Lueyang, China." *Journal of Family History*, Vol. 25, No. 2. 158-177.
- Li Shuzhuo, Marcus W. Feldman, Nan Li. 2003. Acceptance of Two Types of Uxorilocal Marriage in Contemporary Rural China: The Case of Lueyang. *Journal of Family History*, Vol 28, no. 2, April 2003: 314-333.
- Miller, Barbara. 1981. *The Endangered Sex: Neglect of Female Children in Rural North India*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- People's Daily. 2000. "Cartoons Urge Birth Control."  
<http://english.people.com.cn/english/200001/26/print20000126R105.html>.
- Ruf, Gregory. 1999. "Collective Enterprise and Property Rights in a Sichuan Village. The Rise and Decline of Managerial Corporatism." In Oi, Jean and A. Walder, eds. *Property Rights and Economic Reform in China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. Pp. 27-48.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2000. *Cadres and Kin: Making a Socialist Village in West China, 1921-1991*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Sen, Amartya. 2000. *Development as Freedom*. NY: Alfred Knopf.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2003. Editorial: "Missing Women – revisited." *British Medical Journal*. 2003;327:1297-1298 (6 December), doi:10.1136/bmj.327.7427.1297. <http://www.bmj.com>.
- United Nations Human Development Index. 2004. United Nations Development Program.
- Watson, James. 2004a [1977]. "Hereditary Tenancy and Corporate Landlordism in Traditional China," in J. Watson and R. Watson, eds., *Village Life in Hong Kong: Politics, Gender, and Ritual in the New Territories*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press. 145-166.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2004b.[1989] "Self-Defense Corps, Violence, and the Bachelor Sub-Culture in South China: Two Case Studies." in James Watson and Rubie Watson, eds., *Village Life in Hong Kong: Politics, Gender, and Ritual in the New Territories*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, pp.251-265 .
- Watson, Rubie. 2004 [1982]. "The Creation of a Chinese Lineage: The Teng of Ha Tsuen, 1669-1751." J. Watson and R. Watson, eds., *Village Life in Hong Kong: Politics, Gender, and Ritual in the New Territories*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press.
- Yan, Yunxiang. 1996. *The Flow of Gifts: Reciprocity and Social Networks in a Chinese Village*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Zeng Guohua. (2004) "Adaptation, Revival and Reconstruction: Clan Organizations and Rural Power Structures: Two Case Studies from Southern Jiangxi and Eastern Guangdong." *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology*. 37(1):34-50.
- Zeng Yi et al. 1993 "Causes and Implications of the Recent Increase in the Reported Sex Ratio at Birth in China," *Population and Development Review* 19(2):281-302.