Chapter 9
Persistent Social and Economic Disparities

9.1 Access to Education and Employment as a Factor of Inequality

From a demographic point of view, discrimination against girls and women is part of a family and social system that confers high value on men and keeps girls and women in an inferior position. The Chinese government's actions to improve women's status over the past 50 years have led to clear improvements. Despite persistent social and cultural issues, there is no doubt that Chinese women enjoy better treatment today than during the imperial period. Peasant women are in a more favourable situation than in most other developing countries, and the position of women in the cities, or at least the larger ones, is probably better than most. In theory Chinese women enjoy all the rights for which hundreds of millions of women around the world are still fighting, including the right to work, study, divorce, or have an abortion. Even if the laws relating to women's rights and interests are often only partially applied, the country does have a comprehensive body of laws governing various aspects of women's lives and gender equality, which is the prerequisite for any progress in this domain.

However, there are considerable disparities in women's situations depending on whether they live in the more developed coastal regions, the west or the centre of the country, and if they live in the city or the countryside.[1] While the better-off city-dwellers have access to consumer society goods, the peasants in the less developed regions still live by the seasons in a form of poverty that is relatively untouched by modern life. In the countryside, women may still eat in the kitchen when the family receives guests, "We women don't know much about what's going on in the world, and since we are confined to the kitchen we're excluded from intellectually

[1] According to official estimates, the gap in GDP between the cities and the countryside rose tenfold between 1949 and 1990 and is still growing. "There is almost no other country in the world where the income gap between city and countryside is as wide as it is in China," reported two researchers from the Beijing Academy of Social Sciences in 1999 (Fabre 2000).

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stimulating conversation," explained Xu Jinfeng, a member of the Hebei Women's Federation.[2] The traditional codes governing the social divisions between the sexes continue to weigh on peasant women. Many young girls have to give up their education after primary school to help with domestic tasks and work in the fields, and more importantly, to allow their brothers to continue with their education[3] (Haski 2002). In 2003, Wu Qidi, then vice-minister for education, admitted that many girls were deprived of an education in disadvantaged regions because their parents want them to start working as quickly as possible.[4] Clearly, the imbalance in the sex ratio at young ages is the demographic reflection of women's low social status compared with men, and of a social environment that favours boys in the family at the expense of girls, especially in access to education and jobs (Chu 2001; Li and Zhu 2001).

9.1.1 Discrimination in Schooling

"Education for All"

Women's educational levels have clearly improved over the past decades. In traditional Chinese society schooling for girls was never a priority. On the contrary, the idea prevailed that "a woman without learning is virtuous" (*nüzi wu caibian shi de*) (Elisseeff 1988). Learning was the privilege of young girls from good families and of high-ranking courtesans, and usually restricted to the arts and social etiquette. For the former, learning was refinement, while for the latter it was erudition for professional purposes. The purpose of getting an education was not to raise women's social status but to acquire an additional advantage that would make them more attractive to men.

By advocating education for all, Mao Zedong struck a harsh blow to a centuries-old, sexist and elitist educational system. Mao believed that schooling should comply with two main principles: it should be egalitarian and available to the masses. A fervent defender of women's rights, he saw education as the prerequisite to women's emancipation. Schooling was therefore made available to everyone – or at least everyone with good class origins. The sons and daughters of the working classes and the revolutionary cadres dedicated to the Party and the revolution were sure to be admitted. The "redder" they were, the better their chances of reaching higher education, since class origins were a determining factor (Attané 2005; Unger 1982). Primary schooling developed rapidly as a result, but progress was interrupted by the anti-rightist movement of 1957[5] when teachers and intellectuals were persecuted, and then again by the Cultural Revolution in 1966 (Hossain 1997).

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[2] China's women fight kitchen culture. BBC monitoring, 2 Feb 2002. Available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/world/monitoring/media_reports/1797524.stm. Accessed 17 Mar 2003.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Nine years of compulsory education will become widespread in China by 2008. *Renmin ribao* (People's Daily) 26 Aug 2003.

[5] See note 17, page 107.

Nevertheless, a step had been taken towards making education widely available and the efforts deployed to release women from the domestic sphere by opening schools to girls, started to bear fruit. Prior to 1949, 80 % of the population was illiterate and few men – and even fewer women – attended school regularly. In 2010, China's illiteracy rate was very low compared with most developing countries, including the rate for women (2.5 % for men and 7.3 % for women) (PCO 2012). India, for example, which is just behind China in terms of population size, still had an illiteracy rate of 26.0 % in 2011 (17.8 % among men and 34.5 % among women). The rate for sub-Saharan countries is even higher, at 38 %, of which 62 % are women (UNESCO 2011). Were it not for exceptions, such as Latin America, which is very advanced in terms of access to education (8.0 % illiteracy in 2005–2008) (UNESCO 2011) and China's close neighbour, Republic of Korea (2.2 %), China would be among the leading countries in the developing world (UNESCO 2000). Officially, illiteracy concerns less than 5 % of the population, mostly adults and elderly people, and the vast majority of young people are able to read and write. But in China, as in most countries with a literacy problem, the majority of illiterates are women (73.8 % in 2010), and literacy is advancing at a slower pace for women than for men.

At present, most children are enrolled in school and what was once a privilege is now the rule. Just 60 years ago, women who had received an education, however rudimentary, were the exception, especially in the countryside. In the generations born before the 1950s, now aged well over 60, only one in two living in the countryside had gone to school. Today the situation of women has significantly improved. Official statistics show that among children aged 6–9, only 3.8 % of girls have never attended school, which is no higher than the percentage for boys (3.7 %).

A law was passed in 1986 making 9 years of education compulsory for all, so that every child could complete lower secondary school.[6] But this was still far from the case in 2003, when Wu Qidi declared that, "Chinese law stipulates that every child is entitled to nine years' compulsory education, but to date that law has not been fully applied".[7] In 1990, two women in three nation-wide (32 % in the cities and 71 % in the countryside) had been to school for 6 years or less, and only one woman in 10 had more than 9 years' education, primary schooling included. Twice as many men had 9 years of schooling, and men had stayed in school for nearly 2 years longer than women (6.6 years on average versus 4.7 years for women) (Table 9.1). In 2000, the literacy gap between the sexes had narrowed slightly, with women having just 1.5 years less schooling, on average, than men (6.1 and 7.6 years, respectively), although still not the compulsory 9 years. In the past decade, however, the generalization of primary education in the younger generations has led to a significant reduction in the proportion of women (18–64 years) without instruction. In 2010 it had fallen to 6.6 % in rural areas and 3.5 % in urban areas (Table 9.1). Improvements are also visible in access to high school or higher education, with a three-fold increase between 1990 and 2010 for women in rural areas and a doubling

[6] Six years are required to complete primary school, 9 for lower secondary school and 12 for high school.

[7] Nine years of compulsory education will become widespread in China by 2008, op. cit.

Table 9.1 Educational level of women, 1990–2010

	1990		2000		2010	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
No education (%)	10.9	34.7	20.8	58.8	3.5	6.6
No more than primary education (%)	19.8	36.1			10.3	29.4
High school or above (%)	36.1	6.7	44.4	8.4	54.2	18.2
Mean length of schooling (in years)						
Women	4.7		6.1		8.8	
Men	6.6		7.6		9.1	

Sources: ACWF (2010)

Table 9.2 Crude enrolment rate by sex and place of residence in 2000 (%)

	Primary		Lower secondary		High school		University	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Towns and townships	94.4	94.2	66.3	67.3	47.3	48.0	18.6	16.4
Countryside	95.1	94.4	50.5	47.9	11.8	9.4	1.0	0.9
China	94.9	94.4	55.1	53.5	24.8	24.3	8.8	8.0

Source: 2000 Population Census (PCO 2002)

in urban areas. While high school and higher education remain the prerogative of a minority of Chinese (just over a third have access to one and/or the other), recent developments indicate a clearly positive momentum: in 20 years, the mean length of schooling for women has almost doubled from 4.7 years in 1990 to 8.8 years in 2010, gradually closing the gap with men (6.6 years in 1990 and 9.1 years in 2010).

In the eastern cities of China, the younger generations of both sexes now have access to a relatively egalitarian educational resources. But geographical disparities remain significant, especially in rural areas. In 2010, in the centre and west of the country, for example, rural women had attended school for 6.8 years on average –2.2 years less than those living in rural municipalities of Beijing and Tianjin. In the countryside, the added value of education, especially for girls, is not always understood, especially as the cost has become prohibitive for many families since the reform of the education system in the 1980s. In general, family expectations are lower for girls than for boys, although the gender gap in this respect is narrowing.

In 2000, the official primary school enrolment rate was very high, at 95 % for both boys and girls in the cities and in the countryside (Table 9.2), but secondary school enrolment was another matter. Nation-wide, only one child in two went to lower secondary school, meaning that after ages 12–13 only half the number of children was still in school, reflecting the poor overall educational capital. Things were slightly better in the cities, where two in three children entered lower secondary school, and as many girls as boys, which is a new factor. However, in the countryside, girls were still discriminated against in lower secondary school education, even though the gap was gradually closing, with nearly 51 % of boys in lower secondary school in 2000, compared with 48 % of girls. Upper secondary school was even more selective, with only one in four teenagers enrolled, and considerable

disparities once again between the cities, where one student in two attended upper secondary school, and the countryside where only 12 % of boys and about 9 % of girls had that opportunity.

Country-wide, women's education is gaining ground year after year but higher education still belongs to a tiny privileged minority, namely the political class prior to the reforms and the new wealthy classes today. It is attracting growing numbers of women, however. In 1980, fewer than one student in four was female, but today their numbers equal those of men, which shows the considerable progress achieved by the younger generation. Overall, however, the enrolment rate for higher education, which is the same for men and women, remains low.

Lower School Enrolment Rates for Girls

In 2000, nearly all children went to school even if nearly half of them did not get beyond primary school. Actually, the dropout rate remains high, especially among girls, and many children fall behind in school, give up, or attend infrequently. According to the 2000 census, some two million children aged 7–14 in the countryside were not in school, and nearly six out of ten of them were girls (57.3 %).[8] Bearing in mind that girls are a minority in that age group (47 % in 2000) due to pre- and post-natal discrimination, the imbalance is all the greater. Since girls are under-represented among children as a whole, they should logically be under-represented among the children not enrolled in school, but in fact the reverse is true. In poor families, boys often get priority for schooling and girls give up school first. In the 2000 census, out of the 1.3 million children aged under 15 who gave up school before the end of primary level, 57.9 % were girls (PCO 2002). But the reverse is true higher up the academic ladder because of a selection effect: girls lucky enough to enter lower secondary school tend to be from better-off families, and when their parents have the means to send them to school they generally prove to be more studious than boys, as is the case elsewhere in the world.

The problem for girls in the countryside is their comparatively poor attendance and their high dropout rate before the end of compulsory schooling, which prevents any lasting acquisition of knowledge. True, a majority of children do attend school sporadically and learn the basics of reading and writing, but they are not in school long enough to consolidate what little knowledge they might have acquired.

9.1.2 Gender Inequality in Employment

One Working Person in Two Is Female

Chinese women have one of the highest labour force participation rates in the world. Almost three in four women work, and in both the cities and the countryside, almost one

[8] In 2000, 1.78 million children aged 7–14 were not in school, 1.02 million of whom were girls.

Table 9.3 Gender distribution of the working population by type of activity (%)

Type of activity	Women (in 2000)	Men (in 2000)	% of women (in 2005)
Agriculture	69.0	60.7	49.7
Manufacturing, transport	11.7	19.3	32.5
Trade, catering, services	10.1	8.4	48.9
Technical personnel	6.5	5.0	49.4
Office workers	2.1	4.0	31.8
Executives	0.6	2.5	21.6
Total	100.0	100.0	45.4

Sources: PCO (2002); NBS (2007)

economically active person in two is a woman (44.8 and 46.2 %, respectively) (PCO 2012). This performance is far superior to that of Indian women for example, who only represent one third of the economically active population (and in 2008, their labour participation rate reached barely 36 %).[9] However, while the female employment rate in China appears to suggest equal access to employment for men and women, in fact this depends very much on the economic sector. In 2000, more than two thirds of all Chinese women (69 %) were working in agriculture compared with 60.7 % of men (Table 9.3). The agricultural sector employed almost as many women as men and they represented 48.5 % of the agricultural labour force. For both men and women, farm labour is poorly paid, with low yields due to rudimentary production techniques and a lack of mechanization. The second sector in which women were largely present, albeit far after agriculture, was factory work, which employed 11.7 % of Chinese women. Trade, catering and services come third, accounting for 10 % of active Chinese women.

In all, around nine out of ten Chinese women are still working in low-skill sectors, a slightly higher proportion than men. They are less represented in more skilled occupations. In China, office work remains largely a male preserve where female employees account for barely one-third of the total, and few women hold positions of responsibility.

In both politics and government, women are at the bottom of the ladder, and going up the hierarchy there are fewer and fewer of them. In 2000, there were only 7 million women (14 %)[10] among the 50 million or so members of the Chinese Communist Party (most of whom had local cadre functions), and inequalities were even more flagrant in the senior leadership. Of the 189 members elected to the Party Central Committee in 2002, there were only five women, the lowest number ever. All nine permanent members of the Politburo were men, and there was only one woman among the non-permanent members.[11] In the mid 1970s, 10 % of Central Committee members were women, four times more than in 2000.

[9] India. An Overview of Women's Work, Minimum Wages and Employment. Available at http://www.wageindicator.org/main/wageindicatorcountries/country-report-india. Accessed 14 Sept 2012.

[10] Females now play an active role in politics. *China Daily*. 25 Sept 2000.

[11] *Ouzhou ribao* (Europe Daily). 19 Nov 2002.

Women Are Disadvantaged in Employment

Where social recognition is concerned, Chinese women still lag far behind their male counterparts and for equal skills, they generally have fewer opportunities (Tan 2006; Attané 2012). These inequalities in access to various types of employment are due in part to their being less qualified and therefore less attractive to employers than men. There are still inequalities in overall educational attainment and in 2010, still one-third (32.1 %) of all working Chinese women had not gone beyond primary school, or had had no education at all versus just over one quarter of men (26.7 %) (Table 9.4).

In addition, wage discrepancies between men and women in the same job are considerable (Tan 2002, 2006; Zheng 2007). Whatever the sector, Table 9.5 shows that women's average wage represents only 75–90 % of the male wage. However, data from a survey conducted in 2010 by the All China Women Federation reveal even more pronounced gender wage inequalities, since women's average wages in 2010 represented just 67 % of the male wage in urban areas and 56 % in rural areas. Actually, it is often harder for women to prove themselves, and employers are usually more demanding when hiring women than men (Tan and Li 2003). Women leave the labour force earlier than men because their retirement age is

Table 9.4 Breakdown of the working population by sex and educational level in 2010 (%)

	No education	Primary school	Secondary school	University	Total
Women	5.1	27.0	57.9	10.0	100.0
Men	3.3	23.4	63.0	10.3	100.0

Source: 2010 Census (PCO 2012)

Table 9.5 Average annual wages of men and women by sector of activity in 2002 (in yuan)

	Average annual wage		Women's wages in % of men's wages
	Women	Men	
Agriculture, animal breeding, forestry and fish farming	12,177	14,002	87.0
Mining	8,578	11,488	74.7
Manufacturing	13,544	16,652	81.3
Production and supply of utilities (electricity, gas, water)	16,665	18,912	88.1
Construction	15,396	17,400	88.5
Transport, postal services and telecommunications	17,993	20,895	86.1
Wholesale or retail sales, catering	13,385	16,705	80.1
Real estate	23,186	27,437	84.5
Social services	17,336	23,267	74.5
Other	13,937	17,141	81.3

Source: WMC (2004)

5 years lower[12] (55 years for women and 60 for men), and because a larger proportion of women lost their jobs during the industrial reforms and had trouble finding work again (Attané 2012; Zheng 2007). Less qualified than men, women remain at the bottom of the employment ladder and mechanically occupy the lowest income categories.

The apparent gender equality suggested by the large number of women working outside the domestic sphere is belied by their very different employment prospects and their unequal wages, due to inequitable access to education, which both maintains and propagates the secondary status of girls and women in the family and in society, as well as society's lower expectations for them. Actually, these unequal treatments are part of a social system in which men and women have differential access to various opportunities for social and economic development, the latter contributing in turn to the perpetuation of gender inequalities in both the public and private spheres (Attané 2012).

9.2 The Preference for Sons in Post-reform China

Since the end of the 1980s considerable research has been devoted to the preference for sons as a determinant of the current shortage of girls at young ages in China (Arnold and Liu 1986; Banister 2004; Bossen 2007; Chu 2001; Coale and Banister 1994; Hull 1990; Li and Zhu 2005; Poston 2002; etc.). According to Banister (2004, p. 40):

> 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.

In contemporary Chinese society, a set of factors combines to maintain the preference for sons, which indirectly leads to discrimination against girls both before and after birth. These are essentially economic and socio-cultural factors that interact in a complex manner to give rise to the preference for sons, and that, in many cases, lead to the discrimination against girls that underlies the growing female deficit.

9.2.1 Socioeconomic Factors

The enduring preference for sons in contemporary Chinese society is related to the social roles traditionally assigned to boys and girls, perceptions of which are only changing very gradually despite the economic growth of the past decades. Chinese

[12]In the 1950s retirement age was set at 60 for men but at 50 or 55 for women depending on the type of employment. This curtailed women's career plans even though the measure was originally designed to protect them. Because women are in employment for a shorter period, they are deprived of any promotion that might have been due had they taken retirement a few years later. Furthermore, a shorter working life also means a lower pension. (*China Daily*. 8 Mar 2001).

Table 9.6 Main sources of income of people aged 60 and over, by province in 2004

	Income from labour	Retirement pension	Insurance	Family member	Other	Total
China	22.0	26.3	2.0	47.5	2.1	100.0
Beijing	4.7	69.8	1.2	23.4	0.9	100.0
Tianjin	5.8	59.8	0.8	31.8	1.8	100.0
Hebei	20.3	22.5	0.9	54.3	2.0	100.0
Shanxi	19.1	21.8	1.2	54.6	3.4	100.0
Inner Mongolia	23.2	25.9	2.9	44.7	3.2	100.0
Liaoning	13.0	53.0	2.6	29.9	1.5	100.0
Jilin	17.5	38.3	1.9	37.9	4.3	100.0
Heilongjiang	13.2	33.1	2.3	48.4	3.0	100.0
Shanghai	4.0	82.5	1.1	11.9	0.5	100.0
Jiangsu	25.0	24.1	2.3	46.8	1.8	100.0
Zhejiang	18.7	30.3	3.6	44.2	3.3	100.0
Anhui	27.4	21.2	3.1	46.2	2.1	100.0
Fujian	17.1	17.0	2.3	61.7	2.0	100.0
Jiangxi	17.9	27.5	1.6	51.5	1.4	100.0
Shandong	21.3	18.6	2.0	56.1	1.9	100.0
Henan	26.4	19.6	1.1	50.5	2.4	100.0
Hubei	29.4	24.4	2.0	42.9	1.3	100.0
Hunan	25.5	14.9	2.4	55.0	2.2	100.0
Guangdong	16.5	21.9	2.6	57.2	1.8	100.0
Guangxi	22.7	20.2	1.8	53.1	2.2	100.0
Hainan	18.3	30.7	2.8	45.3	2.9	100.0
Chongqing	35.3	19.4	2.3	42.6	0.3	100.0
Sichuan	29.7	23.3	1.9	42.8	2.3	100.0
Guizhou	25.6	22.7	1.5	47.7	2.5	100.0
Yunnan	18.8	18.3	1.6	57.6	3.6	100.0
Tibet	13.8	10.0	3.8	69.3	3.1	100.0
Shaanxi	22.7	25.4	1.9	47.7	2.4	100.0
Gansu	21.2	25.4	1.4	49.5	2.5	100.0
Qinghai	14.7	26.3	2.8	54.8	1.4	100.0
Ningxia	17.5	32.9	2.3	45.0	2.1	100.0
Xinjiang	20.7	43.9	3.3	30.1	2.0	100.0

Source: NBSp (2005 pp. 106–107)

law protects the rights and interests of women and promotes gender equality in all areas of family, social, economic and political life (see above, p. 109 sq.). Yet these laws are regularly ignored or only partly applied, and women are kept in a situation that often puts them at a disadvantage with respect to men, especially where access to education and employment is concerned, but also in terms of responsibility and decision-making within the family, access to means of production – notably land – as well as inheritance (Bossen 2007; Zheng 2007).

Aware of the unequal opportunities available to their daughters, most parents place their greatest hopes in the future of their sons, and expect more from them than from their daughters. Furthermore, in most regions of China the responsibility for supporting the elderly traditionally falls to sons and daughters-in-law (Table 9.6),

especially in rural regions where no widespread pension system exists. In the countryside the saying goes:

> There are three advantages in marrying off a son as quickly as possible: the daughter-in-law, descendants and land. (*erzi zaohun you san li: xifu sunzi he tudi*) (Zi 1990).

Unlike in the cities, where children cost more than they contribute, in the countryside they still have a real economic value. They can help in the fields, care for the livestock and carry out small tasks (Liu 1990; Li 1992). The rural exodus and the growing loss of interest in agriculture has not altered the need to have at least one son: even if he leaves the farm, he will go to a town or a large city to find a job that will bring in more money. Whether he lives with his parents or not, he is duty-bound care for them in their old age (Mo 2005).

In the 1950s, the agrarian reform established equal rights for men and women in access to land. A few years later, collectivization wiped out those rights, and both men and women became landless peasants working on collective farms managed by village committees. Later, when agriculture was decollectivized, yet another operating method was introduced (Inset 9.1) with a contract system that tied the peasants to the land. The land was owned by the local government, which was also in charge

Inset 9.1 The Economy and Rural Society Tested by the Reforms

Agrarian reform was the first issue to be addressed by the Communists, even before the People's Republic of China was established in 1949. The collectivization of agriculture aimed to end the exploitation of poor peasants by landlords, and was a major turning point in the history of the Chinese peasantry. Between 1949 and 1974, agricultural production rose by 75–80 % while the population grew by nearly 70 % over the same period. Despite a more equitable access to the means of production, the peasants' situation remained precarious. In the early 1970s, food shortages persisted in several provinces and living conditions in the poorest regions were very harsh. The population growth all but cancelled out the increase in agricultural production (Domenach and Richer 1987). A low level of mechanization and poor work organization meant that the peasants laboured far harder than workers and did not have the same access to political knowledge (Dumont 1984).

The reforms launched by Deng Xiaoping in 1978 marked a new turning point in the history of the Chinese peasantry. The decollectivization of agriculture, at the core of the modernization programme, gave the peasants the rights to work the land and manage their farms independently within the framework of the household responsibility system. The People's Communes gradually lost their economic function and their administrative role was transferred to the townships. That was a second revolution, for cereal production doubled in relation to 1973–1978, the food situation improved and incomes rose considerably (Domenach and Richer 1987). But although decollectivization

(continued)

Inset 9.1 (continued)

made way for the "10,000 yuan households", many peasants grew poorer as others grew richer. The reforms mainly benefited the eastern provinces, while new pockets of poverty emerged.

With the reforms, the land became the collective property of the entire village community, and was distributed to families as fairly as possible. For instance, land fertility was taken into account, along with location and irrigation potential. The peasants acquired usage rights to the land that was allocated to them for a given period, usually 15 years. During that time, those rights could be passed on to heirs or to other peasants with the consent of the village committee, but the trade, sale or rental of that land was strictly forbidden. Furthermore, since land allocation was proportionate to family size, the competition for land was transformed into competition for more children – a paradox in the context of the one child policy. Thus strong demographic growth in some villages, led to a regular redistribution of land, and hampered both investment and yields.[a]

[a]In 250 villages surveyed, land was redistributed every two years between 1983 and the early 1990s (Zhu and Jiang 1993).

of dividing it between the families. However, because traditional social practices, including patrilocal marriage, were maintained, girls were considered as temporary family members and their rights to land allocation and inheritance were not recognized by law. The economic reforms combined with the strict birth control policy, served to revive patrilineal control over land rights through lineage at the expense of girls (Bossen 2007).

Decollectivization therefore provided an additional pretext for discrimination against girls. When the peasants received usage rights to the land they acquired an opportunity to increase their income. After paying their taxes and delivering the required production quotas to the state, they could sell their surplus and keep the profit. The family became a production unit again, a role that had been expropriated during the collectivization period. Consequently, the bigger the family the greater its production capacity and its chances of earning income, especially since land is allocated proportionately to the number of people in the family (Mu 1992; Yu 1993).

According to Bossen (2007), the household responsibility system in agricultural production has contributed to the increase in sex ratio at birth, the desire for a son being largely motivated by the land distribution system and the patrilineal rules governing its transmission. However, in rural areas of provinces with high emigration rates, the situation of women has recently changed somewhat. With a growing number of men leaving for the cities in search of better paid and less tiring work, especially during the slack period in agriculture, agricultural labour is increasingly carried out by the women. According to the All China Women Federation, the true proportion of women working in the fields is far higher than that in the census

(see above, Table 9.3, p. 124). Around two-thirds of the 300 million or so peasants working the land are women. They stay behind in the villages to take care of the home and the children and continue to cultivate the family plots, however meagre their income. Because of their comparatively low educational level, they are less inclined to follow their menfolk to the cities where they would contend with them in areas such as office work, which mainly employs men and where they would not be competitive. Thus women's economic role in rural areas is growing as more men leave the countryside for the cities, and, unwittingly, they are becoming an important factor in rural development. In the early 2000s, more than 50 million of the 130 million employees in rural enterprises[13] were women (NBS 2005) and they represented the majority of workers in factories producing textiles, tea, and toys.[14] In time this may lead to a redefinition of women's role in the family and the local economy, and therefore to changes in the perception of women, and ultimately to an improvement in their status.

9.2.2 Persistent High Family Expectations for Sons

The preference for sons in contemporary Chinese society stems from a rational calculation of the costs and advantages of a child depending on his/her sex (Li and Zhu 2001; Zheng 2007), even though the ideal for most couples is to have one of each sex (Table 9.7) (NPFPC 2000; Mo 2005). Given that a child's role in the family and in society is predetermined by his/her gender, son preference is justified by parental expectations weighing on that child and the roles he/she will have to play as an adult, notably in supplying manpower to the farm or the family enterprise, managing family affairs, continuing the family line and supporting parents in their old age (Xie 2002).

In some regions, son preference is also related to social status within the family and the community, and couples desperately wanting a male heir are often in very disadvantaged social and economic circumstances (Li and Zhu 2001). But the reverse is also true: in Guangdong, one of the richest provinces in China, families who have grown rich as a result of the reforms are impatient to produce a male heir so that they can transmit their newly amassed family fortune (Siu 1993).

It is difficult to identify the interactions between the various factors at play in the preference for sons. In 1997, discussion groups were organized in villages in a

[13]These are enterprises in the townships and small towns (*xiangzhen qiye*). They were key to the reforms and were set up to promote decentralized industrialization and enable peasants to "leave the land without leaving the countryside" (*li tu bu li xiang*), in other words to redeploy the rural labour force while limiting the exodus to the cities.

[14]Equal rights and important role in economic sphere. Information Bureau of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, Beijing, June 1994. Available at http://www.china.org.cn/e-white/chinesewoman/11-4.htm. Accessed 8 Jan 2007.

Table 9.7 Preferences expressed by women of childbearing age for the number of children and their sex (%)

1997 survey (NPFPC 2000)			
Preference stated for:	China	Urban areas	Rural areas
No children	0.7	1.9	0.3
1 boy	4.5	3.9	4.7
1 girl	4.7	10.7	2.9
1 child, whatever its sex	19.8	27.4	17.5
1 boy and 1 girl	48.5	39.2	51.4
2 boys	1.1	0.7	1.2
2 girls	0.7	1.0	0.6
2 children, whatever their sex	8.8	10.6	8.3
At least one boy and at least one girl	2.7	1.4	3.1
As many as possible	0.5	0.1	0.6
Other cases	8.0	3.1	9.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: NPFPC (2000), p. 135

In 2002	
Preference stated for:	Rural areas
1 boy	14.4
1 girl	5.6
1 boy and 1 girl	57.1
2 boys	2.5
2 girls	0.6
3 children or more	–
Number of boys > number of girls	10.4
As many girls as boys	5.9
Number of boys < number of girls	3.6
Total	100.0

Source: "Nongcun jumin shengyu yiyuan diaocha" survey carried out in 2000 on 9,436 women (Mo 2005)

county in Shaanxi province, and the information obtained from them sheds light on the process at work[15] (Diagram 9.1).

According to the above diagram produced by Li and Zhu (2001) for "J" county in Shaanxi province, three approaches prevail in the way a child is perceived according to his/her sex: the parental approach, the family approach and the community

[15]This was a survey carried out in 1997 by Li Shuzhuo and Zhu Chuzhu from Jiaotong University in Xi'an (China) in a county of Shaanxi province, whose findings appeared in several publications (Li and Zhu 2001; Li et al. 2004; Li and Zhu 2005). In addition to gathering quantitative data on gender differentials in the treatment of children, the interviewers organized discussion groups that brought together 64 members of the village community, comprising 19 cadres from the family planning bureau and 45 peasants. These discussions helped to identify families' and couples' attitudes to children, and the influence of social gender relations on excess female infant mortality (see below).

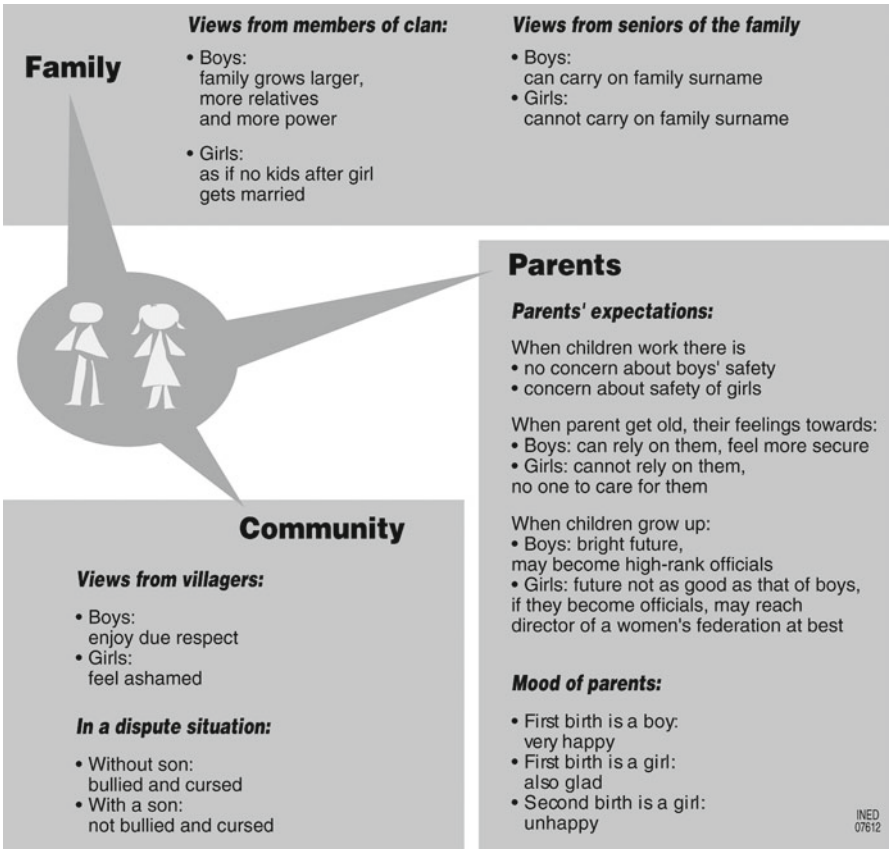

Diagram 9.1 Different perceptions of boys and girls in "J" county, Shaanxi province 1997 (Source: Li and Zhu 2001)

approach. A son, unlike a daughter, is likely to comply with his parents' expectations. Consequently, when the first child is a boy, everyone is satisfied and the mother, aware of having contributed positively to the family's future by giving birth to a son, displays her pride to the other villagers. When the first child is a girl, the parents are pleased but count on receiving authorization for a second child so that they can have the desired son. If the second child also turns out to be a girl, they are very disappointed. Because the family line is potentially broken, the older family members will show their disappointment and the mother will feel ashamed (Li and Zhu 2001).

Families place all their hopes in their sons and imagine successful professional and social futures for them, unlike daughters who are certain to have less ambitious destinies. Furthermore, when the daughter has children in turn, they will be part of their father's family line and not their mother's, so daughters are not perceived as providing their parents with descendants, only their in-laws. The birth of a girl may even threaten the position of the clan within the village community, since she will

not be contributing to its expansion. From the community point of view, families who have just had sons command respect and admiration from the villagers, whereas those who have had daughters are treated with condescension and feel humiliated. When a son is born, the neighbours visit the family to congratulate them, but when a daughter is born the news is not broadcast and parents hardly dare to leave their homes. In a conflict among villagers about financial matters or ownership, the winning party will certainly be the one with a son, and the other party will be told:

> Why do you continue to claim your rights, when you haven't even got a son to continue your family line? (Li and Zhu 2001, p. 427).

Women themselves do not express strong preferences regarding the sex of their children, but tend to want a family comprising at least one son (see Table 9.7). Mo Lixia (2005) calculated that in rural areas the "ideal" sex ratio of offspring was 121.6 boys per 100 girls, a level similar to that observed in the countryside in the 2000 and 2010 censuses (see Table 3.1, p. 36). These results show the extent to which women are influenced by others (husbands, grandparents, family and the social environment) and have taken sexist attitudes on board. They are thus party to discriminatory acts founded on the belief held by many families that the absence of a male heir is intolerable for economic, social and cultural reasons.