Wendy Wang

Son Preference and Educational Opportunities of Children in China— "I Wish You Were a Boy!"

Gender bias in family formation, such as sex selected-abortion, imbalance of the sex ratio, child abandonment, and sibling size/order in relation to fertility is well documented in China. Much less is known about continued gender bias after birth in relation to children's status inside the family. In particular, there is a relative scarcity of research on the impact of the parental son preference in determining differential educational opportunities of male and female children. Continued and fast economic growth in China is not accompanied by the dramatic change in traditional value, and many peasants still hold son preference value. Using 1990 China census data and drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Beijing and its suburbs, I examine children's educational opportunities, and investigate the relationship between parents who hold the son preference value and their unequal treatment when rearing children. The results demonstrated that the continued son preference value, based on traditional views as well as on perceived financial returns to families, leads to a lower level of educational attainment among daughters in rural areas of China. The lower educational attainment and higher labor force participation rates of rural female adolescents reflect unequal opportunities provided by their parents in addition to social inequality in China. Children who live in urban areas with educated parents received better educational opportunities and experience less gender bias.

Introduction

Since the 1978 Economic Reform, China has become one of the world's fastest growing economies. In the 24-year period from 1979 to 2003, China's Gross Domestic Production (GDP) grew at an unprecedented average annual rate of 9 percent (CIA World Fact Book, 2004). Based on a 2003 estimate, China's GDP of

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$6,750 billion ranked sixth in the world (China's GDP per capita was ranked 85 in the world in 2000). In terms of the population living below poverty line (excluding European Union countries), China ranked as the seventh country in the world with 10 percent of its population living below the poverty line whereas the United States ranked as the tenth country with 12.7 percent of its population living below the poverty line (CIA World Fact Book, 2003). However, dramatic economic development in China is *not* accompanied by fast changes in traditional values, and many Chinese still hold traditional views such as son preference. When looking back, women in pre-revolutionary China were firmly subordinate to men, playing the role of housewife and sexual play objects of men. After the 1949 Liberation, the Chinese government announced that women's participation in social and economic development was not only an issue of concern to women, but also an issue important to society as a whole. Although gender inequality has remained in China, progress has been made toward a major transformation in relative gender equality (Kuang, 1992; Stockman, 1994). Scholars argue that since 1949, China has achieved a high degree of gender equality when compared with developed industrial countries (Whyte, 1984; Sheng, Stockman, and Bonney, 1992; Jiang and Li, 1995). However, the practice of son preference and discrimination against girls is still prevalent in rural areas and among poor peasants (Zeng et al., 1993; Ren, 1995; Wei and Bai, 1995; Wen, 1998).

Male dominance in China is prevalent as in most societies. The difference between Western societies and China is that in Western societies females tend to have higher educational attainment than males, but females' educational investment return in terms of income is often lower than that of males, whereas in China females have both lower educational attainment and lower income than that of males. For example, in the United States, females in most age groups had higher elementary school, high school, and even college enrollment and degree attainment than male students, but the income gap between female and male was large (see U.S. 2000 Census: 2002). This revealed that economic development and social movements such as the feminist movement did not wipe out "male superiority" easily. Similarly, in China, the Socialist Revolution did not clean out son preference value in individuals' minds. In Western societies however, both male and female children were provided with equal educational opportunities by their parents, whereas in rural China females were discriminated against not only by the society but also by their parents. Although the researchers in the literature studied gender bias in relation to Chinese life, they tended to focus on family formation such as birth order and birth frequency, child mortality and infanticide, child-care, and fertility decline issues. Few researchers have investigated the impact of son preference value in relation to children's educational opportunities provided by their parents. The current study endeavors to fill this void. To my knowledge, besides Short et al.'s (2001) study on

one-child policy and children's care, this study is the first empirical investigation of the parental son preference in relation to unequal educational opportunities of children after the one-child policy was installed in 1979. First, I argue that raising a child involves more than reducing mortality and increasing healthcare, and an important child-rearing task for parents is to facilitate the child's formal education. Second, I argue that beliefs about the superiority of boys impact child-rearing practices in China, and son preference values determine differential educational opportunities of children inside families. Third, I argue that parents with higher levels of education and occupation are less likely to discriminate against female children, and therefore improved mass education would reduce gender discrimination in the long run. This study is aimed at exploring gender oppression and provides an understanding of gender inequality in present day China because son preference is an important factor reinforcing male dominance in Asian societies (Lantican, Gladwin, and Seale, 1996; Knodel, 1997; Mahotra and Mather, 1997; Pong, 1997). This study also complements other demographic and sociological studies of contemporary family life in China in that the researchers focus on outcomes related to family formation, fertility decline, pre-school children's healthcare and family care, child mortality, marital arrangements, co-residence patterns, working adults, and aging parents (e.g., Wen, 1998; Short and Zhai, 1998; Logan, Bian, and Bian, 1998; Short et al., 2001; Poston Jr., 2002). In the following sections, I will first introduce the literature on son preference and its consequences. Second, I will discuss the research questions and research methods. Third, I will demonstrate aggregate trends in male and female educational attainment by using the 1990 China Census. Fourth, ethnographic field data collected in Beijing and its suburbs during the summers of 1995, 1996, and 1997 on differential educational opportunities of children will be described and analyzed. Finally, a conclusion and a policy recommendation will be addressed.

Literature Review

Son Preference Value

Preference for at least one son is well documented in Chinese society. Research demonstrates that it results from traditional values, such as strong Confucian traditions, social customs such as lineage ties and systems of dowry, and economically-based benefits such as increased labor force opportunities, security of the families, and old-age support for parents, or from a combination of these various social, cultural, and economic attributes (Das, 1987; Aly and Shields, 1991; Karkal, 1991; Cronk, 1991; Rahma and DaVanza, 1993; Greenhalgh, 1994; Cho and Park, 1995). The ideal traditional Chinese family is composed of four generations living together

and includes as many male siblings as possible. The extent to which the ideal families are extended families has been debated (Whyte and Parish, 1984), but there is little doubt about the dominant status of men in the household. Men control the household financial source and its allocation, and perform traditional customs and rituals in the patrilineal society. Family lineage can only be continued through a male child. "According to Confucian belief, one of the three grave unfilial acts is to fail to have a son, and in pre-revolutionary times, this was grounds for a man to divorce his wife" (Hillier, 1988: 104). In traditional China, sons are considered a greater economic asset than daughters who will leave the natal household upon marriage. Sons are expected to maintain financial and social ties to the household throughout their lives. In contrast, daughters are taught to be good housewives, to be obedient, and to place their happiness on the goodness of their husbands (Greenhalgh, 1992).

Son Preference and Its Consequences

Arnold, Choe, and Roy (1998) argue that a complex interplay of economic and sociocultural factors determine the benefits and costs of a child. If the net utility of having a son outweighs that of a daughter, parents are likely to prefer sons to daughters. The preference of a particular sex may also affect the treatment of sons and daughters. Son preference is believed to be the principal cause of the practice of female infanticide (Lingam, 1991; Kaur, 1993; Kishwar, 1993) and excess female mortality that often manifests during childhood. Studies show that parents with a strong son preference value consider their daughters to be less valuable and therefore provide inferior care to daughters in terms of food allocation, prevention of diseases and accidents, and treatment of sick children (Faveau, Koenig, and Wojtyniak, 1991; Muhuri and Preston, 1991; Nag, 1991; Pebley and Amin, 1991). The study conducted by Choe et al. (1997) finds that in Egypt and Bangladesh, where parents are constrained by limited family resources, the preference for sons causes parents to allocate nutrition and healthcare preferentially to them. Arnold, Choe, and Roy (1998) find that son preference leads to a high mortality rate among female children in studying son preference and child mortality in India. They also find that a substantial gap between school attendance of girls and boys existed in most of the Indian states where there were unusually high levels of son preference. Their research shows that discrimination against girls in medical treatment and in quality of food consumed was particularly evident in several Indian states where son preference was prevalent.

In many societies characterized by son preference, gender bias has been documented in children's educational opportunities and their subsequent employment

status. The research conducted by Wils and Goujon (1998) find that a large gap of gender inequality in education existed between male and female students in six world regions from 1960 to 1990: Sub-Saharan Africa, South and East Asia, the Arab States, Latin America and the Caribbean. According to their study, in almost every region and for almost every level of education, there was a gap between male and female enrollment. At the lower levels of schooling, such as the elementary school and junior high school, 85 percent of the girls had less than half the average schooling of boys (p. 360). The study conducted by Donahoe (1999) shows that although public schools were tuition-free in Egypt, under the recent economic, political, and cultural conditions, the associated costs still limited the ability of poor families to educate their children, especially girls.

Children sharing similar parental characteristics may receive quite different educational chances from their parents. Researchers have addressed *family-formation* determinant in the educational attainment of children, particularly sibling-size and sibling-order in relation to education. Such studies produced a fuller account of the intergenerational transmission of inequality in both Western and Asian societies. Several examples include Blake's findings on sib-ship size (1989), Hauser and Sewell's (1985) findings on birth order, Powell and Steelman's (1989, 1990) findings on birth spacing and sex composition, and Pong's (1997) study on sib-ship size on children's educational attainment in Malaysia.

The literature demonstrates son preference value and its consequences, such as son preference in relation to family formation, fertility decline, child mortality, preschool childcare, and child's educational attainment. Yet few researchers have investigated the impact son preference has on differential educational opportunities of male and female children provided by a child's parents in China. After China installed the one-child family policy in 1979, the total fertility rate fell from 6.0 to 2.7 (Tien, 1991) and the proportion of all births that are second or higher parity has since continued to fall (Zhang, 1998). The one-child policy, through legislating when couples can give birth and to how many children, shaped Chinese family life and its relative low fertility fundamentally (Short et al., 2001). Although state legislation changed people's fertility behaviors in a relatively short period of time, it did not change patriarchal norms and son preference values dramatically. It is argued here that parental son preference value continuously affects the differential educational opportunities of male and female children in rural China after the one-child policy was installed.

Beginning with the 1978 Economic Reform, the socialist reconstruction has given rise to the private market economy and increased the demand for highly trained personnel. Training scientists, technical workers, and managerial staffs became one of the major strategies of the population development in China. When Premier Li

Peng spoke at the national educators' meeting, he said: "Our educational structure is based on the nine-year compulsory education. It runs well at the senior and middle school levels. At the same time, we should continue to develop junior and secondary vocational education, advanced college and university education, as well as the professional training. We should work hard to improve the quality and level of undergraduate education" (Gao, 1995).

This educational strategy and its practices had positive effects on the overall low educational quality of the Chinese population. In urban areas where the one-child policy was firmly practiced, parents showed little or no gender bias toward their child. Families where parents had higher levels of education in particular, provided their only child, no matter which gender, with more favorable educational and living conditions. In rural areas where two children were allowed, parents tended to provide more favorable conditions for boys because of son preference attitude and cost-benefit calculations. In rural China there was no retirement pension program. Rural parents perceived that schooling for girls was not as rewarding as for sons. Girls were expected to move to their husbands' households once they got married, and thus investment in girls' education was considered a waste. On the other hand, boys were expected to carry family lines and support themselves and their elderly parents, thus investment in boys' education would maximize family welfare and boys' education would provide higher human capital return (Zhang, 1998).

The discussion on family-level determinants of educational inequality in China can be guided by three theoretical perspectives (1) microeconomic argument about families' considerations of future returns to schooling, (2) family resource-constraint argument regarding family economy and family labor, and (3) cultural argument that focuses on traditional values guiding educational decisions. Each perspective can be used to explain educational decisions made by Chinese parents and each predicts multiple determinants of children's school participation (Buchmann, 2000). First, according to microeconomic argument, an investment decision in education is based on the future return, and parents first consider how to maximize the resources of the entire family and how to redistribute them among family members. Since the primary concern guiding educational decisions is wealth maximization, decisions in family educational investments are based on differences in returns to children's schooling. Parents would invest in children with perceived higher returns. If the labor market offers better employment opportunities to men, parents are more likely to educate sons than daughters (Becker and Tomes, 1979; Becker, 1968, 1991). Second, similar to the family economy argument, the resource-constraint argument stresses that family resources are finite. It is difficult to invest in every child's education, and family size is inversely related to children's education. The family resource-constraint argument might be particularly applicable to China, in that rural parents have

limited incomes and no formal retirement pensions, thus increasing the likelihood that parents rely on their children in old age. Third, in comparison to these two perspectives, cultural argument stresses traditional values and norms in educational decisions made by parents. Patriarchal norms comprise an additional aspect of culture that is commonly cited as a major reason for girls' limited educational opportunities and promote the preferential treatment of sons (Brinton, 1993; Buchmann, 2000). Based on the literature review and the discussion, three research questions will be answered:

1. Does parental son preference affect differential schooling of children?
2. Are parents without welfare support in their old age more likely to enroll sons in schools?
3. Are parents with higher education less likely to discriminate against their daughters?

Methods

In order to better understand the social and cultural consequences of son preference, data at both the aggregate and individual levels are integrated in this work. First, the 1990 China census will explore the son preference value through school enrollment and employment trends, and then ethnographic field interviewing data will provide insight on parental son preference attitudes. The 1990 census conducted by the National Census Bureau was the largest and most recent one done in the country. The census covered 1.2 billion people living in a total of 29 provinces. The census firmly established that China's sex ratio at birth (SRB) was male biased which reflected parental son preference value. The nation's SRB was 106 boys per 100 girls in 1970 and it rose steadily after the installation of the one-child family policy in 1979. The SRB reached 111 in 1985, 114 in 1989 (Zeng et al., 1993; Gu and Li, 1994), and 117 in 2000 (Wang, 2000). The 1990 census also indicated that nearly four million girls were missing because of female selective abortion, possible undercounting, abandonment, and differential child mortality among girls (Banister, 1996: 19; Miller, 2001). Since the 1990 census has no questions regarding parental son preference value and how children were treated, differential school enrollment and employment trends for young age cohorts will be described to explore that factor.

Next, I employed ethnographic field observation and conversation method. Through the help of two Chinese assistants, we observed and talked to 60 parents and 65 children in their homes, job sites, and community sites during the summer months of 1995, 1996, and 1997 in central Beijing and in its six surrounding counties. These 125 individuals were chosen based on a snowball sampling method that aimed at acquiring *insights* about parental son preference attitudes instead of pro-

viding inferential statistical generalizations. In 1995, I started by obtaining an initial sample of 15, including both parents and children in three social settings: urban, suburban, and rural areas of Beijing including Tongzhou, Changping, Shunyi, Daxing, and Huairou counties. Then I asked these 15 individuals to provide me families with school age children including families with daughter only, son only, and mixed genders. I visited individual homes, job sites, and community sites whenever observations and conversations were possible. The ethnographic fieldwork focused on parental son preference attitudes and how parents provided educational chances for their children, as well as children's perceptions of their parents' attitudes toward children's status inside families. The reasons for choosing Beijing is that it has urban, suburban, and rural populations with different kinds of characteristics that provide a wider range for sample selection than other cities. According to the 1990 census, nearly one-third of Beijing's 10 million residents, permanent or temporary, migrated from different parts of China including the most remote rural areas to Beijing and to its surrounding counties. The census showed that 0.72 of Beijing's population lived in urban and suburban areas, and 0.28 of the population lived in rural areas engaged in agriculture. The ethnographic study sample included 0.40 individuals who originally migrated from northern, northeastern, southern, western, and eastern China to Beijing. The parents ranged in age from 39 to 68 years old, 0.65 of them were men, and 0.95 of them were married with spouses. Among the 60 parents interviewed, 0.50 had only elementary school or below level education, 0.40 had middle school education, and 0.10 had college education. The occupations of the parents ranged from farmers, construction workers, factory workers, office clerks, teachers, merchants, government officials, nurses, medical doctors, and technicians, to engineers. Of the 65 children, their ages ranged from 18 to 26 years old, 0.51 of them were women, and 0.28 were married. About 0.30 of them had only elementary school education, 0.64 had middle school education, and about 0.06 graduated from universities. The occupations of the children included farmers, construction workers, factory workers, domestic servants, sales people, office clerks, businessmen, technicians, engineers, artists, and students. While the ethnographic study sample is small, it offers a diverse cross-section of the population and captures many of the variations expected to be relevant to parental son preference value in relation to children's differential educational opportunities. A major strength of this study is the combined usage of the census data and ethnographic data, including a range of factors central to theoretical discussions of family educational decisions (e.g., household labor, parental perceptions of schooling, children's perception of parental son preference attitudes) that are not captured by large-scale representative surveys.

The 1990 Census

Differential School Enrollment Rate

The 1990 census showed that the six- to nine-year-old age group had about 32 million boys enrolled in elementary schools as opposed to 28 million girls. Boys' enrollment rate is 1.13 times higher than that of girls, when taking into account the sex ratio factor. In the ten- to 14-year-old age group, there was also a larger gap between boys' and girls' graduation rate from elementary schools and starting junior high schools.

For the 15- to 19-year-old age group, boys enrolled at a rate of 1.21 times higher than that of girls, and their graduation rate was 1.56 times higher than that of girls. This implies that more girls were unable to continue their education and they might have dropped out of school early. The 1990 census showed that boys were provided with more educational opportunities than girls for all three age-cohorts at elementary school, junior, and high school levels in the whole country. Upon the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution (1976), nine years of education (elementary school to junior high school) became compulsory for individuals in both rural and urban areas of China. Despite the mandatory policy, the 1990 census showed that many girls in six to nine, ten to 14, and 15- to 19-year-old age groups did not continue their educations. Were many of the girls kept at home or married, so that they were unable to enroll in schools? When examining the 1990 census, the female marriage rates for all these three age groups were either zero or almost zero, and hence these girls were not married. The census showed that on the one hand, the boys' school enrollment rate was higher than that of the girls at elementary, junior, and senior high school levels, and on the other hand, adolescent females' employment rate was higher than that of young males. These facts indicate that a decade after the one-child family policy was installed in 1979 parents were more likely to support sons rather than daughters for longer schooling. In rural areas in particular, a son is expected to care for his parent in old age while a daughter is expected to marry and become part of her husband's family. Sending a son to school will increase the earning capacity of a household and hence increase the financial resources for elderly parents. Providing a son rather than a daughter with longer schooling is therefore seen as a better investment.

Differential Labor Force Participation Rate

According to the 1990 census, the employment rate was the "labor force participation rate—Laodong Canyului" (Jiang and Li, 1995; Zheng, 1995). The term

Figure 1
Educational Levels by Age and Gender

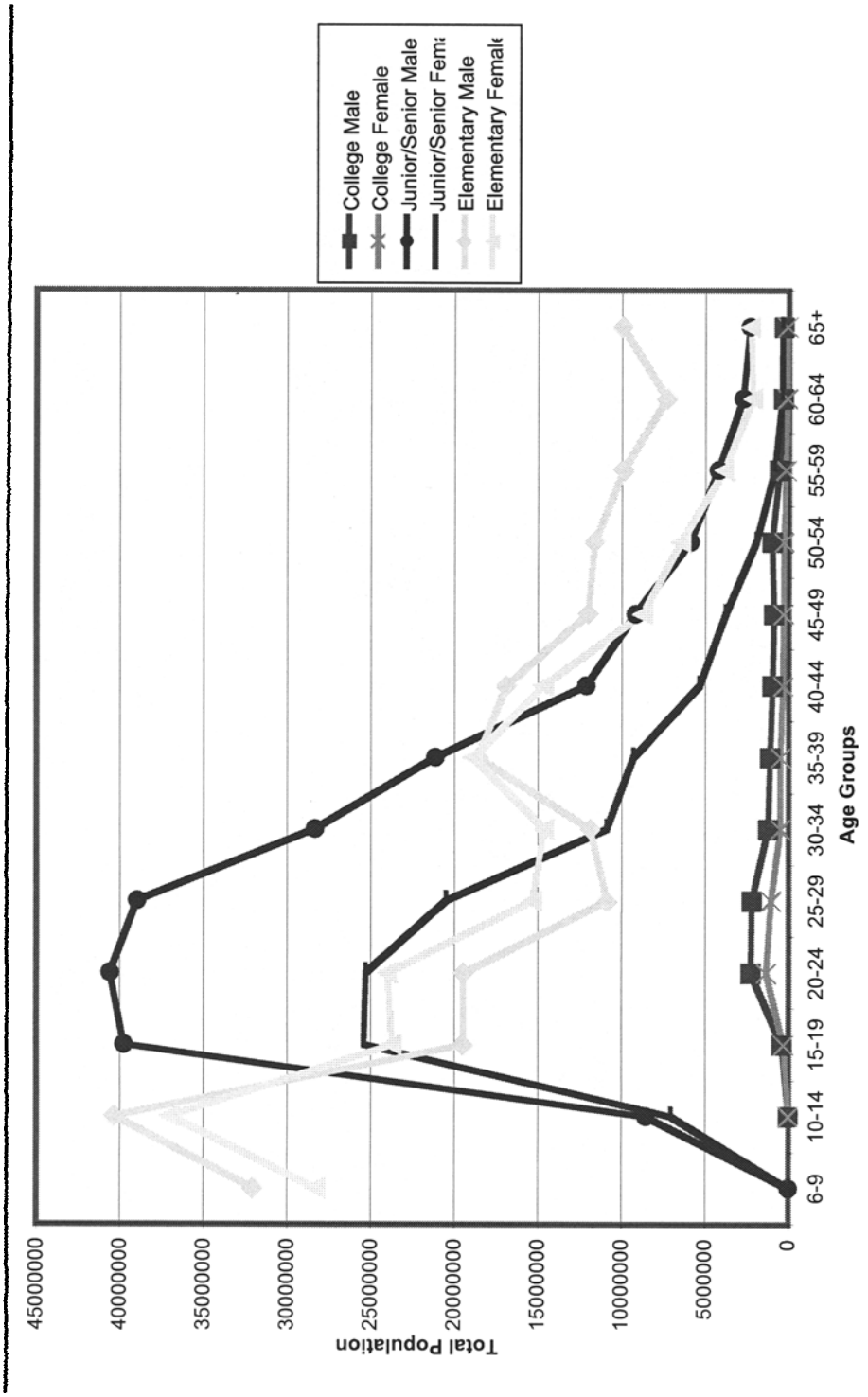


Figure 2
Percent Unmarried in 1982 and 1990

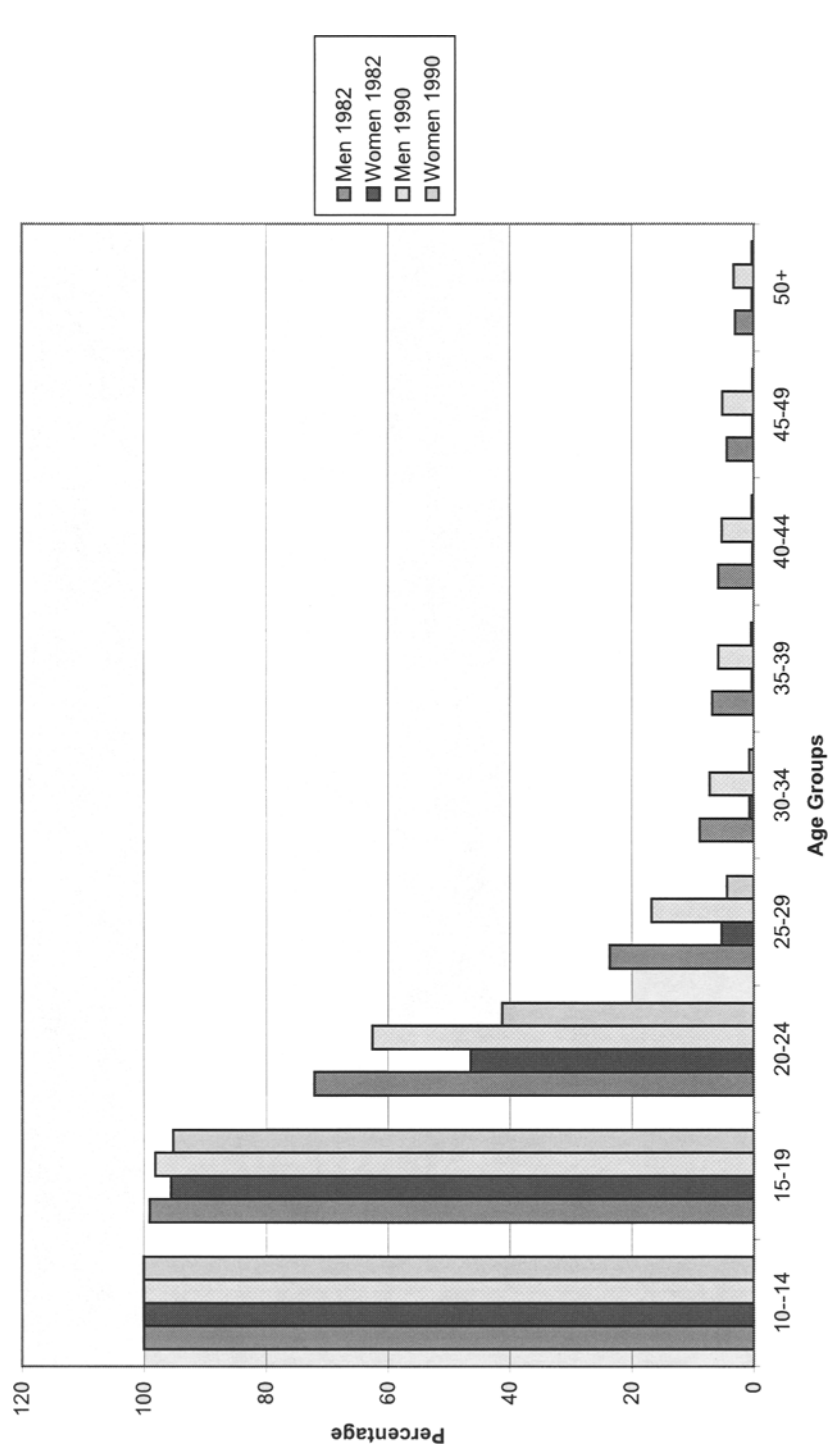
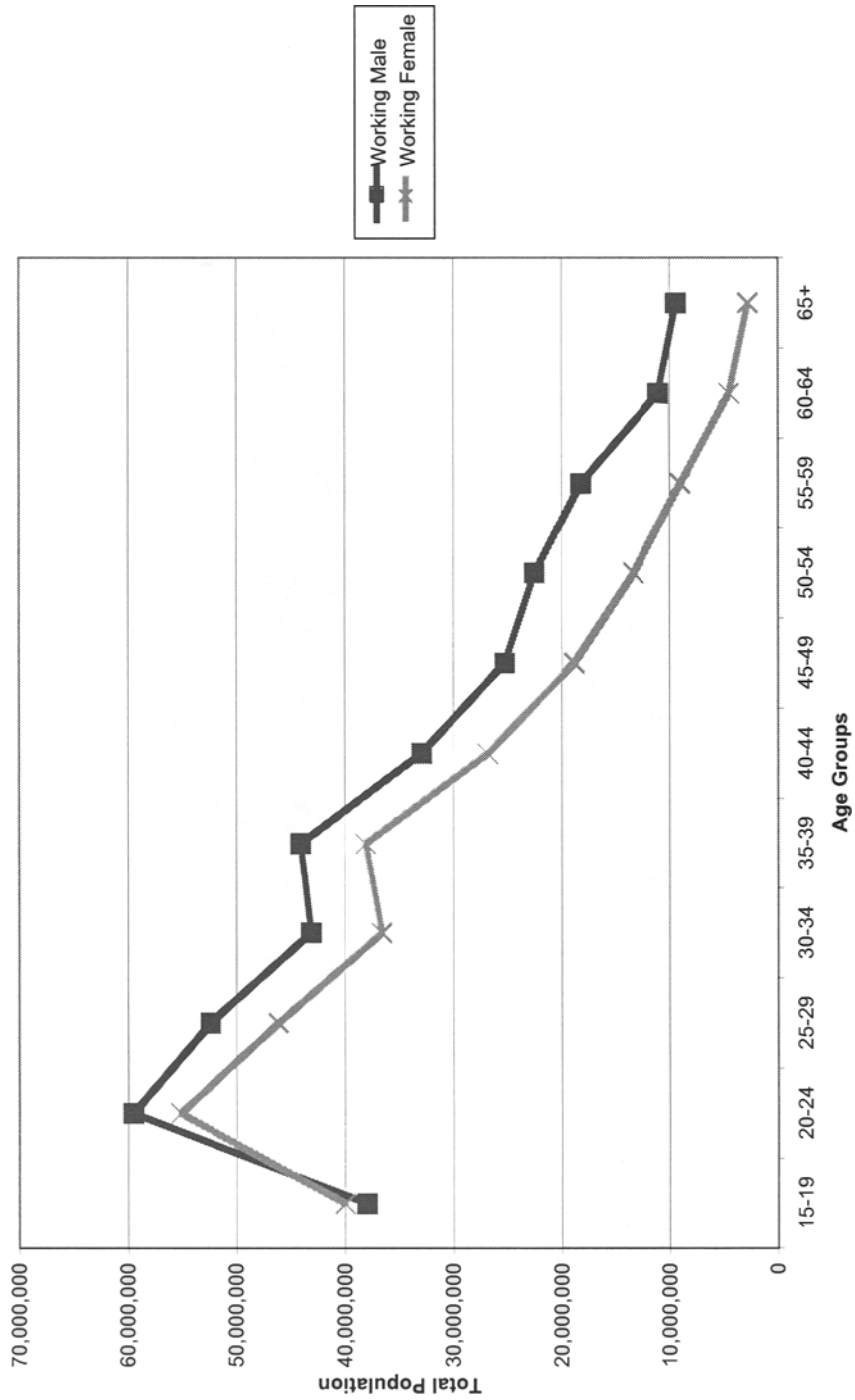


Figure 3
Employment by Gender in China in 1990



indicated that one was engaged in economic production (farm or non-farm) and in service related sectors with wage or income return. Full time employment in the 1990 census indicates that an individual worked 40 hours per week and was employed for at least six continuous months prior to the survey. Before reaching the adult age of 18, many individuals in the rural areas had already worked in the labor force especially during the harvest season.

The 1990 census indicated a relatively large female employment population, which increased correspondingly with age until it reached its peak in the 35- to 39-year-old group, and then declined. The total employment rate for females was 0.73, and was 0.85 of males for the labor force population 18 to 65 years old. The gender difference was only 0.12 for the total population.

However, when looking at age-specific employment rates, for the 15- to 19-year-old group, the female employment rate was as high as 0.68 as opposed to 0.62 for males. The female teenagers' employment rate was higher than that of male teenagers and this difference explains that for the most part, there were fewer young girls in schools than young boys. Young girls who neither attended schools nor married had entered the work force to help out their families. In the rural areas of China, families tended to have low incomes making it necessary for the adolescents to help their parents. More girls were sent to work while boys were sent to school.

Rural Urban Gap in Education

The 1990 census showed that on the average, females in urban China completed about 7.46 years of schooling, suburban females completed 7.36 years, and rural females completed only about 4.74 years of elementary school education. Aside from the gender gap, urban and suburban females' educational enrollment rates were 1.57 and 1.55 times higher than those of rural females. At the same time, the rural female teenagers' employment rate was as high as 0.76 when compared to 0.44 for urban female teenagers. The extremely high rural female employment rate in the 15- to 19-year-old group is likely because of three reasons. First, there was limited mechanization and modernization progress in poor rural areas and families expected their children to be engaged in farm work to help out within the families. Second, because there was no retirement pension system in most rural areas, rural parents depended on their children's future earnings for their old age security. Third, because of the gender inequality and male dominance in China, the income gap between males and females grew since the 1978 Economic Reform, and rural parents believed that providing education to boys would yield higher income returns for families. In urban areas, most parents would be able to receive retirement pensions from their work institutions. Therefore, they would depend less on their children's incomes, and ur-

ban and suburban parents were less likely to treat their daughters differently. The census showed that among 15- to 19-year-old group, more rural male adolescents were in school than female adolescents, leaving a labor pool of adolescent rural girls. Those rural young females with low levels of education were employed in agricultural sectors. The overall low school enrollment rate and high employment rate of rural adolescent girls implied that they did not have as many educational opportunities as rural male and urban female adolescents.

The gender gap and rural/urban gap of the Chinese work force suggests that girls living in rural communities were not only provided with fewer educational opportunities than boys, but also with fewer opportunities than their urban and suburban counterparts. In recent years, the rapid economic development has created a number of higher paid occupations that require at least a secondary education. The census data suggested that these jobs, including technicians and science assistants, were more likely filled by educated men. Young women who did manage to land a higher paying position were likely to have come from urban rather than rural areas. Rural women were more often found in agricultural and farm-village enterprises that required lower amounts of education. The census data demonstrated that when compared to their urban born counterparts, rural females had fewer educational opportunities.

Figure 4
Employment by Gender in Rural, Semi-Rural, and Urban Areas in 1990

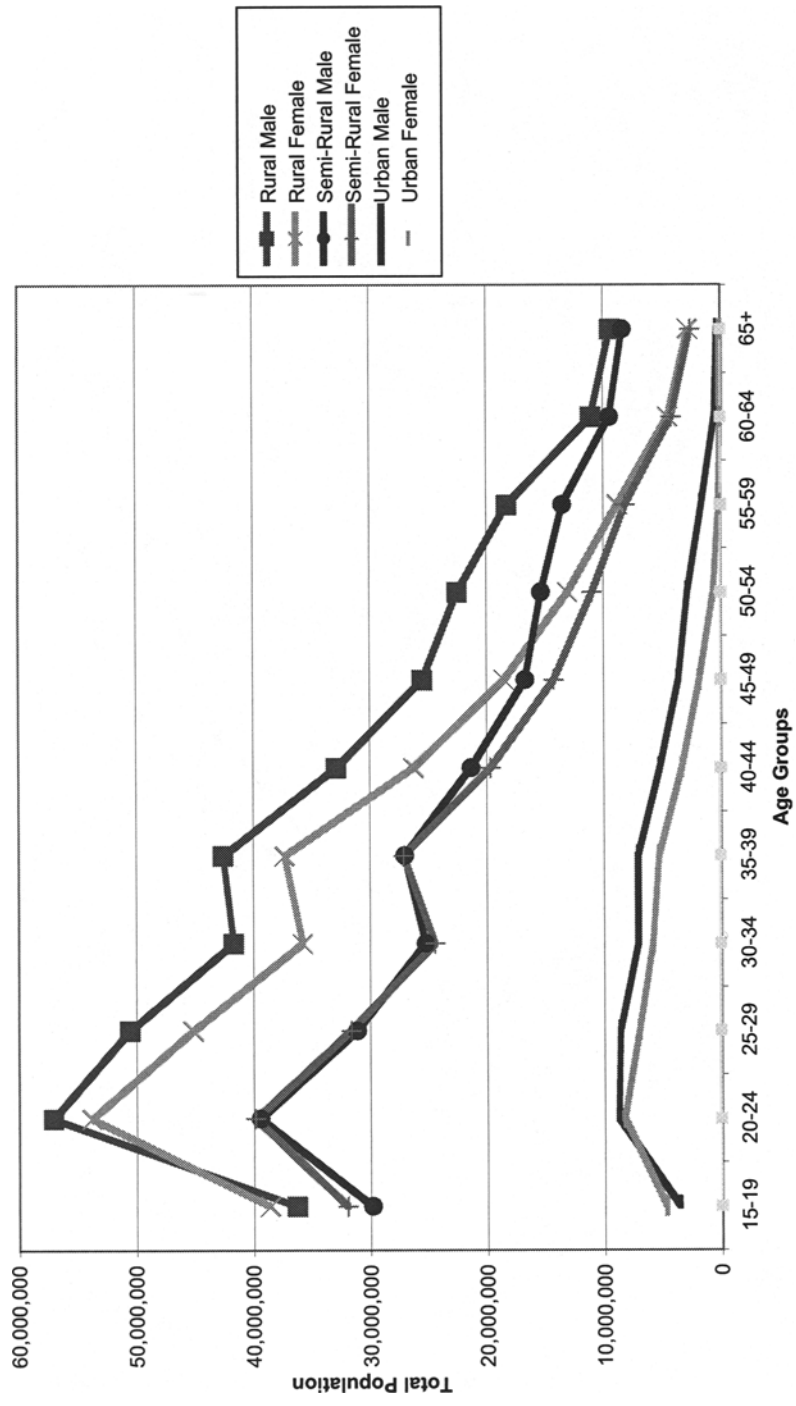
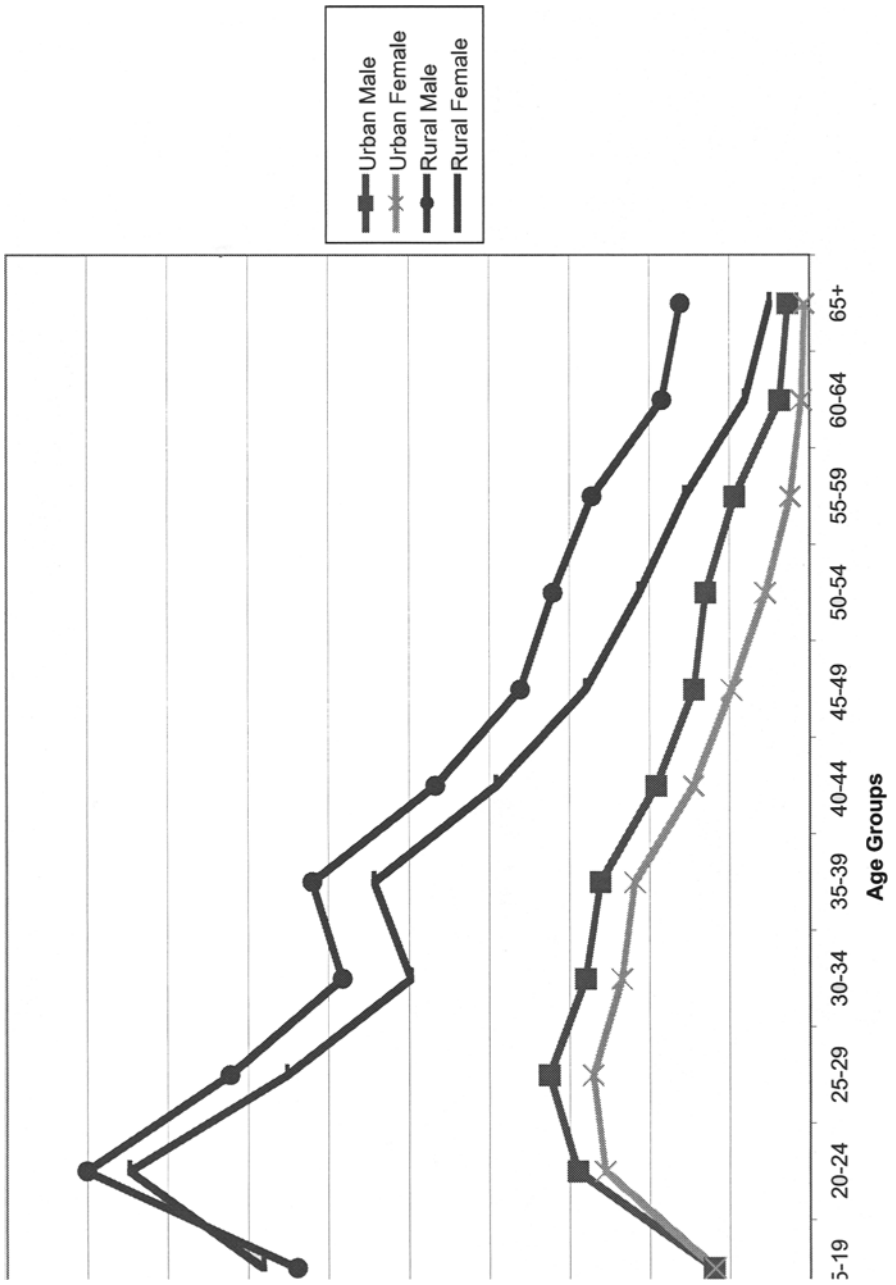


Figure 5
Employment in Rural and Urban Areas by Age and Gender



The Ethnographic Data

"When I Received the Acceptance Letter from the University"

"My name is Zhang Yuan, I'm 19, and from the Daxing county of Beijing. Maybe because I am an optimistic person, or maybe because I have enough self-confidence, when I received the University acceptance letter from the postman, I was very calm. I neither thought about my past nor about the future, but I knew that I would leave home soon. When I gave the acceptance letter to my Mom while she was cooking, she yelled loudly: 'Ha-ha, our son was accepted! . . . by Zhongshan University (one of the best universities in China).' She stopped cooking immediately and ran from kitchen to the family room. My Dad, my older brother's wife, and my younger sister heard my Mom's voice. They all ran quickly to the family room. The originally quiet atmosphere became heated, the entire family was in a happy mood, and everyone tried to look at the acceptance letter. Suddenly, I saw that my younger sister retreated quietly from the family room and went to the bedroom. My heartbeat started pounding. My younger sister is one and half years' younger than me, she is a very smart and hard-working person. She was one grade lower than me but during our junior years, because of her outstanding grades, she jumped to my grade. Three years ago, we went through the high school entrance examinations together. She had higher overall grades than mine and she could go to an outstanding high school. However, one needs to pay much higher tuition fees to outstanding high schools and my family couldn't afford the high tuition fees for both of us at the same time. In our county, male preference is quite popular in parents' minds. My parents wish I could make more money with a good education in order to support their old age and myself. They believe that once my sister marries she would leave our family, and her future earnings would go to her new family. Therefore, my parents do not think investment in daughters' education would benefit them much. As a result, I was sent to one of the outstanding high schools and my sister was sent to an ordinary high school. I lived in the high school for three years and wasn't able to see my younger sister often. I knew that she studied very hard and got good grades all the time, although my family was concerned about my grades much more than my sister's. This year, we 'competed' with others during the 'Black July' for our college entrance examinations. Afterwards, my younger sister excitedly told me that she did not encounter any difficulties during the entire four-day examinations. When we applied to universities, I applied to Zhongshan University (one of the best in China). Because my sister graduated from the ordinary high school, my parents told her to apply for a small local college called 'Train and Railroad College' in order to save money for my education. On the announcement date, the news shocked administers

in the county examination center: my sister's overall grades were the number-one among all of the applicants in the entire county! However, when my sister learned about this she ran into the room cried and cried, and after a while she became quiet and kept silent.

Now I got the university acceptance letter and my sister hasn't. Small colleges send acceptance letters out later than universities. I am sure that she will be able to get into 'Train and Railroad College.' However, it is not her wish but my parents' idea. She is a very smart person, and in the past three years she studied just as much as me, but the results were very different. How can I face my sister without feeling guilty? Fate favors me and plays big jokes to my sister. Although I know that my sister would not give up, she needs to struggle so much harder to achieve what she wants, and perhaps she will never get what she wants. I will be far away from her soon, and I can only pray silently for her future luck."

The above story demonstrates parental son preference on different levels. First, in Zhang Yuan's family, the male child received unearned educational privileges over the female child. The male child was sent to a more prestigious school while the female child was sent to an inferior one, even though the girl had higher test scores and stood out as one of the community's most outstanding students in her entire town. Second, the parents did not consider the damaging psychological effect of this unfair treatment on their daughter. The story demonstrates how the son preference value system is passed on through the generations and perpetuated. Third, the son was sympathetic about his sister's injustice. However, he blamed "fate" for the results while the daughter expressed disappointment and powerlessness. Fourth, as is common for the younger generation in semi-rural China, the daughter showed a submissive attitude and was unable to make a positive move for her own future.

Based on the field interviews and observations, about half of the parents said that they provided their sons with longer or better schooling and their daughters with shorter schooling because boys' educations were more important to family welfare and parents' old age security. Sixteen of the parents complained that tuition fees were getting higher and higher and they could not afford more than one child's education. One parent from a rural Daxing village said: "Why should I invest in my daughter's education? A high school degree for her is unnecessary. All she needs is basic reading and writing that she can learn at an elementary school. When she gets married she will be a mother and a housewife, and her husband will not need a lot of opinions and knowledge from her." About one-third of the sons said that their parents provided better educational opportunities and material conditions for them than for their sisters. They explained that it was not fair to their sisters, but their families could not afford every child's education. About 30 percent of the sons interviewed said that when their sisters got married they were the ones who stayed at home

taking care of their elderly parents. Their sisters usually visited their parents several times a month or a year, while the sons and their wives carried out duties at home.

"I Wish You Were a Boy!"

On a Sunday evening in 1995 at 50 Dengshekou Street, Beijing, 21 immigrant female domestic servants (*Bao Mu*) met at their "Domestic Servants Home" (*Bao Mu Zhi Jia*). A 26-year-old girl with a Cichuan accent began to sing: "In a small village, my dear Mom's hair turns gray while I am far away. . . . " One voice joined her softly, another followed, and gradually more and more voices joined while the sound drifted into the dark sky. These domestic servants gathered together about once a month, to exchange job-related information, discuss the problems associated with families they work for, and occasionally entertain themselves. At this evening gathering, many of them were strangers to one another, coming from different villages throughout north, south, and southwest China. This location was chosen for tonight's activities and this particular domestic service organization had about 200 members already. The mean age of the group tonight was 21.5 years and only four of them were married. Over the years these women made a long journey to Beijing from remote villages of southwest and northern China.

The majority of these young women received little educational opportunity while at home. For many of them it was partly due to limited family resources and the fact they needed to earn money to help support their families. Xioufen and Heqin quit school and worked in the fields after their younger brothers were born. Eighteen out of 21 young women said that their parents wanted to live with their male siblings in old age. The parents provided their sons with longer educations so that the sons were likely to find better jobs than the daughters.

Xiaoli Wang had been part of the Domestic Servants' Home for three years. She was forced to drop out from school in the sixth-grade when her younger brother was born, and she had to help around the house. Before she came to Beijing, her parents introduced her to about nine different men, hoping that she would marry one of them. Because she refused to marry any of them, her father beat her and told her that she should never return home. She borrowed 50 Yuan from a friend in her village, went 400 kilometers away, and applied for a job with a service company. The day when she left home, her father carried her tiny baggage and walked quietly behind her to the train station. When the train came, her father began to cry and said to her: "Don't blame your dad for kicking you out. . . . I wish you were a boy!"

Jianshun Chen was one of the four married young women who came from Van County, Cichuan Province. She dropped out of junior high school when her younger brother began high school. She worked in the fields for several years to support her

family until she married a farmer in her village and moved into her husband's home. Because the law required birth control, Jianshun was sterilized in a county hospital after having two girls. Her mother-in-law and her husband were unhappy about her not giving birth to a son, and often displayed their disappointment and anger toward her. Deciding that she must become independent, Jianshun sent her two young daughters to live with her parents, and cried all the way to Beijing. In Beijing she found a job as a domestic servant and took care of a little girl in a private home. She worked an average of 12 hours a day cooking and cleaning. Jianshun missed her daughters very much and several times she mistakenly called the little girl by one of her own daughters' names.

Qiijng had come to Beijing five years ago from a village in Henan Province. She could not attend junior high school because she had to work on the farm while her younger brother went to school. During the period her younger brother was in high school, her parents and relatives introduced her to three potential marriage partners. One man had a hunchback, another one was lame, and the third man was not only 20 years older than her, but also had a delinquent history. She did not want to marry any of these men, and came to Beijing to work as a domestic servant. Disappointment, lack of self-confidence, and loneliness were the common feelings among the female immigrant workers. This servants' home in Beijing was meant for moral support, exchanging job information, and helping one another. Many could not return to their homes unless they saved enough money for their families. The home, in essence, became their refuge. Among the 32 daughters observed and interviewed, about two-thirds of them came from semi-rural and rural areas. These rural women left their homes and became immigrant workers in service related sectors in Beijing. Several of them said that they left home because there were insufficient family resources, insufficient land, and an oversupply of labor. They also said that their parents paid more attention to their male siblings, provided male children with better healthcare and education. Three women said that they were expected to give birth to sons, and because they did not, their husbands and mother-in-laws discriminated against them. They received no emotional or financial support from their parents or from their husbands. They earned low incomes in service related sectors in order to escape the discrimination at home, but they found that they were discriminated against in the city as well, and had the lowest status in the society.

"No One Wants a Female Except When One Wants a Wife"

Among hiring agencies and employers in many business sectors in Beijing, there was a saying: "No one wants a female except when one wants a wife." Al-

though it was an exaggeration, the premise was true. The male preference attitude among hiring agencies reflected the society's son preference value. For example, a boss from a news agency lost his patience when he saw only female applicants waiting outside to be interviewed. He yelled: "Are there any male applicants? Does anybody see a male applicant?" The female applicants looked at one another and kept silent. Comments on a bank's job application form showed different attitudes for male and female college graduates. One woman's application form included these comments from the employer as: "appearance—a little ugly; height—1.56 M, too short." Another female applicant's form showed: "appearance—four eyes (she wore glasses); height—1.63 M, Ok; weight 105 kilogram- too fat." One wonders if this bank was trying to find someone qualified for the job or to find a model. In contrast, male applicants received no such comments. Not only would a male be given priority over a female applicant with the same credentials, he would be hired even if the female applicant were more qualified. Therefore, in order to get a job, a female applicant needed to be overly qualified. She needed to have outstanding knowledge of the business, have been honored by a university, have a charming personality, come from a good family, and above all, be pretty and have a shapely body. And, no matter what the desired qualifications might be, a female needed to be both qualified within and beyond her field, and substantially surpass all male applicants. In other words, she has to be smart, pretty, capable of working both in the office and in the kitchen, and thus be invincible. The standards for males were quite different. If a male had low grades from a university, it didn't matter. If he was less qualified, he would be offered workplace training, and good looks were never a requirement. Several industrial and technology companies in Beijing hired male university graduates only. The employers would leave a position vacant for a period rather than hiring a female applicant. During the internship period prior to graduation, bosses were usually nicer to female student participants than to males, and seldom showed their bias against women because the bosses knew that these women were only temporarily there. However, when females applied for permanent job positions, the employers often discriminated against them and said: "No one wants a female except when one wants a wife."

Male preference in hiring to related to son preference value. Tradition dictated that in most fields males were more capable employees than females. It was widely believed that females were shyer and less aggressive than males, more frightened about making mistakes, more intimidated by strangers, and did not handle criticism well. Overall, females were perceived to be less capable and more fragile than males, a belief shared by both parents and employers.

"A Daughter is Equally as Important as a Son"

Urban and suburban parents with higher levels of education tended to be more liberal and impartial. In this study, there were 19 parents who had only daughters. Five of these parents had university educations and the rest had high school educations. The occupations of these parents ranged from medical doctor, engineer, technician, schoolteacher, nurse, government official, foreign language translator to news journal editor. They expressed their love and satisfaction for their children despite gender. One parent said that his daughter filled his life with joy, and another parent said that she was very proud of her daughter's excellent school performance. When asked if these parents had regular incomes and retirement pensions, the answers were positive. They said that they would not depend on their children's income for their old age security, and they would like their daughters to do well. Qing Fang's father Qi Fang was a well-known cardiologist in Beijing Concord Hospital and earned a very good income. Dr. Fang and his wife provided their daughters with good education and care. Qing Fang and her older sister Ping Fang went to Beihai kindergarten, a very prestigious kindergarten where their mother taught. Qing Fang and Ling Fang went to the United States to pursue their graduate degrees when the study-abroad program was re-installed in the 1980s. After receiving her M.F.A. from UCLA Qing Fang married a young Israeli-American carpenter. Qing Fang's parents said that their daughter had the right to choose her husband, no matter what color or race. In summer 1997, when Qing Fang brought her Israeli husband and her daughter to Beijing, her parents were very happy and offered to take care of the granddaughter in their home.

Yuquen Wu was the only daughter of Yu Chen, an engineer in a Beijing watch making factory, and Shangren Wu, a mechanical engineer in an airplane company in Tongzhou County, Beijing. The couple had university degrees and earned good incomes. They loved their only daughter and provided Yuquen with the best of care. After Yuquen Wu receiving her Business Accounting and Auditing Bachelor degree from Beijing Finance and Trade University she married a classmate. Three years later her father suffered a stroke and lost the ability to walk and speak normally. Yuquen traveled between her own home and her parents' home, helping her mother to take care of her sick father. Her mother Yu Chen said: "It's lucky that I have a daughter whose heart is always with us. . . . I think a daughter is a better caretaker for the parents than a son, especially when parents are ill. A son might not be very concerned about his parents after his marriage, because his wife would be his central concern." In another example, the parents of Lei Zhang were translators at Beijing Foreign Language Bureau and they had higher educations. They sent Lei to good elementary and high schools in Beijing, and then sent her to Wellesley College in

the United States. After receiving the Bachelor's degree from Wellesley College, Lei Zhang returned to Beijing and worked for the United Nations International Children's Educational Fund (UNICEF) office. After Lei's father died from a sudden heart attack, Lei Zhang and her husband took turns taking care of her mother and re-arranged the mother's life. Their love and care helped the mother to cope with her grief better. Among one-third of the parents with higher levels of education, they said that they loved their daughters and did not care about not having sons. These parents provided their daughters not only with good educations, but also with nannies, tutors, musical instrument instructors, and summer camp opportunities.

The above examples illustrate parental gender preference in relation to children's educational opportunities. Since the reinforcement of the one-child family policy, parents were limited to only one or two children. When family size was reduced, the first concern of many parents was to improve the quality of their children's lives. In rural areas, although parents generally found happiness in both male and female children, many parents placed more value upon their sons due to patriarchal beliefs, linage inheritance in the family, and old age support. Because of the gender income gap and the lack of a retirement system in the countryside, rural parents invested more in their sons for possible higher financial returns to the households, and provided unfavorable conditions to their daughters. On the other hand, in urban areas, when individuals had higher levels of education, they were less likely to discriminate against female children. Also, when individuals had retirement pensions from work places, they expected less financial support from their children.

Discussion

Although sociological literature documents the universal linkage between children's school attainments and their socioeconomic status, only a small component of the inequality in children's educational opportunities is explained by parental son preference attitudes (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993). Researchers suspect that there are indeed effects of gender bias and suggest that the bias might not end at the birth of a child. The analyses in this paper demonstrate the consequences of continued parental son preference on differential educational opportunities when girls become family members. Regarding the first research question: "*Does parental son preference affect differential schooling of children*?" both the 1990 census and ethnographic data suggest that there is continued practice of son preference that affects children's schooling, especially in rural areas. Boys are more likely to be enrolled in schools, and they receive longer educations than girls. Rural adolescent girls receive the least education and have the highest labor force participation rate. The ethnographic interviews illustrate that because of perpetuated parental son preference

value, boys and girls have differential educational opportunities provided by their parents. In semi-rural and rural areas, the one-child policy allows two children if the first one is a girl. Girls with brothers are often subject to the highest risks of dropping out of schools because of the limited financial resources in the families. The field data reveal that son preference attitudes also affect job hiring, and females are not only subject to discrimination at home but also at work. Therefore, parental son preference value has continuously affected male and female children's differential educational opportunities after the one-child family policy was installed, especially in rural areas. Regarding the second question: "*Are parents without welfare support in their old age more likely to enroll boys in schools?*" the field interviews indicate that in rural areas of China, because of limited family resources and lack of welfare system, peasants tend to enroll their sons in schools and have their daughters working to partially support their families and male siblings. Parents perceive that boys with more education would get better jobs, and thus would be able to provide more financial support to the family including parents' old age support. In urban and suburban areas, parents with retirement pensions and affiliations with government institutions are less likely to hold son preference attitudes. Finally, regarding the third research question: "*Are parents with higher education themselves less likely to discriminate against girls*?" the analyses indicate that parents with higher levels of education or white-collar occupations tend to be more liberal and become financially more independent. These parents are less likely to hold son preference value and less likely to discriminate against their daughters.

In summary, examples in this paper can first be understood as outcomes of decisions made by rural parents with an eye toward long-term family welfare. In other words, parents' expectations for future financial help is an important determinant of children's schooling. Parents educate their children to provide not only social mobility for the family, but also their own old age security. Rural parents perceive limited returns on a girl's education due to the gender income gap and marriage arrangements in rural areas. Second, differential educational chances among children can also be understood as an outcome of the need for household labor in rural areas. The image of women as housewives and manual laborers remain within the minds of many rural parents. Parents do not view their daughters' occupations to be as rewarding as their sons', and find daughters' main value in being at home as cheap laborers. Hence, economic arguments that stress returns from education told part of the story, and resource-constraint arguments emphasized in the household-production framework told another (Parish and Willis, 1993). Son preference appears to be more relevant under conditions of resource-constraints, and parents invest less in daughters when resources are limited. Rural parents tend to "kick out" their daughters when there is daughter-son competition in the household. Parish and

Willis' (1993) assessment of the case of Taiwan applies equally well to China: "What may be more important to altruism may not be parents' will to treat sons and daughters equally but the means to do so" (891). Urban children whose parents have higher levels of education and occupation are relatively advantaged in terms of educational opportunities, independent of their genders. Urban educated parents are more open-minded, hold less prejudice, and are more supportive. The analyses in this paper are also in agreement with the conclusion by Buchmann (2000) in her study of children's schooling in Kenya. By combining aspects of microeconomic arguments with other theoretical perspectives that address family resource constraints and parental perceptions of the value of schooling, Buchmann finds that parents' expectations for future financial return is a significant determinant of enrollment of their children in schools.

Concern with women's status in China has involved both improving women's status in an absolute sense and closing the gender gap. The most significant aspects of the gaps between women and men are the gaps in their education and employment opportunities (Stockman, 1994; Anderson, 1995; Wang, 2000). The high employment rate of young female laborers, especially young rural females, inevitably leads to their lack of higher education, thereby having a reverse impact on the quality of their occupations. In order to reduce the impact of son preference, a government educational policy on the improvement of mass educational level and a government economic policy of old-age pension support in rural areas are crucial. Instead of over-emphasizing its GDP growth, the Chinese government should invest more in rural school personnel and facilities and provide more educational opportunities for rural children and poor families. Programs that emphasize the value of schooling for female children and provide legislative bans on child labor are absolutely necessary. Policies should address equal labor opportunities and negative impacts of gender discrimination in education and employment. The government should also distribute tax money each year in county-level offices for helping out the rural elderly retirees. Once the retirement pension system is built and mass education is improved, gender preference will decline in significance. In this study, both the Census analyses and the ethnographic findings are only suggestive rather than conclusive, and further research is needed. Accompanied by the fast economic growth and the continuing practice of the one-child family policy, the decreasing number of siblings a child has may be an advantage to children in parental care and educational opportunity. However, not all children are treated equally, and the results in this paper suggest that *gender matters beyond family formation behaviors*. Despite the women's liberation movement in China, gender oppression is not yielding. Feminism is not just an alternate concept of social power, but a movement dedicated to removing the chain of oppression from "around the necks" of 50 percent of the human beings.

This chain is kept in place not only by the elite, but also by the poor, who often have nothing to exploit other than their women.

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