

From the issue dated April 30, 2004

A Dangerous Surplus of Sons?

Two political scientists warn that Asia's lopsided sex ratios threaten world peace

By DAVID GLENN

A body of Chinese poetry, *The Book of Songs*, believed to date from 1000-700 B.C., offers this advice to new parents:

When a son is born
Let him sleep on the bed,
Clothe him with fine clothes.
And give him jade to play with. ...

When a daughter is born,
Let her sleep on the ground,
Wrap her in common wrappings,
And give her broken tiles for playthings.

In many parts of Asia, that advice appears to have stuck. Centuries later, a strong preference for sons persists, enhanced by technology that increasingly allows parents to realize their desires. Amniocentesis and ultrasound can easily identify the sex of a fetus, and sex-selective abortion has become an everyday practice. Daughters who are born are frequently given up, and thousands are adopted out of the country every year. On the horizon are inexpensive sperm-sorting techniques that will guarantee a son even before conception. New technology, of course, is not the only factor; in some rural areas, old-fashioned female infanticide still lingers.

The reasons for the persistence of offspring sex selection, and the exact numbers of pregnancies involved, have been hotly debated since the early 1990s, when the economist Amartya Sen called attention to the phenomenon of "missing women." By some social scientists' measure, more than 100 million females are now missing from the populations of India and China. Mr. Sen and others have argued that sex selection both reflects and reinforces women's low social status, which -- beyond its intrinsic cruelty -- impedes the development of democracy and prosperity in male-skewed nations. Scholars and feminist organizations in both Asia and the West have produced many volumes of often conflicting advice about how to combat the practice.

Now two political scientists have joined the fray with an ominous argument: Offspring sex selection could soon lead to war.

In a new book, *Bare Branches: Security Implications of Asia's Surplus Male Population* (MIT Press), Valerie M. Hudson and Andrea M. den Boer warn that the spread of sex selection is giving rise to a generation of restless young men who will not find mates. History, biology, and

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sociology all suggest that these "surplus males" will generate high levels of crime and social disorder, the authors say. Even worse, they continue, is the possibility that the governments of India and China will build up huge armies in order to provide a safety valve for the young men's aggressive energies.

"In 2020 it may seem to China that it would be worth it to have a very bloody battle in which a lot of their young men could die in some glorious cause," says Ms. Hudson, a professor of political science at Brigham Young University.

Those apocalyptic forecasts garnered a great deal of attention when the scholars first presented them, in the journal *International Security*, in 2002. "The thing that excites me about this research is how fundamental demography is," says David T. Courtwright, a professor of history at the University of North Florida and author of *Violent Land: Single Men and Social Disorder From the Frontier to the Inner City* (Harvard University Press, 1996), a study of sex ratios and murder rates in American history. "The basic idea that they have, that in some sense demography is social destiny -- that's a very powerful idea."

But other experts are unpersuaded. They say that Ms. Hudson and Ms. den Boer's argument rests too heavily on a few isolated historical cases, and that the authors have failed to establish a systematic correlation between sex ratios and violence. Critics also suggest that the argument promotes false stereotypes of men and masculinity, and that the authors do not offer detailed knowledge of Asian societies and political systems. Offspring sex selection is indeed a serious problem, the critics say, but to treat it as a problem of international security is an unwarranted distraction.

Baby Ka-boom

The two political scientists began their project in the mid-1990s, when Ms. den Boer -- who is now a lecturer in international politics at the University of Kent, in England -- was a graduate student at Brigham Young. Ms. Hudson regularly assigned the philosopher Daniel Little's book *Understanding Peasant China: Case Studies in the Philosophy of Social Science* (Yale University Press, 1989), which mentions that 19th-century Chinese rebellions were concentrated in areas that were disproportionately male.

Intrigued by that insight, Ms. Hudson and Ms. den Boer began to search for similar patterns elsewhere. "It was sort of random research at the beginning," says Ms. den Boer. "Where has female-selective infanticide been prevalent in the past? Then we looked at where the practice is prevalent today ... and then looked further at the correlations with violence."

"I don't think we initially set out to write a book," she continues. "We initially, in fact, just wrote a conference paper. There was a lot of interest in that paper. The CIA came to the university and spoke with us about it, and wanted to know what United States policy should be toward countries that have this prevalence of infanticide and high sex ratios." (In demographers' jargon, a "high-sex-ratio" society is male-skewed, and a "low-sex-ratio" society is disproportionately female. The

worldwide sex ratio is estimated to be 101, meaning that there are 101 men for every 100 women.)

Bare Branches offers some disheartening numbers: In 1993 and 1994, more than 121 boys were born in China for every 100 baby girls. (The normal ratio at birth is around 105; for reasons debated among biologists, humans seem naturally to churn out slightly more boys than girls.) In India during the period 1996 to 1998, the birth ratio was 111 to 100; in Taiwan in 2000, it was 109.5. In 1990 a town near New Delhi reported a sex ratio at birth of 156.

Scholars have offered a number of explanations for the remarkable persistence of son-preference, which has lingered even in regions confronted by modernizing forces and government efforts to stamp out female infanticide. A powerful Chinese social norm, especially strong in rural areas, holds that sons must care for their parents in old age; people without sons thus fear poverty and neglect. In both India and China, various folk beliefs hold that only a son can perform the religious rituals that will ease a deceased parent's way into the afterlife.

Some scholars suggest that those norms and beliefs are remnants of a long-ago time when there were narrowly rational reasons to prefer sons to daughters. Anthropological studies have found, for example, that female infanticide and son-worship sometimes emerge in warring nomadic communities that frequently lose many men in battle, or that are vulnerable to having their women and children kidnapped by a rival group. In such situations, the theory goes, a group can preserve its integrity by tightly controlling the number of women within it.

Another theory holds that son-preference is a byproduct of hypergyny, a system in which women are expected to marry men of higher social rank. Strongly hypergynous societies tend to have dowry rituals; the bride's family gives money to the groom's family as an emblem of the bride's subordinate status. (A Chinese truism says: "The family of the married daughter holds its head down, while the family of the man whom she has married holds its head up.") The great cost and social shame long associated with dowries can make parents cringe at the thought of having a new daughter.

Americans often assume that hypergyny and a preference for sons must be self-correcting, according to Ms. Hudson. As marriageable daughters become scarce, people will choose to produce more of them. Simple supply and demand, right?

"If there's an economist in the audience," the professor says, "he or she will raise this point: 'When you make something scarce, you'll make it more valuable -- this will *improve* the social position of women.' And it's just utterly false. ... It doesn't take account of the fact that the woman herself does not hold her value. That is, she herself could not use her scarcity to improve her condition, because her fate is determined by men, either her father or her husband's family. She herself cannot leverage her scarcity."

"There's also a sort of NIMBY phenomenon that goes on here," Ms. Hudson continues, alluding to the "not in my backyard" attitude. "Individual fathers and families will say, Yes, it's important that girls be

born, that there be wives for our sons. But *I* want a son! We'll let somebody else have the girls."

Breeding Instability?

Whatever the causes of sex selection, Ms. Hudson and Ms. den Boer are certain that it threatens the stability of eastern Asia.

"We're right on the cusp," says Ms. Hudson. By that she means that birth ratios began to skew around 1985, as sex-selection technology spread, and that the "surplus" boys born in the late 1980s are just now reaching adulthood. "With every passing year, these surplus males will become more and more an important social factor." She cites news reports of spikes in drinking, gambling, and violent crime among young men in rural Indian villages.

As their ranks grow, these unmarried young men are likely to be attracted to militant organizations, the authors say. In such an "unstable context," they write, the conflicts over Taiwan and Kashmir, for example, are unlikely to be permanently settled. What's more, the governments of Asian nations may cope with the social strains caused by their "bare branches" -- a Chinese term for men who cannot find spouses -- by turning to militarism and ultranationalism.

"The security logic of high-sex-ratio societies predisposes nations to see some utility in interstate conflict," the authors write. In addition to stimulating a steadier allegiance from bare branches, who are especially motivated by issues involving national pride and martial prowess, conflict is often an effective mechanism by which governments can send bare branches away from national population centers, possibly never to return."

The authors rest their case in part on historical case studies. Female infanticide was rampant in 18th-century China, and the Qing dynasty responded by encouraging single men to colonize Taiwan, they write. As a result, Taiwan developed an extremely high sex ratio and soon was swept by groups that combined banditry with anti-imperial rebellion. The "Heaven and Earth Society" became so powerful that in 1787 the government was forced to send thousands of troops to restore order.

A similar story had unfolded in 16th-century Portugal, where primogeniture was in practice. Because first-born sons inherited everything, many later-born sons had no chance of finding wives. According to James L. Boone, a University of New Mexico anthropologist, such later-born sons banded together to persuade the monarch to launch wars of conquest in Africa. "It was above all *the cadets*," Mr. Boone wrote, "who lacked land and other sources of revenue within the country, who desired war, which would permit them to accede to a position of social and material independence."

Ms. Hudson and Ms. den Boer also point to a series of empirical tests -- including one they have conducted themselves -- demonstrating a positive correlation between sex ratios and murder rates across India.

Nothing in the two women's arguments, however, persuades Joshua S. Goldstein, a professor emeritus of international relations at George

Washington University, who wrote *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa* (Cambridge University Press, 2001). "The problem with their design is that they're basically just picking cases that fit their hypothesis, and so you don't know whether it's generalizable or not," he says. Mr. Goldstein would prefer a much more systematic study, one that would try to identify how sex ratios interact with other variables that are believed to be linked to instability and war: rapid population growth, ethnic tension, poverty, and unstable availability of resources.

Melvin Ember agrees. "Arguing by example is not anywhere near truth or confirmation," says Mr. Ember, president of the Human Relations Area Files, a repository of anthropological data at Yale University. "A better study would look at a large, randomly selected sample of societies with high, low, and normal sex ratios, he says. "It just requires a little bit of good will and money. The statistical techniques and the databases exist."

A similar complaint is offered by Manju Parikh, an associate professor of political science at the College of St. Benedict, who has written about offspring sex selection. "This is an example of social-science inductive reasoning, but it's not a very good example," she says. "They have to show why other explanations don't do as well. This is not a unique situation" -- that is, she says, many countries with normal sex ratios have also been prone to instability and war.

Those complaints reflect a too-rigid model of explaining the world, responds Ms. Hudson, who teaches courses in social-science methodology. "This critique goes to the heart of how we know anything in the social sciences," she says, arguing that because skewed sex ratios are a still-emerging variable, it is appropriate to sketch their potential effects more loosely, using what she and Ms. den Boer call "confirmatory process tracing."

"I encourage others who wish to perform additional analysis using other methods to do so," Ms. Hudson says. "But until a question is even raised, it cannot be addressed."

Mr. Goldstein and Ms. Parikh also worry that the *Bare Branches* argument leans too heavily on what they regard as crude evolutionary models of male behavior. "The authors seem to completely lack empathy for these low-status rootless men," says Ms. Parikh. "These guys are the victims of development, and they call them criminals and potential criminals. This is so appalling." For instance, contrary to the book's suggestion, she says, most migrant workers in Asia maintain strong kinship ties with their home villages, send money home every month, and are nothing like the untethered marauders pictured in the authors' warnings.

The term "surplus males," Mr. Goldstein says, "is offensive, and for lack of a better term, sexist. They're making a very conservative argument, which is sort of wrapped up in a feminist skin." It is a mistake, he says, to draw easy lessons from the finding that unmarried men tend to have higher testosterone levels than do their married peers.

Ms. Hudson says she herself is skeptical of sociobiological explanations

but finds it impossible to avoid engagement with them. "I don't know of any social-science findings that are more confirmed than the fact that young men monopolize violent antisocial behavior in every society," she says. "It may not be PC to say so, but you come up against such a mountain of evidence."

As for Ms. Parikh's point about migrant workers' kinship ties, Ms. Hudson says that "feeling kinship with home and village is not the point. ... Even when bare branches stay close to home, when they congregate they form new systems of norms unto themselves." Those new norms are often aggressive and antisocial, she says. "Families cannot control their 'stakeless' sons."

Mr. Courtwright, of North Florida, agrees. His 1996 book argues that violent crime in the United States has been concentrated in areas with high sex ratios, like the old Western frontier, and areas with low sex ratios, like contemporary urban ghettos, from which significant numbers of men are "missing" because of imprisonment. Such demographic considerations should be central to any serious study of crime and disorder, he says. "Even if you don't buy their fears about war," he says of Ms. Hudson and Ms. den Boer, "certainly you can accept their predictions about crime and instability."

Worrisome Trends

The argument presented in *Bare Branches* is akin to one developed in the late 1990s by the Canadian psychologists Neil I. Wiener and Christian G. Mesquida. They argued that violence and conflict are tightly correlated with a given society's "male age ratio," the ratio of men age 15 to 29 to men age 30 and older. If there is a relatively high proportion of young men, they say, a society is much more prone to violence. In Mr. Wiener and Mr. Mesquida's framework, young men are hard-wired for "coalitional aggression" as they fight for resources and potential mates.

The upshot of that argument is optimistic: The two psychologists predict that war and conflict will diminish during the 21st century, as the world's median age rises and the male age ratio improves. (Mr. Goldstein finds their optimism comically overdrawn, noting that the York University alumni magazine has quoted Mr. Mesquida as flatly declaring, "Right now we don't have to worry about Russia because their population is static.")

Mr. Wiener is enthusiastic about Ms. Hudson and Ms. den Boer's work, and says they are asking exactly the right questions about Asia's future. "Males cause trouble," he says. The prospect of tens of millions of unmarried men "is potentially extremely disruptive for these societies."

No matter how disruptive such men might be, skeptics say, Ms. Hudson and Ms. den Boer cannot make accurate predictions about the effects because they are insufficiently familiar with the details of Asian political systems and social life. "The political leadership in China has been heavily held in place for the last 25 years by the fact that they have kept the country out of war," says Mr. Goldstein, who finds it implausible that the regime would increase its militarism simply in order to soak up free-floating bachelors. "In any case, the kinds of wars

that are fought these days don't involve human waves of 20 million unmarried men," he says.

As for a rise in Chinese nationalism, he says, that is indeed a concern, but it has little to do with bands of low-status bare branches, as Ms. Hudson and Ms. den Boer write. "It's not unmarried men out in mining camps who are whipping this up," Mr. Goldstein says. "It's college students and young professionals on the Internet chat rooms and such. So they really didn't convince me at all that these bare branches would be a source of any change in foreign policy."

Ms. Hudson concedes that her conjectures about foreign-policy changes are speculative -- necessarily so, she says, because the first bare branches are only now reaching adulthood. But she insists that her speculations are plausible and urgent: "To think about such things before they might happen is an important part of reducing the probability of unwanted consequences."

Partly in response to feminist activism, Asian governments have taken steps to curb sex selection. India now bans public hospitals from performing sex-determination ultrasound tests (though the ban is nearly impossible to enforce), and at least three Indian states have outlawed sex-selective abortions. In 1996 China posted propaganda billboards featuring two older women. One, who appears destitute, says, "I have three sons, but none of them takes care of me." The other, who is comfortably dressed, replies, "I have only one daughter, but she surpasses your three sons." (The daughter appears on the billboard, rubbing her mother's back.)

Such efforts have had limited effects. Last month Khalid Malik, the U.N. resident coordinator in China, issued a statement warning that if present birth rates continue, as many as 60 million more women could be "missing" from China's population within 10 years.

"People are exercising their preferences," he told reporters. "But the consequences for society are enormous."

A GROWING MALE MAJORITY

As sex-selective abortions have become more common in certain countries, boys vastly outnumber girls. In China in 1996, for example, there were 121 boys ages 1 to 4 for every 100 girls in the same age range.

India

Children up to 6 years old

	Girls	Boys
1991	100	105.8
2001	100	107.9

China

Children 1 to 4 years old

	Girls	Boys
1982	100	107.0
1996	100	121.0

SOURCE: Valerie M. Hudson and Andrea M. den Boer

<http://chronicle.com>
Section: Research & Publishing
Volume 50, Issue 34, Page A14

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