

## Bare Branches and Security in Asia

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Are societies less secure when there is an abnormal ratio between men and women? The emerging subfield of “security demographics” examines the relationship between population characteristics and short- and long-term security trajectories of nation-states. Over the last five to ten years, research relating security to such topics as the demographic transition, the sub-replacement birth rates of developed economies, the proportion of young men compared to older men in the population, the effects of legal and illegal immigration, and the consequences of pandemics on the productive capacity of populations has begun to emerge. What we hope to add to the discussion is the variable of gender balance.

Though Russia and several former Warsaw Pact nations are experiencing a deficit of adult males, our research focuses on Asia, particularly India, China, and Pakistan, wherein we find a deficit of women, including female infants and children.

That there is an abnormal deficit of females in Asia can be readily confirmed through standard demographic analysis. There are established ranges for normal variation in overall population sex ratios, as well as early childhood and birth sex ratios. These ratios are adjusted for country-specific circumstances such as, for example, maternal mortality rates and infant mortality rates. Using official census data, it is then a relatively straightforward task to determine if there are fewer women than could reasonably be expected in a given population. Of course, there are perturbing variables: for example, many of the Gulf States have very abnormal sex ratios favoring males, but this is due to the high number of guest workers, predominantly male, that labor in the oil economies of these states. Once these types of factors have been taken into account, we find that a deficit of females in Asia is a real phenomenon.

To see the scale of the deficit, some comparisons are in order. If we examine overall population sex ratios, the ratio for, say, Latin America is 98 males per 100 females (using 2000 U.S. Census Bureau figures)—the corresponding figure for Asia is 104.4 males per 100 females. But one must also keep in mind the sheer size of the populations of Asia: India and China alone comprise approximately 38% of the world’s population. Thus, the overall sex ratio of the world is 101.3, despite the fact

that the ratios for the rest of the world (excluding Oceania) range from 93.1 (Europe) to 98.9 (Africa).

Birth sex ratios in several Asian countries are also outside of the established norm of 105-107 boy babies born for every 100 girl babies. The Indian government’s estimate of its birth sex ratio is approximately 113 boy babies born for every 100 girl babies, with some locales noting ratios of 156 and higher. The Chinese government states that its birth sex ratio is approximately 119, though some Chinese scholars have gone on record as stating the birth sex ratio is at least 121. Again, in some locations, the ratio is higher: the island of Hainan’s birth sex ratio is 135. Other countries of concern include Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Taiwan, Afghanistan, and South Korea. No data is available for North Korea.

Another indicator of gender imbalance is early childhood mortality. Boys typically have a higher early childhood mortality rate, which virtually cancels out their birth sex ratio numerical advantage by age 5. The reasons for this higher mortality include sex-linked genetic mutations, such as hemophilia, as well as higher death rates for boys from common childhood diseases, such as dysentery. However, in some of the Asian nations just mentioned, early childhood mortality rates for girls are actually higher than those for boys. Furthermore, orphanage populations are predominantly female in these nations.

Other statistics also factor into the observed gender imbalance. In the West, for example, male suicides far outnumber female suicides. But in countries with deficits of women, female suicides outnumber male suicides. In fact, approximately 55% of all female suicides in the world are Chinese women of childbearing age.

What forces drive the deficit of females in Asian nations such as India and China? How do we account for the disappearance of so many women from these populations—estimated conservatively at over 90 million missing women in seven Asian countries alone?

Some scholars assert that there may be a physical cause at work preventing female births, such as the disease hepatitis B, antigens of which have been associated with higher birth sex ratios. This may well be a contributing factor. However, it is worth considering the following experience of the municipality of Shenzhen in southern China. Alarmed at their rising birth sex ratio, which

reached 118 in 2002, local officials instituted a strict crackdown on black market ultrasound clinics. Offering 200 yuan for tips as to where these clinics could be found, officials then vigorously prosecuted owners of the machines and technicians using them, with prison terms affixed. By 2004—that is, in just two years – the birth sex ratio had dropped to 108.

It is fair to say that accounts such as these provide support for the thesis that the modern gender imbalance in Asia, as with historical gender imbalances in Asia and elsewhere, is largely a man-made phenomenon. Girls are being culled from the population, whether through prenatal sex identification and female sex selective abortion, or through relative neglect compared to male offspring in early childhood (including abandonment), or through desperate life circumstances that might result in suicide. The gender imbalance in Asia is primarily the result of son preference and the profound devaluation of female life.

One could justifiably suggest that such devaluation is not confined to Asia; why, then, is the deficit of women found almost exclusively there? This question can only be approached through a multi-factorial cultural analysis, which we will not detail in this paper. Suffice it to say that one must examine variables such as religious prohibition or sanction of the practice, traditions of patrilocality, and old age security obtained through male offspring, issues of dowry, hypergyny, and caste purity in India, as well as the effect of interventions such as the one-child policy in China. Other factors to consider include the web of incentives, disincentives, and capabilities surrounding the issue of prenatal sex determination technology.

At this point, however, we need to turn to the question of whether a deficit of females affects the security trajectory of nations. We believe it does. Anthropologist Barbara D. Miller has termed the preservation of a balanced sex ratio a “public good” that governments overlook at their peril. Will it matter to India and China that by the year 2020, 12-15% of their young adult males will not be able to form culturally traditional families because the girls that would have grown up to be their wives were disposed of by their societies instead? With each passing year between now and 2020 (or even further into the future), both the proportion and the number of young adult males who are in excess of the number of young adult females in China and India will increase. The Chinese, given their longstanding historical practice of female infanticide, even have a special term for such young men; *guang gun-er*, or “bare branches,” meaning branches of the family tree that will never bear fruit, but which may be useful as “bare sticks,” or clubs.

The Chinese elision between bare branches and truncheons foreshadows our argument: men who are not provided the opportunity to develop a vested interest in a

system of law and order will gravitate toward a system based on physical force, in which they hold an advantage over other members of society. Furthermore, we must remember the consequences of hypergyny: in a system with too few women, the men who will marry are those who are higher in socio-economic status. The men who will not be able to marry are those who are poorer, less educated, less skilled, and less likely to be employed. These men are already at risk to establish a system based on physical force in order to obtain by force what they cannot obtain legitimately. That they will now also not be able to establish a household short-circuits what is in most societies a most auspicious event: the transition of its young men from potential societal threat to potential societal protector. The criminal behavior of unmarried men is many times higher than the criminal behavior of married men, and a reliable predictor of a downturn in reckless, antisocial, illegal, and violent behavior by young adult males is marriage. If this transition cannot be effected for a sizeable proportion of a society’s young men, the society is likely to become less stable.

(Note that this transition is also less likely in societies with a deficit of males: in such societies, men need not marry or form permanent attachments to obtain food, shelter, sexual services, domestic services, and so forth. In that respect, societies with too few men and societies with too many men share some characteristics. Furthermore, societies in which marriage age is generally delayed for men can also produce instability; for example, the average age at first marriage for men in Egypt is now 32.)

We can approach the linkage between gender imbalance and instability in a number of ways: aggregate statistical analysis, historical case studies, and sociological theory. In regards to statistical evidence for this relationship, several excellent studies have demonstrated a strong correlation between state-level sex ratio and state-level rates of violent crime in India. States with high sex ratios, such as Uttar Pradesh, have much higher violent crime rates than states with more normal sex ratios, such as Kerala. Historical case studies also abound, since abnormal sex ratios are not a new phenomena. In *Bare Branches* we mention several such case studies, such as the Nien Rebellion in China in the mid-1800s. The Nien rebels came from a very poor region in China where the sex ratio was recorded to be at least 129 men per 100 women. Many poor men were left without much stake in their society. At first relatively smaller groups of men coalesced to form smuggling and extortion gangs, which would bring them greater wealth than they could hope to obtain through legitimate means. Eventually these gangs began to band together to form larger armies. At its height, the Nien rebels wrested control of swaths of territory from imperial control. It took years for the emperor to subdue this rebellion.

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Sociological theory and experimental evidence must not be overlooked. Scholars have studied, for example, the behavior of unattached young males, noting their propensity to congregate with others like them and to engage in dominance displays when in such groups. Sociologists have found that the “risky shift” in group behavior, where a group is willing to take greater risks and engage in more reckless behavior than any individual member of the group, is much more pronounced in groups comprised solely of unattached young adult males than any other group composition.

After examining the evidence, some predictions can be made for societies whose sex ratios are rising: crime rates will increase, the proportion of crime that is violent will increase, rates of drug use, drug smuggling, weapons smuggling, trafficking, and prostitution will increase. We are also likely to see the development of a chattel market for women, not only domestically but also internationally, with women not only kidnapped within the country, but also trafficked from border nations. For example, some researchers believe that one of North Korea’s main exports is brides to China.

However, it is also important to examine the reaction of the government. Historically, we have found that governments do become aware of the negative consequences on societal stability of a growing number of bare branches. Most governments are motivated to do something about that problem; in the past, “doing something” meant thinning the numbers of bare branches, whether through fighting them, sponsoring the construction of large public works necessitating hard, dangerous manual labor, exporting bare branches to frontier areas within the country or to less populated areas of neighboring lands, co-opting bare branches into the military or police, and so forth. One Portuguese monarch in the 1500s sent his army, composed primarily of noble and non-noble bare branches, on one of the later crusades in order to get them away from Portugal where they were creating a crisis of governance; over 25% of that army never returned and many who did return had suffered serious wounds. These governments also felt the need to make sure that their bare branches understood that one should not tangle with the government—that the government was capable of being as brutal as they were.

In other words, what we find is that the need to control the rising instability created by the increasing numbers of bare branches led governments, generally speaking, to favor a more authoritarian approach to internal

governance, and also made the nation a less benign presence internationally. It is almost as if the prospects for democracy and peace were being diminished in step with the devaluation of daughters within the society.

How will this play out in twenty-first century Asia? Gender imbalance does not cause war or conflict per se, but it can be an aggravating factor in the event of war or conflict. Will there come a point when a deteriorating

internal security situation due to the instability caused by substantial numbers of bare branches (by 2020, 28 million young adult bare branches in India, and an equivalent or larger number in China), will overshadow external security concerns for the governments of these nations? Perhaps we should remember that both

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Pakistan and India have gender imbalances, as do both China and Taiwan. It is also worth remembering that the resource-rich Russian Far East is now at least 9% Chinese, in a context where Russia is not only decreasing in population, but disproportionately losing men. Perhaps we should remember gender imbalances when we assess the potential for democracy in China, and the evolution of democracy in India. The gender imbalances of India and China will not remain their problem alone; these two nations alone comprise about 38% of the world’s population. Could it be that the status of women in these nations will come to be seen as an important factor in both domestic and international security in Asia, with possible implications for the entire international system?

The Chinese government, at least, is acting on that perceived linkage. In July 2004 they announced their ambition to normalize the birth sex ratio by the year 2010. In January 2005, they announced programs to provide old age pensions to parents of girls. Only time will tell if these and other interventions will achieve their desired ends; in the meantime, the horse has left the barn

for at least the next 20 years, for there is no way to undo the birth sex ratios of previous years. Will the value of female life have been discovered too late? We will see—we will all see.

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