

Son Preference in China: What Are the Causes?

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Abstract. In China's rapidly developing technological and economic society, there still exists a patriarchal ideology. From ancient times to the present, most women have been hampered by this concept, which has been ingrained in Chinese society for thousands of years. Son preference is an ideology that has been perpetuated in China from traditional feudal society to today. It is also important to understand why the son preference has persisted in China for thousands of years. This paper focuses on the specific reasons for the long-standing Son Preference ideology in China. This article mainly collects evidence from relevant Chinese unique literature such as the *Analects* of Confucius and survey reports to prove it. It also discusses the reasons by classifying them into three categories, namely economic, cultural and political. This research can help people in the present society to learn to find out the root cause of patriarchy and change it. In this way, the inequality between men and women in Chinese society can be reduced in the future.

Keywords: Son preference; Confucianism; China; patriarchal society.

1. Introduction

Son preference is an ideology that has been perpetuated in China from traditional feudal society to today. It is a belief that men and women are not equal. People with a son preference mindset believe that men are more important than women in all aspects, which has directly contributed to the low status of women in China for thousands of years. Although China's economy continues to grow rapidly, it has not completely erased the son preference in people's minds. It is because of the severe preference for sons that gender discrimination, abandonment of female babies, and even sex-selective abortions often occur in Chinese families. Especially in rural areas, the deviation of the gender ratio between men and women is huge. Therefore, it is urgent to solve this problem. Many previous studies on son preference have focused on its consequences on society, such as unequal opportunities in education for girls [1].

However, it is also important to understand why the son preference has persisted in China for thousands of years [2]. Only by understanding the reasons why it has been passed down in Chinese society can we help eradicate the son preference stereotype. This research explores the causes of persisting son preference. For that purpose, this research analyzes this issue from economic, cultural, and political aspects. This paper first clarifies the impacts of China's millennia-old small-peasant economy on son preference. Second, the paper examines whether Confucianism deepens this ideology through the content of the *Analects* and other historical texts [3]. Finally, it discusses the reasons why son preference is still deeply rooted in modern China concerning the one-and-a-half child policy. Although this study focuses on the causes of son preference in Chinese society rather than in other countries, it also gives examples of this ideology in other societies for comparative analysis.

2. Economic Causes

2.1 The Economic Impact of the Agricultural Society

Economic interests may be the direct cause of patriarchal thinking in China. Historically, China is a traditional agrarian society, and such societies tend to favor sons over daughters. Because men did have a greater physical advantage over women, sons were always seen as providing an advantage in agricultural labor [4]. In ancient social collaboration, it was almost inevitable that men would be

dominated in society. This is because the production and preservation of social wealth at that time were almost always dependent on the transformation of pure human resources. The transformation of human resources to maximize benefits necessarily had two requirements: one was the ability to be effectively organized and utilized, and the other was the ability to be steadily exported.

Women cannot be organized as effectively as men in the long term due to their function of nursing offspring, and pregnancy and child-rearing can lead to interruption of human resources output. Even if they give up childbirth, the physiological period of women also makes it difficult for women to achieve the same level of output as men. Thus, the male outside-female inside collaboration inevitably led to the dominance of men in economic production and force, and women gradually became the appendages of men, exchanging their reproductive rights for male patronage. In addition, because ancient smallholder societies had limited resources, people needed violent conflict to obtain more resources (e.g., water, land), and men had an advantage over women in terms of violence. Therefore, men controlled the economic resources of the family and their distribution and often occupied the position of “head of the family” in a household.

2.2 Wealth Transmission in a Patriarchal Society

In addition, in ancient Chinese tradition, sons were a better source of wealth for the family than daughters. According to the Chinese patrilineal clan tradition, a clan consists of a male ancestor and his children, as well as the descendants of his male children, whom all belong to the father [2]. Whereas lineage is passed down from male to male, the property is inherited according to the paternal line. This is especially evident in Chinese genealogies and clans. One can learn the name deeds of each generation of men in the ancestral line, as well as their sons. Women, on the other hand, often appear as the wives of men and are not able to have their names.

Therefore, sons would be seen as the heirs of the family’s property and the ones that the parents would rely on in their old age. Daughters, by contrast, could only be the passers-by of the family. This is because a daughter would leave her mother’s family after marriage and become a laborer in her husband’s family. So, it is unlikely that a woman could gain a central position in a family, either in her family of origin or in her husband’s family. Moreover, according to traditional Chinese culture, the maiden family should pay a high dowry when a daughter married, which led many families to consider their daughters “money losers” [4].

3. Cultural Causes

3.1 The Devaluation of Women in Confucianism

From a cultural point of view, the long-entrenched Confucian culture has seriously influenced gender inequality which results in the idea of “son preference” [5]. The rule of “Three Obedience and Four Virtues,” as described in the Chinese classic *The Book of Rites*, states that “a woman should obey her father before marriage, her husband after marriage, and her son after widowhood.” Such values always place women in a subordinate position to men [6]. At the same time, the Confucian work “*Analects*” also contains neglect and devaluation of women. In chapter 17, one of the few direct parallels to women is made: “Only ladies and villains are tough to raise, and if you are close to them, you will be disrespectful, and if you are far away, you will be bitter.” This adage suggests that only women and villains are difficult to get along with; if you get too near to them, they may lose their humility toward you, and if you keep your distance from them, they may get resentful of you. This phrase positions women in a lesser social class, meaning that they are on the same level as the bad guys [7]. Although Confucius did not intend to refer to all women, it is apparent that he considered women inferior and submissive to males.

3.2 Confucianism’s Division of Labor Between Men and Women

Confucian values assign different roles to men and women. When King Wu praised himself for having ten capable and intelligent ministers, Confucius suggested that “with a woman among King

Wu's ministers, there were only nine men". This story directly proves that Confucius did not think women were suitable for the role of ministers [8]. He isolated women from the government, believing that women should not be involved in government affairs and were not capable of holding important positions. Thus, Confucianism created a clear gender division, which required women to serve as caregivers in the household, while men worked outside to provide financial resources for the family.

3.3 The Influence of the Doctrine of "Yin and Yang" on the Status of Women

Confucian values believe that the most important interpersonal relationships are between ruler and liege, father and son, and husband and wife. Furthermore, when the dualism of Yin and Yang was introduced into Confucianism, women were gradually confined to the domestic sphere. Although Confucius did not focus on the inequality between men and women when he first proposed the Yin-Yang view of marriage, he intended to achieve mutual benefit through a different division of labor.

However, under the expansion of the Confucian thinker Dong Zhongshu in the Han Dynasty, the "Doctrine of Yin and Yang" once again became a form of oppression and bondage for women [9]. He defined the ruler, father, and husband as "Yang" and the liege, sons, and wives as "Yin". Yang was superior to and dominated Yin in every way. At the same time, Dong Zhongshu believed that women inherently possessed virtues opposite to those of men, namely chastity, obedience, and weakness. These so-called "virtues" reinforced the oppression and shackling of women and once again strengthened the idea of "male superiority over female" in traditional Chinese society.

3.4 Ancestor Worship and "Filial Piety" in China

Ancestor worship is a traditional custom based on Confucianism. The Chinese believe that the spirits of dead ancestors must be present and influence future generations. Therefore, people perform activities such as "ancestor rituals" to express their worship and respect and hope that the deceased ancestors continue to protect their descendants [10]. The evolution of clan society established the patriarchal system; the original family system tended to be clear, stable, and perfect. People gradually came to believe that clan elders or their fathers' parents could bestow favors on individual clan members. As a result, the concept of blessing children and grandchildren and beginning to worship and pray for their deceased ancestors resulted in the formation of a rigorous understanding of ancestor worship [10].

Chinese ancestor worship is mainly rooted in the lessons of Confucian filial piety and the legends of folk beliefs, as well as Chinese family lineage. When China entered civilized society, *The Classic of Filial Piety* was introduced, and the Confucian idea of filial piety was widely preached. It gradually progressed to the point of ancestor worship due to the thought of distant ancestors. The last chapter of *the Book of Filial Piety* tells how the living has a duty to the dead. The most important virtues in Chinese Confucianism are "loyalty" and "filial piety," and even departed ancestors are to be revered as if they were still alive, with offerings and sacrifices performed during festivals. In China, the veneration of ancestors is a daily code of behavior.

Therefore, ancestor worship rituals are necessary to ensure the continuation of ancestor blessings for future generations. Unlike Japan, where all family members can choose to "worship" the spirits of the departed, in China, these rituals can only be performed by male descendants. So, ancestor worship once again deepens traditional Chinese families' importance on their sons. Once a family has no sons or grandsons, the future of the family is lost [11]. In their view, such "unfilial" behavior would anger the ancestors and bring bad luck to the family.

4. Political Causes

One of China's lesser-known family planning policies is the "one-and-a-half child policy". The "one-and-a-half-child" policy refers to the 1984 flexible family planning policy, which prohibited most rural households with a boy as the first child from having any more children, but permitted those

with a girl as the first child to have a second child after four to five-year hiatus. This policy was not abolished until 2015 when China fully opened up to two children.

According to the China Economy, the implicit meaning of the “one-and-a-half-child” policy is that the value of a girl is far less than the value of a boy and that a second child is needed. This psychologically suggestive family planning policy made it more challenging to eradicate the patriarchal beliefs in an already unequal countryside. This policy, which was seen at the time as “compassionate” and “appropriate to the local situation”, objectively created an artificial inducement that fostered a preference for sons in all parts of society, especially in rural areas. Indirectly, the policy supported undesired phenomena such as prenatal sex determination and female newborn abandonment, resulting in a markedly higher gender ratio at birth and a greater rate of mortality among girls.

Demographic analysis shows that considering the underreporting of female babies is more severe than that of male babies, the sex ratio is 124.7 in 2007 in areas where the “one-and-a-half child” policy was implemented. The main reason for this is that 19.1 percent of couples with one girl had sex determination to ensure the birth of a second boy. In contrast, this ratio was only about 4.6 percent in areas with a late childbearing policy.

5. Conclusion

Although China’s economy has multiplied since the reform and opening up policy, urbanization and market reforms have to some extent reduced the prejudice against daughters. However, despite the gradual improvement in economic conditions, the phenomenon of son preference is still prevalent in Chinese society. Therefore, it is clear that cultural factors are the primary cause of patriarchal thinking. Changing the long-standing Chinese family model and kinship system is difficult. Only by increasing female education and employment opportunities can women be empowered to be independent of their parents and husbands and no longer be subject to them. At the same time, having a progressive mindset can help women to educate the next generation to achieve gender equality, creating a virtuous circle.

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