

I. Background

Ever since the 1970s, China has been implementing birth control policies as well as social and economic measures. Income and education levels are rising constantly, as well as the quality of life and the birth rate, whereas the national fertility rate is falling rapidly. The total fertility rate (TFR)¹ has fallen from 6 in the 1970s to a level that is below the replacement level² in the early 90s, and this level has been maintained for more than 10 years. Because of the drop in fertility rate and demographic changes that are specific Chinese features, the sex ratio at birth is calculated to be 107.6 in 1982, 111.3 in 1990, 116.9 in 2000, with a 7.74% rise within 18 years. The constant and incremental increase of the sex ratio at birth has become one of the most striking structural changes of the Chinese demography in the past twenty years or so.

II. Analysis of the causes and consequences of a high sex ratio

1. Fundamental reasons. (1) Preference for giving births to boys is still predominant in Chinese culture. (2) The root reason lies however in economic considerations. (3) The lack of institutionalisation is a major social factor.

2. Technological factors. The advancement in science and technology has greatly enhanced the development in birth control and family planning, while at the same time, conveniently fulfills people's need for prenatal sex selection and indiscriminate abortions.

3. A catalytic factor for a high sex ratio at birth is that the fertility rate in general is low.

III. Conclusions

1. There is no causal relationship between a high sex ratio at birth and the implementation of birth control policies in China.

2. A high sex ratio at birth in the country is the combined result of various factors.

3. A preference for giving birth to boys consists of an important element in the traditional Chinese culture and the embodiment of gender values.

4. Not only is the idea of giving births to baby boys a spiritual and cultural necessity for the Chinese, but it is also the embodiment of the economic functions of a family, social status, wealth and the need for clan inheritance (zongshi). It is also imperative for the continuation of family lineage. These constitute the socio-economic grounds for a high sex ratio at birth.

5. Because of the development of modern technologies, prenatal sex identification and sex selection are now possible.

6. Birth control policies are key measures to prompt couples to have fewer babies.

7. China is not the only country which possesses a high sex ratio at birth. Countries or regions, such as Eastern and Southern Asia, which do not institute birth control policies also have a high sex ratio at birth.