

## Why Are Baby Girls Being Killed in China?

In 1980, when I was living with the 8,000 members of Sandhead Brigade in China's Guangdong Province, I asked village friends whether female infanticide ever occurred locally. The answer, which came with rather more heat than I had expected, was an emphatic no. "Ours is a land of fish and rice," one wrinkled old midwife told me in explanation. "All the people here have always been able to raise their daughters." She and others insisted that even under the old imperial regime girl babies had never been put to death. It was just not done.

Yet less than two years later Chinese friends in Hong Kong who had recently

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by Steven W. Mosher

been back to the village began to tell of girl infants dying soon after birth in suspicious circumstances. One young woman was even more candid, admitting to me that when her mainland sister-in-law had recently given birth to a girl, the baby had been murdered immediately. A bucket of water had been prepared beside the bed. When the newborn turned out to be a girl, she was drowned.

Female infanticide isn't just an anomaly of the village I lived in. Premier Zhao Ziyang thought the problem widespread enough to condemn it in his report to the National People's Congress in December 1982. "We must protect in particular infant girls and their mothers," he said. "The whole society must resolutely condemn the criminal activities of female infanticide and maltreatment of mothers. The judicial apparatus should resolutely punish the offenders according to law."

In recent months provincial newspapers throughout China have reported grisly tales of the murder of female infants. On March 3, the People's Daily admitted that "the butchering, drowning and leaving to die of female infants and the maltreating of women who have given birth to girls has become a grave social problem."

Peking claims that these crimes are committed by "backward" villagers in the name of "feudal" attitudes that "boys are precious, girls are worthless." Male villagers, said to desire sons to "carry on the ancestral line and extend the generations," have been especially singled out for censure. "In their keen desire to have sons," the English-language Peking Review said last January, "some men still torment their wives who bear daughters and worse still, they kill the baby girls through neglect or outright murder." If Peking is to be believed, many peasant men are ignorant and misguided monsters who willingly sacrifice their infant daughters on the altar of some feudal belief.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Infanticide does have a long and tragic history in many parts of China. But by the middle decades of this century, it looked as though this barbarism was on its way to extinction. In Chinese villages today, where ancestral land has long since been expropriated by the state and ancestor worship is on the decline, traditional notions of clan and family continuity no longer exert much influence. These attenuated ideas could not possibly account for the sudden reoccurrence of female infanticide.

The wave of infanticide sweeping China is a direct consequence of a population-control policy of unprecedented severity. It restricts families to one child, ignores the realities of old-age economics in the countryside and systematically denigrates the value of human life.

Parents are permitted to have only one child, and then only after a "birth quota" has been issued by the authorities. Each population unit, such as a rural collective, is limited to a certain number of births per year, which it allots to couples who have yet to have children.

Women pregnant with "over-quota" babies are forced to attend round-the-clock "study courses" until they submit to an abortion. Families who actually have a second child must pay heavy fines of up to \$2,000—several years wages in mainland China—and run the risk of demotion or assignment to less desirable work as well.

This draconian policy makes no provision for the long-term economic concerns of peasant parents, especially their anxieties about financial security in old age. Sons are the only social-security system known to villagers, for there are no pension programs in the Chinese countryside. Neither can daughters give long-term assistance, for rural custom decrees that they take up residence with their husband's family upon marriage and sever all economic ties with their natal family. Even if they were to keep a daughter at home, peasants say, it would be impossible to find her a husband in a population of only sons. Sons alone continue to live at home, providing for their parents after they retire from field labor.

Those who are without sons must toil in the fields throughout their twilight years. As their strength declines to the point where they cannot keep up, they are assigned lighter work that pays scarcely enough for their rice ration. Old age is a long downward spiral of flagging vigor, worsening diet and weakening health.

While the birth of a son has always been a more important event than the arrival of a daughter, Peking's policy of one child per family has raised the stakes. For the peasantry birth has become a kind of Russian roulette: The arrival of a son heralds a relaxed and secure old age; the coming of a daughter portends poverty and slow starvation during one's declining years. It is not "feudal nonsense" but brutal economic reality that moves the parents to hope for a man-child.

If the child isn't male, then the choice is a stark one: Either kill or abandon the newborn female infant, reserving your one-child quota for the birth of a boy, or face a harrowing old age. It is no surprise that many peasants decide in favor of their own security, and trade the infant's life for their own. It is an act of self-preservation.

It is also an act in which the Chinese state is a silent accomplice. The English-language China Daily printed in Peking may publish editorials lamenting the resurgence of infanticide, but the implementation of the birth control policy at the

grass roots encourages cadres to overlook the willful murder of female infants.

County, commune and production brigade cadres are told how many births their unit is to be allowed each year and are promoted and otherwise rewarded on the basis of whether they succeed in meeting the quota. It isn't in their interest to prevent female infanticide. Each girl who dies at birth or disappears soon after is one less head that they will be held to account for in the annual birth control report. If lower-ranking Chinese officials do not actually encourage infanticide, then neither do they discourage it. They simply look the other way.

Front-line cadres take their cues from their superiors, and these have made clear that population growth is to be held down at all costs, even that of the lives of millions of infants.

Not only are forced abortions being performed up to the time of birth, there are even cases of officially sanctioned infanticide. In one incident shortly after I left Guangdong Province, a young woman pregnant for the first time gave birth to twin boys. What should have been an occasion for rejoicing quickly turned tragic as the cadres present asked her which one she wanted. Both of them, she replied, but to no avail. One of the babies—she could not and would not choose which—was taken from her and put to death.

It is the Communist Chinese state that, by adopting a brutal and inhumane policy of population control, must bear the primary responsibility for infanticide's reappearance in the last decades of the 20th century. Chinese peasants are as human as the rest of us.

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