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GENDER IMBALANCE IN CHINA: Causes and Consequences

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TFG's Abstract

This thesis seeks to critically observe the issue of gender imbalance in China. To do so, it uses a series of academic resources from different fields of study such as demography, anthropology sociology or economy written by researchers from inside and outside the country. This allows for a broad and nuanced analysis of the issue which aims to not only expose the current state of affairs, but also show a complexity that is often overlooked. The thesis is divided into three sections. In the first section, the thesis will analyze the causes of the gender imbalance. It will also explain the one-child policy and why it has been regarded as the catalyst of the problem in China. Then it will proceed to explain how the gender imbalance has affected both men and women exposing the three main social issues derived from it: bare branches, women trafficking and leftover women. Lastly, it will explain the two main policies enacted by the Chinese government to mitigate the consequences of the gender imbalance. All of this will be done by trying to answer one question: What does it imply from a gender studies perspective?

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Dades del TFG

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Desequilibri de gènere, política del fill únic, preferència del fill, selecció de gènere, branques nues, dones sobrants.

Resum del TFG

Aquest Treball de Fi de Grau busca observar de forma crítica el tema de el desequilibri de gènere a la Xina. Per fer-ho, utilitza una sèrie de recursos acadèmics de diferents camps d'estudi com la demografia, l'antropologia, la sociologia o l'economia els quals estan escrits per investigadors tant de dins com de fora del país. Això permet una anàlisi més àmplia i matisada del tema que té com a objectiu no només exposar l'estat actual de la situació, sinó també mostrar una complexitat que sovint es passa per alt. El treball es divideix en tres seccions. A la primera secció, s'analitzaran les causes del desequilibri de gènere. També s'explicarà la política del fill únic i per què està considerada com el catalitzador de el problema a la Xina. Després es procedirà a explicar com el desequilibri de gènere ha afectat tant a homes com a dones exposant els tres principals problemes socials derivats d'ell: les branques nues, el tràfic de dones i les dones sobrants. Finalment, s'explicaran les dues polítiques principals promulgades pel govern xinès per mitigar les conseqüències de l'desequilibri de gènere. Tot això es farà tractant de respondre una pregunta: Què implica això des d'una perspectiva de gènere?

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Desequilibro de género, política del hijo único, preferencia del hijo, selección de género, ramas desnudas, mujeres sobrantes.

Resumen del TFG

Este Trabajo de Fin de Grado busca observar de forma crítica el tema del desequilibrio de género en China. Para hacerlo, utiliza una serie de recursos académicos de diferentes campos de estudio como la demografía, la antropología, la sociología o la economía los cuales están escritos por investigadores tanto de dentro como de fuera del país. Esto permite un análisis más amplio y matizado del tema que tiene como objetivo no solo exponer el estado actual de la situación, sino también mostrar una complejidad que a menudo se pasa por alto. El trabajo se divide en tres secciones. En la primera sección, se analizarán las causas del desequilibrio de género. También se explicará la política del hijo único y por qué está considerada como el catalizador del problema en China. Luego se procederá a explicar cómo el desequilibrio de género ha afectado tanto a hombres como a mujeres, exponiendo los tres principales problemas sociales derivados de él: las ramas desnudas, el tráfico de mujeres y las mujeres sobrantes. Por último, se explicarán las dos políticas principales promulgadas por el gobierno chino para mitigar las consecuencias del desequilibrio de género. Todo esto se hará tratando de responder una pregunta: ¿Qué implica esto desde una perspectiva de género?

Aviso legal

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1.INTRODUCTION

The issue of gender imbalance is nowadays a well-known, well researched topic not just within the East Asian context, but throughout the world. Yet, this was not always the case. In fact, it is considered a fairly recent field of study since it did not gain much recognition until the 1990s. Despite China and India being, arguably, the most commonly known cases, other countries such as Vietnam, Azerbaijan or Georgia also face this issue. In this thesis we are going to specifically focus on the case of China to answer three questions: *What are the causes behind the gender imbalance in China? What are its consequences? What does it imply from a gender studies perspective?*

To do this, I have chosen to divide this thesis in three sections or chapters. In the first section, I am going to explain what the gender imbalance is and how it gained the importance that it has today. I am also going to explain the three factors that, according to academics, can be attributed to this phenomenon. Those are: son preference, sex selection and a decrease in the fertility rate. To understand the gender imbalance in China though, we fist have to understand the one-child policy. Therefore, I am going to explain how it came to be and its relation to the gender imbalance since many academics argue that without the existence of this policy, the imbalance would not be as pointed as it is today.

In the second chapter, I am going to discuss how the gender imbalance have affected both men and women. In the men's case, the focus is going to be placed on "bare branches" since they are the group who have noticed those consequences the most. In the women's case, it will be placed in two different groups. The first one being trafficked women from poorer regions. This does not just refer to women from within China, but also from neighboring countries. The second group will be "leftover women".

Lastly, I am going to talk about different policies established by the Chinese government in order to try to balance the sex ratio. The first policy that will be discussed is the two-child policy. This policy was implemented somewhat recently and has substituted the one-child policy. The second is the Care for Girls campaign. This campaign became a policy in 2007 which aimed to raise the value of girls in the country.

When it comes to the gender imbalance in China and its consequences, it should be noted that more often than not the issue is oversimplified. Similarly, there is a tendency to see the Chinese's society as homogenous when that is not the case. To contrast this, I

have tried to bring into the discussion as many different points of view as available to try to have the most accurate picture possible. This also allows for a very interesting debate that not only helps gain perspective on the matter, but also shows how complex it is. In fact, I would argue, the goal of this thesis is to show this complexity not just on the issue of the gender imbalance, but also when it comes to its consequences. I would personally like to show through this research that societies in general, and the Chinese in particular, are much more complex than they are sometimes made up to be not just in the media, but also in academia.

The complexity of the matter is not the only difficulty one finds when researching the issue. Aside from an oversimplification, there also tends to be a degree of tendentiousness depending on which article is being referenced. In fact, there were some sources that had to be discarded because of this issue. Hvistendahl (2011) discusses this matter in her book *Unnatural Selection: Choosing Boys Over Girls and the Consequences of a World Full of Men*. She attributes this fact to a series of assumptions and suppositions that in many cases are not completely coherent with the country's historical or political reality (224). I find myself agreeing with her, especially when it comes to discussing China and its complex sociopolitical context. Another difficulty is a lack of research in certain areas. For example, while there is quite a considerable amount of research done on leftover women, my main problem came when I was trying to find a connection between this phenomenon and the gender imbalance. In fact, most of the research done on this matter is based of two master thesis which are the only ones I found that cover the issue. Likewise, while the presence of leftover women in media is well researched, the possible motivations behind it lack examination.

The methodology used in this research is exclusively based on the compilation and analysis of a series of academic papers and books related to the topic of interest within the social science field. The use of resources from different academic backgrounds and approaches to the issue have help me to compare and put different arguments and points of view under debate. At the same time, because this thesis is done from a gender perspective, the analysis will also center on how power structures and its division of the gender's roles have affected the Chinese society in relation to the gender imbalance and its consequences.

As for the theorical mark, this thesis is based on the dichotomy between researchers who focus more on historical conventions, and researchers who approach the

issue from a socioeconomic standpoint. When it comes to the cause of the gender imbalance, some researchers such as Cristopher Guilmoto or Zhang Wenhua focus more on the historical conventions that led to the current situation, while others like Robin Burgess and Juzhong Zhuang focus more on the socioeconomic realities of the society. The same applies to the analysis of its consequences.

2. EXPLAINIG GENDER IMBALANCE IN CHINA

The issue of the gender imbalance has been historically overlooked by demographers. The main reason was the notion that as countries started to experience economic growth, gender selection would disappear since women would have more access to education, better jobs and, most importantly, contraception. In fact, it was not until Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen's essay titled *More than a 100 million women missing* was published in 1990, that it started to get some academic recognition (Hvindestendahl, 2010: 8). Sen defends that in a regular environment, the Sex Ratio at Birth (SRB) tends to favor women in all ages because they usually are more resistant to sickness or social and environmental difficulties (Sen, 1999: 1). He then proceeds to explain how taking that fact into consideration, the women to male ratio in continents such as Africa or Asia was far from what it is considered to be normal. He compared their SRB to that of Europe and North America to establish what "normality" was. He considered that in those countries, males and females have access to the same resources, while that is not the case in Asia or Africa (Sen, 1999: 2-3). Back then, though, research on gender imbalance was scarce. This meant that even though he did recognize discrimination against women and even talked about some studies suggesting infanticide in China (Sen, 1999: 10), he mostly blamed the phenomenon he called *women missing* on "the failure to give women medical care similar to what men get and to provide them with comparable food and services" (Sen, 1999: 2). To him, that resulted in less women surviving (Sen, 1999: 2).

Still, even though after the essay's publication there were more academics doing research on the issue, it was mostly considered a local problem and not a world-wide one. Yet that is not the case (Hvindestendahl, 2010: 9). For example, in 2005 six countries situated in the Eurasia region such as India, China, Armenia or Azerbaijan reported an SRB of above 108 (Guilmoto, 2005: 2). This number means that there are 108 boys born for every 100 girls while, according to Christopher Guilmoto (2005: 2), the normal SRB is within a range of 104-106.

The SRB in China is especially worrisome when you look into its numbers. By 1990, China had reached an SRB of 110 (Guilmoto, 2005: 2) and in 2005 it went up to 120 (Guilmoto, 2005: 3). We see how China's SRB is far from what is considered normal which can have negative consequences for the country and its citizens (Li, 2007: 7). It is important to notice that when it comes to analyzing the specific case of China, we see

how gender imbalance in the country has been deemed a direct consequence of the one-child policy by researchers (Zhang, 2017; Li, 2017). Still, we have to keep in mind that even though it is true that the policy had a great influence on the matter, it does not explain the whole story. In fact, it is much more complicated. Many other factors such as area of origin (meaning rural or urban) and social status are equally as important (Burgess and Zhuang, 2002). Despite this, it can be argued that in order to understand the issue of the gender imbalance, we have to first understand the one-child policy and how it came to be.

2.1. One-child policy

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the world had become obsessed with the issue of overpopulation. Many countries were worried about the increasing numbers that statistics were showing and groups like the Club of Rome, believed that population growth would destroy the environment. Because of that, they believed there was a need for drastic measures to control it (Greenleagh, 2005: 258). This worry for overpopulation also affected China who had been toying with the idea of implementing forms of population control since the 1950s. Yet they never did it because of Mao Zedong's idea that a large population is necessary for the revolution (Scharping, 200: 31). It is true, though, that Mao had expressed in some occasions a certain amount of worry for China's population growth (Scharping, 2003: 31-32), but usually his political mass campaigns would annihilate any possibility of implementing birth-control regulations (Scharping, 2003: 32).

Overtime, many party members started to get concerned about the issue (Scharping, 2003: 43). One of the most prominent voices during that period was Deng Xiaoping who repeatedly expressed his worries about China's growing population since he believed a high population growth was linked to poverty (Greenleagh, 2005: 258). It is no wonder, that when he became President of the People's Republic of China, he implemented one of the most infamous population control policies of all time.

The first step towards decreasing population was the "Longer, later, fewer" campaign which encouraged couples to marry later and have fewer children. This campaign was later followed by another one with "One is best, two at most" as the slogan (Greenleagh, 2005: 260). Even though those initiatives were successful in lowering the fertility rate -by 1979 it had reached the 2.7 mark (Abrahamson, 2016: 331)-, it was still

not enough and so the Party launched what academics call the most draconic form of population control: The one-child policy.

The one-child policy was kick started in 1979 but the Party Central Committee did not ratify it until 25th of September 1980. Before the ratification earlier that same year, the members of the Party had received a letter from the higher ranks asking them to take economic, legal and administrative measures to implement it (Zhang, 2017: 144). It is important to notice that the policy suffered many changes throughout the years mainly because of how difficult it was to implement in rural areas (Zhang, 2017: 144). In general, it was much easier to enforce it in cities because most of the families were, to some extent, dependent on the government. This allowed for direct repercussions in case of disobedience such as losing their job (Zhang, 2017: 144). In the countryside, however, that was not the case since most families were farmers and relied heavily on their children, especially on sons (Zhang, 2017: 144). Due to this, many rural families showed great resistance to the policy from the beginning. This prompted the government to relax the policy allowing couples to have a second child if they met certain requirements such as their first-born being a girl or having any sort of mental or physical impediment (Zhang, 2017: 145).

The one-child policy did not affect all of China in the same way. Aside from being harder to implement in rural areas, there was also an important gap depending on the region and its development. For example, regions considered to be more developed and, therefore, with an already lower fertility, were not much affected by the policy. One example would be Zhejiang. On the contrary, its neighboring province Jiangsu —which had much higher fertility rates— suffered more repercussions and a bigger social change (Zhang, 2017: 145). Another group for whom it had different consequences were minorities since they were allowed to have two and sometimes even three children (Zhang, 2017: 145).

Mostly, the policy was implemented through system of rewards -access to public education or housing- and penalties —fines or job loss—. In order to get access to these advantages, Chinese families had to ask for a childbearing certificate prior to get pregnant (Chang et al., 2006: 2). Still, just as what happened with the policy itself, the implementation of this system depended on the region or the status of the family in question (Chan et al., 2006: 4). For example, rural families tended to have less access to the incentives than urban ones and it was also harder for them to pay the fines if they had

more that the stipulated number of children (Zhang, 2017: 144). It is important to note that policy enforcement was not carried directly by Beijing. Instead, the central government issued a statement transferring the power to the local administrations. At the same time, in an effort to ratify the importance of the one-child policy, the Party started to give promotions to their governors according to who set the highest fines (Huang, 2017: 4). The transferring of power lead to a series of abuses against women and families such as forced abortions, sterilizations, withholding registrations for the new babies or menstrual monitoring (Whyte, 2014: 2).

However, why was the enforcement of the policy such an important matter? Aside from the worry about population growth, it is important to notice that the one-child policy was implemented almost in parallel to the economy reform. Researchers have stated that Deng Xiaoping was worried about population growth hindering the economic development of China. In his essay *Modifying China's One-child Policy*, Whyte (2014) states that "The post-Maoist leaders anxious to recover from the Cultural Revolution and with a focus in anything that could increase the growth rate of the economy per capita terms, were eager to find ways to restrict fertility" (2). The reason why increasing the economy per capita is so important for the leaders of the Party, is explained by Feng et al. (2012) in their essay *How Will History Judge China's One-child Policy*. In this paper, she says that the basis of the Communist Party's legitimacy is given by the success of the economic development plan which is measured in terms of GDP (188). She states that "there might be a relation between Deng Xiaoping's wish to increase the per capital income between 1980 and 2000 to $1000 and the goal of having a population total of 1.2 billion by 2020 and a population growth of 0%" (Feng et al., 2012: 199). The importance of the GDP as a legitimization method has persisted until today. In fact, the Communist Party's cadre performances evaluation system is highly relaying on the GDP per capita and the government revenue per capita on their region (Feng, 2012: 119). In other words, the Chinese government needed a method to control the population growth in order to meet their economic goal by the end of the century (Zhang, 2017: 144).

An idea that further adds into this idea is the concept of *Suzhi* introduced by Ann Anagnost (2004). According to her, the *Suzhi* can be somewhat translated into quality and was first introduced into Chinese society at the beginning of the socioeconomic reform. Many Chinese academics and politicians were worried that the low *Suzhi* in the Chinese society, had prevented the country from reaching modernity and, therefore, its full

potential (Anagnost, 2004: 190). Over time this concept has evolved to reference what academics call "persons of quality" (Anagnost, 2004: 190). This divides the Chinese society into two groups: people with a high *suzhi* -generally middle or upper class and from urban areas- and people with a low *suzhi* – linked mostly to rural people and migrant workers. The government's goal was that the general *suzhi* was high (Anagnost, 2004: 190). The evolution of this concept and the social division it implies will be apparent throughout this paper as we talk more about power structures and the consequences of the gender imbalance.

Even if according to the Party, the propose of establishing the one-child policy was accomplished (Feng et al., 2012: 120-121), it also brought along many unintended consequences. One of these consequences, and the main concern in this research project, is a skewed Sex Ratio at Birth which has led to a significant gender imbalance in China.

1.2. The causes for the gender imbalance

Gender imbalance has traditionally been measured according to the SRB, which indicates, as we have seen before, the ratio between the number of boys born to every 100 girls (Hesketh et al., 2011: 1374). In general, East Asia has long shown preference for boys reaching the ratio of 109 boys for every 100 girls in the mid-20th century (Guilmoto, 2005: 3). But even if the SRB was already higher than normal back then, it was mostly stable until the 1980s when it increased rapidly reaching 114 by the 2000s. This increase has been linked to China (Guilmoto, 2005: 2).

Gender imbalance "exerts an indirect effect on demographic issues such as population size, ageing, working-age population and marriage" (Li, 2007: 7) that reflects on future generations. As Shuzhou Li (2007) argues:

> The phenomenon of *missing girls* decreases the number of births, thereby accelerating China's ageing process, which inevitably has negative effects on economic growth, while exerting severe pressure on the country's unsound social-security systems. The total size of the working-age population will also be affected by the reduction of population size. Finally, the phenomenon of *missing girls* will lead to a shortage of marriageable females, thus bringing about a likely "marriage squeeze" in China (2007: 7).

This has worried many researches and has led them to try to find a reason for the gender imbalance. In general, they agree that it is a combination of three factors: son

preference, the progress of gender-selection technology such as ultrasounds and a decrease in fertility rates (Li et al., 2011: 1536).

Son preference is part of Confucius' philosophy. This school of thought has been considered part of Chinese culture since Emperor Wu introduced it during the Han dynasty. The Emperor thought it would prove useful to his reign and started to encourage his ministers to study it (Zhang, 2001: 3). From that moment on, Confucianism became "the mainstream philosophical thought in society and gradually developed into a heart value of Chinese culture" (Zhang, 2001: 3). Despite Confucianism's status ending at a political level after the 1911 revolution, "many of his teachings are still rooted in Chinese culture and other Confucian societies" (Wang, 2018: 22) which, in part, explains the prevalence of son preference to this day.

The main reason why Confucianism is thought to be the root of son preference is that his philosophy supports the patrilineal family structure. Confucius considers that it is only through male progeny that the family surname and properties can be passed from one generation to another (Zhang, 2001: 3). As a result, sons are the only ones allowed to "carry on family names, inherit family properties and host their parents' funeral ceremonies" (Li, 2007: 6). Is because of this, that it was considered the wife's obligation to have a son (Chan et al., 2002: 427). It was also seen as a proud moment since it solidified her status within her husband's family, while the failure of doing so was seen as one of the three unfilial acts (Zhang, 2001: 3).

Following the idea of patriliny but from more of an economical approach, is important to keep in mind that Asian countries, as do many others, have historically followed a patrilocal and patriarchal system. In was customary that once a woman got married, she was expected to move out of her family's household into her husband's or close to it (Guilmoto, 2005: 9). This fact is important because in China, there has been a lack of a well-functioning support system for the elderly. This puts all the pressure of taking care of the parents on the son (Wang, 2018: 17). Because daughters usually married out, it was implied that she "must leave her natal family and become a permanent part of a trans-generational household of the groom's family" (Wang, 2018: 18). This also meant that "parents can enjoy constant financial, emotional and other support from their sons, whereas married daughters are no supposed to contribute to their parents' expenses after marriage" (Guilmoto, 2005: 8). It is also important to notice that in some areas there is

still a “division of labor by gender making women economically dependent” (Shuzhuo Li, 2007: 6). Due to this dependency women are relegated to perform auxiliary tasks, mainly household chores (Li, 2007: 6), while man “have the filial duty of providing economic support” (Li, 2007: 6). All of this led to many rural families worrying that having only a daughter meant their economic security could not be guaranteed (Wang, 2018, 18). Lastly, we also have to keep in mind the more practical reasons. China used to be an agricultural country which means that farmer families though it was better to have a son since they could help on heavier duties (Chan et al., 2002: 427).

The second factor is a strategy that families use to have sons which is sex-selection (Li et al., 2011: 1536). Sex-selection through prenatal sex identification has always been practiced in China (Chen, 2005: 3). Traditionally, sex recognition was done through pulse diagnosis (Chen, 2005: 12) while more recently it has been made possible through ultrasound technology (Chen, 2005: 3).

During the 1980s, not long after the one-child policy came into effect, ultrasound technology became available throughout Asia. Initially, it was supposed to be for diagnosis proposes. Yet, many families with a strong son preference started seeing it as a chance to perform sex-selection (Hesketh et al., 2011: 1374). Ultrasound machines are not, in fact, the only test for sex identification available. There are others such as amniocentesis and chorionic villus sampling (Chen, 2005: 12). Still, it has been the most used since its introduction. For a long time, it was used as a form of monitoring both the unauthorized removal of contraception methods and pregnancies (Chen, 2005: 12). It did not take long for the Chinese authorities to realize that the SRB was rising in the country and link it to sex selection. Because of this, in 1986, the use of ultrasound machines to identify the fetus’ gender was forbidden (Qi and Mason, 2005: 7-8). Later on, and since the SRB kept rising despite the restrictions, in 2001 the Communist Party started enforcing a series of laws detailing the circumstances in which both fetal recognition and sex-selective aborting could be considered illegal and a criminal offence (Chen, 2005: 22). Punishment for failing to abide by the law involved heavy fines for the family and the revoking of the medical license for the practitioner (Chen, 2005: 14).

Despite all of this, prenatal sex identification and sex-selective abortions are still practiced to this day specially in higher order children, which means 2nd or 3rd pregnancies (Chen, 2005: 22). In fact, a typical pattern in many families indicates a somewhat normal SRB for the first child and abnormally high SBR for subsequent births (Qi and Mason,

2005: 2). One of the main reasons why this happens is how the one-child policy is made. Parents need a permit to get pregnant and so if they either abort the fetus, do not register it after the birth or give it up for adoption, they can use the current permit to try for a son (Chan et al., 2002: 429). Nevertheless, how do doctors and families avoid being caught?

Generally speaking, ultrasounds and abortions do not take place in the same facility which makes it hard for authorities to find a link between the two. Moreover, in cases where reporting is mandatory, practitioners are usually able to find an alternative reason to explain why it was performed (Ganatra, 2008: 92). We also have to keep in mind that gender identification is mostly made under bribery (Chen, 2005: 14). Thus, the gender is usually reveled through nonverbal gestures. Because of that, in many cases there is no way to prove a breach of the law (Ganatra, 2008: 92).

With all that in mind, we have to be very careful when talking about abortion and its context in China. Studies show that sex-selection is not the only motive behind getting abortions. In fact, only 20% of them are for sex-selection. Other reasons include the policy restriction and contraceptive failure. This is especially the case for higher order children where the SBR is more prominent (Chen, 2005: 15). At the same time, it is important to point out that unwanted abortions may be derived from the patriarchal system since wives might be facing family pressure or fear of abandonment if they fail to produce a son. This means that restricting or prohibiting abortions is problematic since it would leave many vulnerable women even more marginalized, increasing the risk of exploitation (Ganatra, 2008: 94). For this reason, is essential to discuss the root of the problem to try to find a solution (Ganatra, 2008: 95) instead of banning abortion altogether.

The last factor- and one could argue the catalyst of the issue- is a decrease in fertility (Li et al., 2011: 1536). As we have observed before, China experienced a drastic decrease in fertility during the population control era. Many researchers argue that because the decrease was, according to them, imposed by the government through the one-child policy, these families face a strong pressure to keep their families small. This is due to the policy being forced on them through monitoring, sterilization or penalties (Ganatra, 2008: 91). Because of this pressure, we can conclude that when parents are only allowed to have a limited number of offspring and they have a strong son preference, they become much more likely to gender select (Li et al.: 1539)

We can say then that according to what we have seen so far, the current gender imbalance is due to a combination of factors derived from the one-child policy that many researchers pin on Chinese tradition. As Wang (2018) argues in her essay *Missing Women*:

> Under the social conditions during the period of the policy, the strong son preference and the culture of ancestor worship strongly emboldened many Chinese people and their willingness and readiness to practice sex-selective abortions as the anticipated the benefits of having sons instead of daughters (24).

However, as I stated at the begging of the chapter, historical factors do not explain the whole story. In fact, to understand the issue with gender imbalance in China we have to be as aware of Chinese culture, as of other factors that also play into the family's decision to sex-select such as their economic background or place of origin. Burgess and Zhuang (2002) explain in their essay *Modernization and Son Preference* that there are different behaviors within Chinese families when it comes to gender selection according to their background - meaning place of origin and diversification of their household (19). To reach this conclusion, they observed families from different social and economic backgrounds in two provinces: Sichuan and Jiangsu. This was done in order to determine the difference in sex selection or female discrimination in terms of healthcare or food allocation. The results showed some very interesting facts.

When it comes to female discrimination, we see that the female mortality tends to be much higher in rural Sichuan in comparison to rural Jiangsu. In contrast, the SRB is higher in rural Jiangsu. At the same time, rural Jiangsu shows little gender bias when it comes to resource allocation, while that is not the case for rural Sichuan (Burgess and Zhuang, 2002: 13). This could mean that families from rural Jiangsu have more access to ultrasound machines or other methods of sex identification allowing them to gender select prior to the birth of the infant. This would not be the case for rural Sichuan since it presents a lower SRB, but the sex ratio increases during the first year of the baby. This implies less access to sex selection technology which prompts them to express their preference through health spending (Burgess and Zhuang, 2002: 14). At the same time, they observe a low SRB in both urban Sichuan and Jiangsu and no signs of gender discrimination when it comes to resources meaning that richer and more educated parents may be less gender biased or have fewer worries when it comes to economic factors (Burgess and Zhuang, 2002: 15-16). This fact is important because it contradicts the

notion that son preference is solely due to cultural factors (Burgess and Zhuang, 2002: 16).

With the study's results in mind, we see that "son preference varies across China, being more pronounced in poor, backward, rural areas" (Burgess and Zhuang, 2002: 16). Therefore, we can say that income growth and diversification can lead to son preference being eroded when it comes to education or health. In contrast, we see how biases show more prominently in poorer, rural households; specially those dependent on agriculture. We observe, then, how son preference is not only a cultural issue, but also, the consequence of economic factors and modernization (Burgess and Zhuang, 2002: 19).

Moreover, in her book *Choosing Daughters: Family Changes in Rural China*, Lihong Shi (2017) shows "an emerging pattern of rural couples' choosing voluntarily to have a singleton daughter" (6). Families who have decided to follow this new reproductive pattern can be found in seven different provinces: Shandong Province, Zhejiang Province, Jiangsu Province, Hubei Province, Liaoning Province and Heilongjiang Province (Shi, 2017: 7). This is not to say that gender preference is not a reality in China. In some regions this practice still persists (Shi, 2017: 6). But it exposes a different point of view and adds to the complexity of the chinese society which often gets overlooked.

The first reason for the emergence of this new pattern is a combination of a shift towards a market economy and "the retreat of the state from the social and political domains of village life allowed villagers to engage in economic and social activities of their choice" (Shi, 2017: 49). Nowadays, being able to be part of the new consumerist culture and enjoying free time has become goal for the younger generations (Shi, 2017: 50). At the same time, money has become the new indicative of one's status within the villages (Shi, 2017: 50) This means that having sons is no longer a marker for status and therefore, is not a necessity anymore (Shi, 2017: 145). Because "childrearing requires financial resources and time away from work and leisure" (Shi, 2017: 57), many couples decide to have only one child. Similarly, securing the child's best possible upbringing and future success has become a top priority for young couples (Shi, 2017: 65). Many parents consider achieving upward mobility as the way to ensure a comfortable life for their offspring. This success is believed to also allow for a better care of parents when they are old (Shi, 2017: 66). To attain that, parents consider that giving a good education to their children is extremely important (Shi, 2017: 75). In places with a high son preference,

parents would practice female infanticide or neglect to ensure that the resources were allocated to the male heir but that is not the case in this particular research. The couples in the study do not differentiate between boys and girls since they believe both genders are able to become successful and take care of their parents (Shi, 2017: 67). In fact, many couples consider girls more likely to help their parents when they are old while they consider boys a financial burden and not as filial.

There has been a decline in filial piety when it comes to sons and daughters-in-law. Because women have gained more agency in their marriage, and men want to have a harmonious relationship, sons often put their wife's wants above their parents. This has led to intergenerational conflicts (Shi, 2017: 93). At the same time, because daughters are no longer alienated from their families once they get married, filial piety has shifted in a way that has favored girls. Due to the decline of filial piety in men and the gender norms associated with women, parents believe daughters to be more considerate towards them than sons (Shi, 2017: 100). This means that couples have become more willing to embrace daughters since having a son no longer implies securing help when parents get old (Shi, 2017: 106). Simultaneously, sons have begun to be seen as financial burdens due to parents having to spend large amounts of money not only in their education, but also in their marriage as we will see later on (Shi, 2017: 108). This has led to couples avoiding having two children since it would be too much of a burden (Shi, 2017: 125). Interestingly though, it has also led to a fear of having sons, especially in young couples that already have a daughter (Shi, 2017: 125). Because gender is unpredictable, many of those couples fear that their second child will be a boy which will require much more financial support. Thus, many couples decide to apply for the one-child certificate and stay with only a daughter (Shi, 2017: 127).

3. CONSEQUENCES OF THE GENDER IMBALANCE

3.1. Consequences for Men

As it has been stated previously, China is currently being affected by a poignant gender imbalance, which means that there are more men than women in China. This becomes a problem once these men reach adulthood because, as Attané (2018) says in her article *Being a Single Man in Rural China,* a high gender imbalance means that the majority of single people in the country are men. Specially men from more secluded and poor areas (1). This is phenomenon is known as *marriage squeeze* (Kaur, 2013: 38). Because of that, the chance these men have of finding a wife are scarce since they have a low social economic status and a lack of education (Attané, 2018: 2). These single men are known as "bare branches".

3.1.1 Bare Branches

Jiang and Sánchez-Barricarte (2011) define bare branches as men of a certain age who are "involuntarily left unable to get married" (539). They do not have children or a wife which renders them "a bare branch without leaves" (Jiang and Sánchez-Barricarte, 2011: 539). We have to keep in mind, though, that when this issue is analyzed, is done mostly from a binary and heteronormative point of view. This implies that all bare branches are heterosexual and identify themselves as male (Eklund, 2013: 63). Bare branches are often depicted as depressive people with a low self-esteem due to not being able to fulfill the traditional expectations their parents place on them. In China, men are supposed to continue the bloodline as it was discussed above. They are also seen as anti-social since they do not have a place in society. Therefore, they are more prone to violence which can potentially become a threat to security (Hesketh et al., 2011: 1376).

Single men reach bare branch status once they turn 27-28 years old and have yet not gotten married or have any prospects of it (Jiang et al., 2013: 137). At this point, the nuclear family of those single men becomes known as a "bare branch family" and enters a stage very different of those families whose sons are married according to the norm. In the "bare branch family" situation, parents will have to provide economical and emotional support for that single son. In return, this son's life will be centered around his parent's health since they usually co-reside until the parents die (Jiang et al., 2013:135). Moreover, bare branch families differ from "traditional families" in that the latter ones are

demographically defined by events such as marriage or the birth of a child (Jiang et al., 2013: 136) while in the bare branch case, changes are defined by deaths (Jiang et al., 2013: 137).

One of the main issues that these single men face is the marriage culture. In China, marriage is "a symbol of adulthood and signifies the start of a family, and consequent parent-child relationships" (Jiang et al., 2013: 135). This means that non-married and childless people are seen as second-rate citizens since they are considered to have failed to "live up to one of the most important requirements of heteronormative hegemonic masculinity underlying patriarchy" (Zhang and Bélanger, 2018: 69). In this context, marriage is regarded as a necessary step to fully transition into adulthood. Because bare branches are not married, they are never seen as responsible adults. Moreover, in China and especially in rural areas, marriage has traditionally been a "gender production of patriarchal systems that empower men over women" (Zhang and Bélanger, 2018: 74). Thus, practices related to marriage are mostly dominated by men and, therefore, favors them. Ironically, this has created consequences that overtime have affected man themselves or, more specifically, bare branches. An example of this would be the bride price.

The bride price is defined by Jiang and Sánchez-Barricarte (2012) as the "amount of money or goods paid by the groom or his family to the parents of a woman upon the marriage of their daughter to the groom" (1). Because after the wedding the bride will leave her natal family and will move in with her husband's, many parents feel that having a daughter will be more beneficial to the man's family than their own. This is due to the daughter not being able to care for them after marriage. As a consequence, the parents of the bride will ask for a monetary compensation before giving their daughter away (Zhao, 2013: 87). The reason why it has become a negative effect, is because in many cases the groom's families are unable to pay it (Zhao, 2013: 87).

Because of the supply and demand situation derived from the gender imbalance, females have acquired, according to some academics, more agency when it comes to choosing who they want to marry. This has raised both their requirements and the bride price (Jiang and Sánchez-Barricarte, 2012: 2). In fact, in some villages it can be anywhere from 8 to 20 times the annual salary of an average family. This means that if the family in question has more than one son, the probabilities of all of them marrying becomes even

lower (Liu et al., 2014: 105). Mara Hvistendahl (2011) criticizes this assumption by arguing that "attracting a high bride price is not the same as gaining more autonomy" (169), since that value is only on a basic level and does not guarantee a good treatment from the husband's family post-marriage (Hvistendahl, 2011: 169).

Historically speaking, because women in China marry into their husband's family, marriage was seen as an opportunity to reach a higher social status (Liu et al. 2014: 109). This practice was known as *hypergamy* (Eklund, 2013: 64). The existence of this practice means that women from poorer areas rank economic status among the factors they tend to value most when it comes to picking a husband. Consequently, this has derived into women migrating to richer parts of the country to try to find more suitable matches (Jiang and Sánchez-Barricarte, 2012: 2). This has created what have come to be known as "bare branch villages" which are little rural and poverty-stricken towns, mostly located in the mountainous regions of China, inhabited almost exclusively by bare branches and their families (Liu et al, 2014: 105).

One of the reasons why women chose to migrate to find a husband is the *hukou* system, which is associated to a series of social rights and the concept of *suzhi*. Because of this relation, urban *hukou* are much more valued that rural ones (Zhang and Bélanger, 2018: 69). Exchanging a rural *hukou* for an urban one is extremely difficult, which means that the best option for a female who wants to reach a higher status is to marry a man from a better socioeconomic background (Kang et al., 2011: 18). Generally speaking, men want their wife's to be "domesticated, filial and easygoing" since they relate that to stability (Zhang and Bélanger, 2018: 75). This means that it is possible for a woman with low *suzhi* to marry a man with a higher status since, because of their lack of access to education, they tend to specialize in housework. They also tend to have little access to the labor market which further plays into the idea of a filial wife (Kang et al., 2011: 20) and reinforces gender norms. Despite this, we also have to keep in mind that in many cases, these migrant women will be much more vulnerable to deception, abuse and abduction as it will be discussed later on (Liu et al., 2015: 3).

It is also important not to interpret marriage migration as: high income men marry women from rural areas. This would go against the standard belief that a marriage can only work if you marry someone from a compatible family background. Families and individuals tend to think that coming from a similar socioeconomic status is an important factor when it comes to choosing a spouse (Ji, 2015: 11). What this means is that rural

women will most likely find a husband from a bigger city or town within their province (Liu et al. 2015: 2). Even though inter-province marriage has increased since the 1990s, it still is done mostly within a relatively similar socioeconomic background (Liu et al., 2015: 2). In an interview to the BBC Huang Yuanyuan (2013) expresses:

> There is an opinion that A-quality guys will find B-quality women, B-quality guys will find C-quality women, and C-quality guys will find D-quality women. The people left are A-quality women and D-quality men.

In this context, D-quality men would be bare branches while A-quality women are leftover women who will be discussed later on. This phenomenon is due to a combination of the already mentioned female hypergamy and male hypogamy. The term hypogamy refers to a man marrying a woman from a lower social status and it has historically been a common way for Chinese men to marry (Hahn and Elshult, 2016: 24). Since the current marriage market is asymmetrical, it tends to squeeze out these two categories living them at a disadvantage in comparison to the other categories, as well as with few options of being able to find a suitable partner.

That is not to say that there is no male migration from rural areas. Even though men are generally less able to migrate to find brides outside of their towns since their low socioeconomic status gives them a disadvantage (Zhang and Bélanger, 2018: 74), some of them manage to leave their towns. Some bare branches try to migrate to other towns with a more favorable SRB in order to find a wife. In many instances, these areas also present them with better economic opportunities (Ebenstein and Jennings, 2008:10).

3.2. Consequences for women

One important factor when talking about the consequences of the gender imbalance is how this issue have affected women. There are two arguments that many academics have given regarding the issue. The first one, supports the notion that in this gender imbalanced society, bare branches are the lowest rung on the ladder. The second argues that that gender imbalance has benefited women since their status in society has been improved because of their alleged upper hand when it comes to marriage (Abrahamson, 2016: 329). To many, those facts are not true (Jin and Liu, 2013; Abrahamson, 2016). Research shows that women are in fact the main victims of gender imbalance and the marriage squeeze in terms of violence both physical and structural (Jin and Liu, 2013: 89) since they experience it regardless of their social status.

3.2.1. Human trafficking

The Human Trafficking "industry" has been a worldwide issue for centuries with thousands of people trafficked yearly around the world and estimated gains of up to 7 billion dollars per year (Zhao, 2013: 84). The definition of Human Trafficking that most of the international community adheres to can be found in the *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children,* also known as the *Palermo Protocol* (UN-ACT, 2016: 3). According to the United Nations Treaty Collection, this Protocol was signed December 12, 2000 and made effective December 25, 2003 with 117 countries signing it. In this text, the definition goes as follows:

> The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation [with exploitation including] at a minimum the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs (OHCHR, 2000).

In the last two decades, human trafficking, most specifically women trafficking, has been on the rise in China. This issue has become a concern for the government who despite having made many efforts, have not manage to eradicate it (Zhao, 2013: 85).

Historically, women trafficking used to be a common practice in China up until the 1950s (Zhao, 2013: 84), During the times of Imperial China, the country was under a patriarchal rationale where it was the men's right to have control over women since they were regarded as men's property. First, they belonged to the father and then to the husband (Zhao, 2013: 86) never to herself. That notion presumably changed with the Communist Party rise to power. During Mao's era, the party became an advocate for women's emancipation and in 1950 the Marriage Law was issued. Under this law, "all feudal forms of marriage such as concubine, polygamy and marriage arranged by parents" (Zhao, 2013: 92) became abolished and women trafficking became rare. With Mao Zedong's death and China's economic development plan in motion, human trafficking was revived and spread at a fast rate (Zhao, 2013: 84). But how did that happen?

There are several factors we have to consider when we study how women trafficking became so prominent in China. First of all, we have to remember that during the 1970s, China put into motion a plan to develop its economy (Jiang, 2011: 84). That meant a turn towards a reality where economic development replaced class struggle (Zhou, 2013: 98) which brought as a consequence the resurgence of women trafficking.

On the one hand, from that moment on, getting rich became the top priority for a number of people and human trafficking happened to be a shortcut since it is a highly profitable business (Zhou, 2013: 89). In fact, it is regarded by the United Nations as the third most lucrative industry in the world (Winterdyk and Reichel, 2010: 5). On the other hand, with the economy rapidly developing and the increasing need for labor migration, many women from poorer areas started to look for jobs in larger and richer cities. Most of these girls were vulnerable to being deceived and lied to during their quest to a better living in the city which created a perfect setting for trafficking. Soon this migration routes became breeding ground for recruitment. (Jiang, 2011: 90). This is further explained when we take a look on the first trafficking routes. At the beginning, women used to be trafficked from economically backward provinces in China such as Sichuan, Hubei or Hunan into more economically developed ones such as Jiangsu, Hebei or Fujian (Jiang, 2011: 87).

Secondly, we have the issue of globalization. As China was opening up to the world and becoming a developed country, it started to spike the interest of neighboring countries and their poverty-stricken citizens. Similarly to what had happened within China, they started to look into ways to migrate in order to earn a better living thus creating new migration routes. Those new routes became recruiting spots for trafficking organizations who wanted to take advantage of their desire to find better job or marriage opportunities in China (Peerabeng et al., 2012: 124). Informal routes became the main recruiting spots since they are mostly unregistered (Robinson and Branchini, 2018: 4). This was, thus, the beginning of cross-border trafficking in China.

When it comes to cross-border trafficking with China, the countries most affected are those part of the Great Mekong Subregion (GMS). The countries who are considered to be part of this area are: Cambodia, Myanmar, Viet Nam, the Democratic People Republic of Lao and Thailand (Peerabeng et al., 2012: 124). Three of these countries share borders with China, specifically Yunnan and Guanxi Zhuang provinces who are

also considered part of the GMS (Peerabeng et al., 2012: 124) making this area prone to trafficking. The trafficking patterns in this area, as well as within China itself, are very diverse. Victims are of all genders and ages and are used for both forced marriage and forced labor (Peerabeng et al., 2012: 125). The specific cases we are going to analyze are the victims of trafficking who were sold as brides for forced marriage which is described by Robinson and Branchini (2018) as:

> Formal or informal union of two persons at least one of whom did not have the option of refusing the marriage without suffering penalty (or the menace of penalty) or exit the marriage without suffering penalty (or the menace of penalty). Penalties include physical, sexual, emotional, financial or legal consequences (1).

Forced marriage and bride trafficking have become tightly associated with the bare branch phenomenon. As we have seen previously, bare branches tend to have a poor socio-economic background which, paired with a skewed SRB, makes it difficult for them to find a bride. As a result, they resorted to buying them from less developed countries since it is cheaper that paying the bride price (UN-ACT, 2016: 12). This is particularly common in the poorer provinces as well as in places where the bride price is high (Qiu et. la, 2019: 39). In China, matchmaking has been a common practice to find a bride for more than 2000 years. Yet because of the gender imbalance, it has become more and more common for parents to rely on matchmakers to purchase a bride for their son (Qiu et. la, 2019: 39). These trafficked women have, I would argue, an even lower status that bare branches which would contradict the notion that bare branches are the lowest strata in China since they are able to exert their structural power over these women

Historically, women in China have been seen "as a resource or type of labor force for reproduction and production" (Zhao, 2013: 89). At the same time, marriage as we have seen before, has a high social connotation when it comes to status and continuing the established gender relations. This means that marriage is regarded as "a social issue greater in importance that many other personal issues" (Zhou, 2013: 89). These two facts explain why, in many cases, buying a wife is not considered a disgrace, but a man's "inherent right to do so" (Zhou, 2013: 90). It also explains why men are willing to pay others to "buy them wives from even poorer areas creating a huge buyer's market" (Jiang, 2011: 94).

Generally speaking, women who get trafficked as brides tend to share a series of characteristics. As we have seen, in many cases they are from poorer neighboring countries which means that they usually lack employment or educational opportunities. Moreover, they are payed low wedges at their jobs but are still expected to contribute to the family's economy (UN-ACT, 2016: 5). Because of this situation, and the belief that they will find better opportunities in China, they decide to migrate (Robinson and Branchini, 2018: 8). Is in this process that they are usually recruited.

The first contact is usually someone known to the victim. The recruiter will claim to have daughters living in China and earning more money than they would in their home country either through marriage or work. In many cases they will wear jewelry or be well-dressed to prove their higher socioeconomic status (UN-ACT, 2016: 20). They will also make a payment to the victim or her family before the departure to allegedly cover travel expenses (UN-ACT, 2016: 5), but will later be used to threaten the victim (UN-ACT, 2016: 20). The second recruiter will be in charge of arranging passports, visa and plane tickets. The passports will be given to them before departure and women will be told what to say at immigration. Usually they are told to say they are traveling since they are on a one moth tourist visa. They will travel to China alone, where they will meet with another broker that will take them to their final destination. Once there, they will stay at the broker's house waiting to be introduced to various Chinese men until they are selected as wives (UN-ACT, 2016: 6).

Once they reach their destination, they realize they have been lied to. If they were told they were going to work, they realize they have been brought to get married. In case of marriage migration, they realize they will not have the power to choose their husband or refuse to marry as they were told initially. Moreover, the potential husbands are usually poor, old and sometimes disabled man (UN-ACT, 2016: 24) while they were told they would marry a man with a high social status. To persuade them into agreeing, they are often told they will have to marry a Chinese man in order to change their one moth visa to a long term one so they can avoid deportation or find a job (UN-ACT, 2016: 7). During this time, the passport is in the broker's possession and the women are deprived from outside communication (UN-ACT, 2016: 7). If they refuse to get married, they will be threatened financially, sexually or psychologically until they comply (UN-ACT, 2016: 7).

Once they agree to get married, under Chinese law they have to give consent. But this is almost never the case since they are often not provided with a translator. Because

they do not understand Chinese, they cannot explain what it is happening. In case they are provided one, it is quite common for the translator to be someone close to the broker which leaves the women unable to say anything. Because of these issues, they end up having no choice but to agree (UN-ACT, 2016: 24). As soon as they get married, the husband will confiscate her passport so she cannot escape and she will face abuse (Zhou, 2013: 90). Because of this mistreatment, 30% of them will commit suicide (Zhou, 2013: 91) Once she gets pregnant, her living conditions will improve and she will have more freedom (Robinson and Branchini, 2018: 9). It is at this point were sometimes they have the opportunity to escape (UN-ACT, 2016: 26).

The escape is not easy. Many times, it is unsuccessful because neighbors and local police will discover them and return them to their husbands. If they manage to get to another town or city and found by the police, they will be put in contact with their home country's embassy who will support them through their repatriation process (UN-ACT, 2016: 8). Other times, they will manage to get to the embassy or consulate by themselves embarking on a difficult journey. Once they reach the embassy, they will be helped and repatriated (UN-ACT, 2016: 8). At this point is important to keep two things in mind. The first one is that, in many cases the neighbors and local authorities have pacts to surveille the victims and prevent their escape (Jiang, 2011: 101). The neighbor's involvement is also notorious when it comes to blocking rescue missions. Sometimes the police try to rescue victims, but they are met with resistance from the villagers who sympathize with the bare branch. It is not unusual that they even protect the trafficker from being caught (Zhou, 2013: 90). Similarly, many villages' leaders regard importing brides as a solution to the bare branch problem (Zhou, 2013: 90). The second thing is that in many cases, the embassies use their status to ask for more money for travel expenses than it is actually needed (UN-ACT, 2016: 19). Meaning they take advantage of these women and their families.

Once they return home, these women will be interviewed by the anti-human trafficking police and will receive money and support from an NGO. They will also be offered low-skill jobs or vocational training (UN-ACT, 2016: 8). Many women are scared to return home because of the stigma they might face (Zhou, 2013: 91). In fact, many women express worry about how their family and town will react to their return. The percentage grows if the women has experienced sexual assault (Zimmerman et al., 2014: 58). Studies show that most women tend to suffer from anxiety and depression post-

trafficking (Zimmerman et al., 2014: 53). Moreover, only 50% of them decide against filing against their broker since they fear retaliation against themselves or their families (Zimmerman et al., 2014: 58).

It is worth mentioning that there is one case that follows a different pattern. North Korean women who are trafficked in China face different issues. First of all, even though sometimes they are deceived by marriage brokers in their home country (Davis, 2006: 133), most North Korean victims are usually abducted in China since they fled the country by themselves. They are found at places with a high affluence of immigrants such as river crossings or railroad stations by people who will sell them. Other times, victims will be deceived by trafficking networks. In this case, networks tend to be formed by Korean-Chinese men who speak Korean. The fact that they can speak the victim's language helps when it comes to deceiving them (Davis, 2006: 134). It is not unusual, though, that their own families are the ones selling them to sustain themselves. Those families are usually under the belief that the daughter will go to China to work and provide for the family (Davis, 2006: 134) and do not know what will happen in reality.

Another point were North Korean women differ vastly from South East Asian, is in their status in China. As we have seen, if victims manage to escape, they are helped by the authorities and the embassies. That is not the case for North Korean women. In fact, they are unable to report what it is happening to them because they are considered illegal immigrants even if they have been victims of traffic (Davis, 2006: 134). Because of the repatriation agreement signed between North Korea and China in 1986, when North Korean women are arrested by Chinese authorities, they are not treated as victims but as criminals. Then they are deported to North Korea where they will be sent to labor camp for up to 26 months to do forced labor. If they are pregnant, they will be forced to abort since the state does not want responsibility over a child with foreigner blood. Once they are out of the labor camp and go back to their village, they will be treated as outcasts. If they are suspects of conspiracy, they might be executed for being enemies of the state (Davis, 2006: 135). This leave North Korean women in an even more vulnerable situation.

3.2.2. Leftover women

While women trafficking is the most obvious instance of how the gender imbalance and structural violence have affected women in China, one probably less obvious consequence has been leftover women. The term was originally coined by the

All-China Women's Federation in 2007 who defined them as urban women who were still single at the age of 25 years old (Hahn and Elshult, 2016: 20). Generally regarded as highly educated, career women living in major Chinese cities, leftover women or *sheng nü* have been framed by the public discourse and media as selfish or overly picky when it comes to finding a husband (Ji, 2015: 1). This implies that those women are to be blamed and penalized for their own success and independence (To, 2013: 2). It is important to note that, in general, the public opinion regards the generation born after the economic reform as self-centered and irresponsible since most of them have prioritized education over marriage which resulted in a notable decline of marriages (Gaetano, 2010: 1). Still, women have been much more stigmatized that men (Gaetano, 2010: 9).

Interestingly, research has shown that marriage is still nearly universal in China as a whole. Generally, when a country increases industrialization and access to education, marriage formation declines because this new structure allows women to study and enter the workforce. But this is not the case for China (Ji, 2015: 3). When compared to other Asian countries, we see that China's singletons constitute only a 2% of the population (Jones, 2007: 466). This means that rather than forgoing marriage, women are delaying it (Ji, 2015: 3). Then, why put so much pressure on them?

There are three main factors that contribute to this issue. Firstly, there is the importance of marriage in Chinese culture. As we have mentioned before, heterosexual marriage is still central to "gender socialization and identity making" (Gaetano, 2010: 2) and it is regarded as a "symbol of adulthood" (Jiang et. al, 2013: 135). For women, though, it has also been linked historically to their identity and status since a women's position in society used to derive from the family they were married into (Gaetano, 2010: 2). Moreover, marriage is still the only way to form a family legally since it is the only way to be issued permission to have a baby (Ji and Yeung, 2014: 1667).

Marriage and family formation are also seen as a "building block for the modern-nation state" (Gaetano, 2010: 2) since it symbolizes a harmonious and stable society (Fincher, 2014: 23). This is contraposed to singlehood, which is seen as a source of uncertainty and worry (Gaetano, 2010: 2). Single males are perceived as a thread to social stability because they are regarded as more prone to violence (Hesketh et al., 2011: 1376). For this reason, according to Fincher (2014), it can be argued that women are expected to contribute to social harmony by marrying men to tame them (23). The leftover women

campaign, then, becomes a "campaign to promote marriage for social stability" (Fincher, 2014: 24).

Another factor that contributes to the pressure women face are gender roles. Despite Mao Zedong and the Communist Party's best efforts to attain gender equality, the reality is that Confucianism and its gender roles have experienced a resurrection since the economic development (Ji, 2015: 2). This was especially accentuated during the "women return home movement" which took place during the reorganization of the economy in the 1980s. This movement resulted in a high rate of female unemployment in an attempt to make more room for men in a time were the unemployment rate was rising (Hahn and Elshult, 2016: 11). Confucianism promotes a patriarchal society were "women are valued for their role as wives and mothers" (Ji, 2015:2) and relegates them to the private sphere while making man the *breadwinner* and, therefore, the ones who should be on the public sphere (Ji, 2015: 3).

The last factor is the *suzhi*. Shortly after the article that first introduced the term "leftover women", the government announced the goal to raise the population's *suzhi* to "cultivate quality citizens" (Fincher, 2014: 29). Highly educated women are regarded as having a high *suzhi* which means that it would be in the government's interest for these women to reproduce since high quality women would raise high quality children (Fincher, 2014: 30).

Now that the concept of leftover women and the argued causes behind it have been introduced, we can discuss the relation between this group and gender imbalance. It is interesting to see that when one researches the gender imbalance and its consequences, there is one argument that comes up often. According to many academics, because there are much more man than women, the latter should have the upper hand when it comes to marriage and selecting a partner. In a more academic way, we would say that they have more dyadic power (Hahn and Eshult, 2016: 2). Still this is not entirely the case. In fact, 32% of Chinese women express difficulty in finding a partner (Hahn, and Eshult, 2016: 2). Why is this happening? The answer is gender norms and structural power.

First of all, we have to keep in mind that, the Chinese society operates under a patriarchal philosophy. This, according to Hahn and Elshult (2016), is related to the gender imbalance and its marriage squeeze paradox (22). Instead of giving agency to women, gender imbalance has created and unequal marriage market where two groups of

people are squeezed out. One of those groups are A-quality women or leftover women (Hahn and Elshult, 2016: 24). They are stigmatized by society for wishing to take a more modern outlook which shows us that women are still restricted by structural power.

In a patriarchal society, men have the possibility to "limit and alter women's use of their dyadic power" (Hahn and Elshult, 2016: 22). They do that by controlling women through patriarchal norms that accentuate gender roles (Hahn and Elshult, 2016: 22). This is seen quite a few times while reading research papers, especially qualitative ones. There, we can see that men and the resurgence of long-established values are the key players when it comes to the issues and constrains women in those research face. For example, in many cases women express that their suitor rejected them because of their accomplishments and high economic status. This plays into the concept that man should be the *breadwinner* or the 'superior one' on the relationship. Likewise, some were told by man that they were not suitable partners because they could not be controlled due to their status (Ji, 2015: 13) This shows that men judge women through conservative gender norms (Ji, 2015: 12) resulting in leftover women being passed over in favor of less educated ones (To, 2013:10).

Research also shows that in many instances, women express being too old and, therefore too unattractive to men (Gaetano, 2010:7). This means that women are held to a "double standard of aging" (Ji and Yeung, 2014: 1666). While men are considered at their prime between the ages of 30 and 40 years old, their female contra parts have a much shorter window of time since their prime is considered to be between the ages of 25 and 28. Once they turn 30 years old, their desirability will start to decline rapidly (Gaetano, 2010: 5). This relates to the ideal of marriage in China. This ideal is based on the concept of "knowledgeable husband and beautiful wife" (Ji, 2015: 10). Because of this idea, men prioritize women's external appearance -which is highly linked to their age- rendering 30-year-old women as unlikely to meet the criteria (Gaetano, 2010: 5).

Another key factor when it comes to women being held back from finding a suitable partner comes from their families and their conservative notions (To, 2013: 10). One example is *hypogamy*. Contrary to popular beliefs, women are not "too picky" when it comes to selecting a partner. In fact, they have mostly flexible attitudes towards it (Ji, 2015: 10). Some women express not being opposed to dating or even marrying a man of lower economic status. But in this scenario, they express two worries. The first one being the male partner having issues with the women's independence and higher position (Ji,

2015: 10) which would align with the issues already discussed. The second one is their parent's opposition. In general, parents want them to marry a Chinese partner of higher status (To, 2013: 14) or, at least, with common background since it is considered important that the families come from similar socioeconomic status and have similar values. This idea originated at a time were marriages were mostly arranged and was later considered to be outdated (Ji, 2015: 11). Still, nowadays it has experienced a resurgence and parents tend to make sure it is upheld which implies a level of familism (Ji, 2015: 12). This issue is also encountered when women try to find a partner from a western country since parents, again, want them to marry a Chinese man from a similar background (Ji, 2015: 12).

The fact that these women are so often withheld by a conservative patriarchal society, has led them to adopt different strategies. On the one hand, we have women who due to not accepting the patriarchal society they live in, decide to stay unmarried (To, 2015: 17). Those women could be considered part of the 2% of the Chinese population who remain single. On the other hand, and most prominently, we have women who do wish to pursue marriage but find themselves restricted by gender norms. These women try to find different solutions to reach that goal such as trying to find a foreign partner, practice hypogamy (To, 2015: 17) or renegotiate their situation (Ji, 2015: 14). This last strategy is based on the woman accepting the gender norms inside their household "as long as they do not jeopardize their financial independence in the public sphere" (Ji, 2015: 14). It is important not to read this as settling or complying. What they are doing is trying to find a way to have some agency within the context they are forced into (Ji, 2015: 15).

Considering this discussion, we can say that women have difficulties finding a partner despite the current SRB in China because while they have a more egalitarian point of view (Hahn and Elshult, 2016: 25), men still hold on to conservative values and gender norms. This allows them to overthrow women dyadic power (Hahn and Elshult, 2016: 52). As Gavin W. Jones (2007) states, the issue is "the shortage of men who share their values and expectations" (465). It can be said that the resurging of gender norms, is due to wanting to maintain a "social hierarchy, where each individual is given a role in society and shall act accordingly" (Hahn and Elshult, 2016: 42).

3. POLICIES AND MEASURES

3.1. The two-child policy

Practically since its creation, the one-child policy has been extremely controversial. In fact, demographers and critics repeatedly asked for its abolition (Whyte, 2014: 3) and warned the government of its negative effects which include a high SRB and a decline on working age population among others (Zeng and Hesketh, 2016: 4). Still, the government was reticent to change the policy (Whyte, 2014: 3). Finally, the government started to soften the policy over the last decade (Hesketh et. al, 2015: 2620), In 2007, parents from all provinces but Henan -which had to wait until 2011- were allowed to have two children if both parents did not have siblings. Later on, in 2013, it was announced that couples where only one parent had siblings were also allowed to have two children (Zeng and Hesketh, 2016: 4). Finally, in October of 2015 the government announced the lift of the one-child policy which was to be substituted by a universal two-child policy (Hesketh et al., 2015: 2619).

It is important to keep in mind that the one-child policy was never supposed to be permanent in the first place. This means that at some point the policy had to be soften and eventually abolished (Zeng and Hesketh, 2016: 4). But why was the government so reticent? Aside from being a policy enacted by Deng Xiaoping and therefore being considered practically untouchable (Abrahamson, 2016: 327), the government feared a possible "baby boom" (Whyte, 2014: 3). This fear prompted the Party to slowly soften the policy instead of lifting it at once (Hesketh et al., 2015: 2620). Over time, though, the fear was replaced with worry over the aging of the population and the high SRB which prompted the government to fully relax the policy in 2013 and lift it two years later. This was done in order to be able to balance the population growth in the long term (Attané, 2016: 2). This aim was further reinforced in 2016 when the administration decided to revise the law on population and birth control, abandoning the ideas on late marriage and mandatory contraception (Attané, 2016: 3). Still, and despite the government's projections, the easing of the policy did not translate into a higher fertility rate. From the 2 million births the National Health and Family Planning Commission had projected, only 8.000 can be attributed to the two-child policy (Attané, 2016: 3).

In cities such as Shanghai were the population's age is the most advanced, the local governments tried to incentivize a higher fertility rate to no avail (Attané, 2016: 3).

It has been argued that with a higher cost of living and education, people's views on childbearing have changed. Nowadays, families might have changed their preference from quantity to quality (Wang and Yu, 2018: 47). This implies that the new policy will not ensure a sufficient rise of the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) to contrast the aging and workforce problem (Attané, 2015: 4). Still, some researchers argue that the two-child policy will have a positive impact on the population and the issues it faces, albeit slower than what the administration initially projected.

Zeng and Hesketh (2016) argue that an experimental program carried out in four rural areas of four different provinces, allowed some couples to have two children since the mid-1980s. Those areas showed a significantly lower SRB than the rural areas operating under the 1.5 child policy (6). This may be attributed to the fact that the 1.5 child policy operates under the condition that the first child is a girl or is mentally or physically impaired, while the two-child policy does not. According to Zeng and Hesketh (2016), the two-child policy has better results because it avoids unintended giving the idea to families that men are more valuable that women (6). Those findings lead them to believe that the two-child policy will have a positive impact in balancing the SRB in the long term (Zeng and Hesketh, 2016: 7). Other arguments favoring the new policy suggest that because second children will be authorized and recognized, their status will improve. This will, consequentially, encourage families to have a second child eventually. Before the one-child policy abolition, unauthorized second children were not recognized and therefore were not granted a *hukou.* This meant that those children had no access to education or healthcare. But this is not the case anymore (Li et. al. 2019: 5). Likewise, it has also been suggested that another positive effect will be a lower rate of abandoned girl babies in orphanages as well as a drop of non-listed girls (Zeng and Hesketh, 2016: 7). It is also argued that because there will be no penalties for having a second child, there will be less sex-selective abortions (Zeng and Hesketh, 2016: 7).

3.2. Care for Girls campaign

The Care for Girls campaign was a program established in 1999 with the intend to better the perception Chinese families had of girls as well as promoting gender equality (Li et al. 2013: 5). The government intended to boost the value of girls and emphasize the squeezed SRB (Hesketh et al., 2011: 1376), so that sex determination would be abolished (Hvistendahl, 2011: 226). This was done after the cracking down of non-medical ultrasounds was rendered unsuccessful (Hvistendahl, 2011: 226).

The program was developed by the National Population and Family Planning (NPFP) with the support of UNICEF as well as the Ford Foundation, and had three different stages (Li, 2007:9). The first stage was conducted in the city of Chaohu, in Anhui province, between 2000 and 2003 (Li, 2007: 9). During this stage, the program aimed to "establish a favorable environment for girls in Chaohu through direct and indirect intervention in reproductive-health training and social development activities" (Li, 2007: 9). This was done through punishing illegal sex identification and sex selection -known as the "two illegalities"-, providing family planning and reproductive health services, carrying out different seminars and training programs -some of them were geared towards mothers-in-law-, helping women to participate in socio-economic activities and popularizing uxorilocal marriages among others (Li, 2007: 9). During this time, the SRB in Chaohu City dropped from 125 in 1999 to 114 in 2002 (Hvistendahl, 2011: 227). Those positive results gave way to the expansion of the program or the start of stage two (Hvistendahl, 2011: 227).

The second stage started in 2003 and extended the program to 24 counties. The counties selected were of 24 different provinces with extremely high SRB (Li et al., 2013: 5). During this stage, the program focused on three main areas: controlling the "two illegalities", rewarding families and advocating for gender equality (Li et al., 2013: 5). The rewards were not previously established by the NFPF, allowing each county to practice it according to their economic capacity (Li, 2007: 9). The SRB of those provinces also decreased over time, which allowed the program to be introduced nationwide (Hvistendahl, 2011: 227).

The third stage was initiated in 2006 and aimed to bring the program to the entire country (Li, 2007: 10). Moreover in 2007, the Care for Girls campaign became a policy which specifically addressed the gender imbalance in China. The government crafted a 15 year-long plan divided into quinquennium plans with their respective goals (Li et al., 2013: 6). This involved a series of workshops across all provinces and an increase on national advocacy. The aim when it came to national advocacy, was changing the son preference by pushing information related to laws on reproductive health and other policies (Li, 2007: 10). This time, though, the results were not as positive (Hvistendahl, 2011: 227). According to Hvistendahl (2011) this is because the program fails to fully address the problem (228).

Aside from the previously discussed problem with restricting or prohibiting all forms of abortion (Ganatra, 2008: 99), Eklund (2011) criticizes that the Care for Girls campaign puts the focus of problem on son preference (126) and mothers-in-law (133). Although there might be some truth to it, reducing the problem to these factors is oversimplifying it (Eklund, 2011: 133). On the one hand, son preference has been reduced to feudalism and ruralism (Eklund, 2011: 126), while not wanting a son has turned into a synonym of modernism. This stigmatizes families who genuinely want a son (Eklund, 2011: 133) and ignores the socioeconomic realities already discussed when talking about the son preference. On the other hand, passing all the blame onto mothers-in-law is not entirely fair since there are cases were the mother herself is the one who wants a son (Eklund, 2011: 133). Moreover, Ganatra (2008) argues that when talking about the SRB, there is a tendency to show bare branches as a social problem, commodify women and ignore the actual issues which are unequal gender relations and a patriarchal structure (96) which becomes counterproductive if the intent of the campaign is to raise the value of girls and achieve gender equality.

5.CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis we have seen how demographers tend to see the one-child policy as the catalyst of the gender imbalance issue in China. The policy was introduced as a way to control population growth, but it brought some unintended consequences like the gender imbalance. This phenomenon is calculated according to the Sex Ratio at Birth or SRB and it is often liked to three main factors: son preference, sex-selection and fertility rate.

Son preference in China is usually linked to Confucianism which is based on a patriarchal and patrilineal structure. This means that sons are valued over girls since they are the only ones allowed to carry the family name and perform the rituals to honor the ancestors. Yet, this reading of the situation tends to ignore other factors that are as equally important when it comes to explaining the son preference such as the family's socioeconomic background. The fact that there is such a small quantity of research on how the socioeconomic reality of families influences their decision, is a good example of one of my main critiques to many of the articles which is their tendency towards oversimplification. Similarly, there is a certain tendency to homogenize China and perpetuate the division between rural and urban China. This leads to ignoring how some rural villages have effectively advanced towards a more gender balanced society leaving behind son preference as shown by Lihong Shi. I believe there is a need to acknowledge this shift and studying it more in depth since it shows the complexity and the heterogeneity of Chinese societies which are often overlooked.

In many instances, academics have tended to make gender imbalance a local issue rather that a global one. This means that sometimes, it is interpreted according to the values of the country in question instead of analyzing the commonalities between all countries affected. In China's case it tends to be related to the one-child policy and Confucianism. This argument, I would venture to say, tends to be somewhat culturalist. In fact, other countries have a low fertility rate and a high SRB but do not have the one-child policy. Similarly, the existence of a son preference in Asia as a whole is often pointed as one of the main issues for the high SBR. This reading tends to forget that society's ideas and values are constantly evolving as it has been shown in this thesis. We have seen how there are many parents who are deciding to have singleton daughters and placing the same value and expectations on them than on boys. At the same time, we have to remember that patriarchy is a global issue. Many, if not most countries, have systems

that undervalue girls to different degrees in favor of boys since gender inequality and patriarchal values are deeply rooted into societies as a whole. Moreover, I believe that focusing too much on the philosophical root of the issue rather that analyzing the socioeconomic factors that intervene, makes it harder to find a solution that will work at a larger scale.

When it comes to sex-selection, it has already been established in this thesis that banning sex-selective abortion is extremely dangerous. For the most part they are only a small percentage of abortions and not always voluntary. Moreover, it leaves potentially vulnerable women, even more unprotected. Still, I would go even further. Often sex-selective abortions have been used as a means to ban abortions altogether (Hvistendahl, 2011). Slowly restricting women's rights in the name of a social problem is extremely dangerous. One the one hand, it makes it more difficult for society to stop it if the administration goes too far. On the other hand, it puts women at risk. Abortions do not stop because they are illegalized. In fact, it usually has the opposite effect. Women still abort but they do it in extremely unsafe conditions which puts them at a greater and unnecessary risk.

The gender imbalance affects both men and women in different capacities. In the men's case, it is reflected through the "bare branches". These bare branches are often victimized as the lowest ranking citizens in Chinese society. I would argue, though, that it is not the case. Bare branches are able to exert structural power towards an even more vulnerable group: trafficked women. In many instances poorer men who are unable to find a bride through classic channels, resort to buying brides through human trafficking networks. This is because in many instances, buying a bride is cheaper than paying the bride price. These women tend to be either Chinese women who have been abducted when they were trying to migrate to richer Chinese areas, or women from poorer neighboring countries who see China as a place of economic opportunity.

Another group of women who are also affected by the gender imbalance are "leftover women". These group are highly educated urban women with a good socioeconomic status who are 25-year-old or more and still single. They are highly stigmatized by society and media who regards them as too experienced, selfish or too picky.

All in all, I would argue that the main commonality between bare branches, leftover women and trafficked women, is the patriarchal system they are subjected to. This system is mainly reflected on the institution of marriage which leads to all the aforementioned issues. In China, marriage is nearly universal and still considered as a rite of passage into adulthood. At the same time, it is also considered the base for a harmonious society. This puts too much pressure on those who are unable to get married or simply do not want to. In a situation where single people are stigmatized and cast aside, those who are able to exert any sort of structural power -namely men- find ways to do so by buying brides from trafficking networks. Similarly, I would argue that the influence of the patriarchal system in the marriage market also needs to be revisited when it comes to the conventions that have derived from it and have become unnecessary nowadays such as the bride price. The existence of those practices only manages to aggravate the problem. It is worth to notice that this is only the case for low quality men which also hint to a class issue. Still, they find ways to use patriarchal conventions to find a solution to their problem. High *suzhi* men, on the other hand, do not face the same economic issues as poorer men and will never be as looked down upon morally as their female counterparts with whom they share social status. Seeing this, is hard not to notice the gender and economic inequality connotation of the issue. In general, this patriarchal structure and the way it exerts its power over society, tends to penalize women and victimize men.

Leftover women are victims of this patriarchal structure because they are coaxed into complying with the norm by the media and society. Despite there not being much research done on why the term leftover women was pushed by the media in the first place, one could argue that the gender imbalance has a lot to do with this. Still, more research should be done in order to make a statement. It could be said that in a world were women are scarce, it is in the government's interest for women with the highest socioeconomic status to reproduce. That is especially true in a society that places so much importance in the quality of the population. Because they have a high *suzhi*, is almost as if their responsibility was to contribute to society by producing high quality off-spring which is one more example of how the patriarchy seeks influencing women's decisions for their own benefit ignoring women's needs and wants. The fact that men can use their structural power to deprive women from their dyadic power and coax them into complying is another example of how infiltrated patriarchal values are into the institution of marriage.

The Communist Party has responded to the high SBR issue mainly through two policies. Firstly, there is the universal two-child policy which replaced the one-child policy in 2015. Secondly, there is the Care for Girls campaign which aims to raise awareness of the SRB issue and improve the status of women within the Chinese society.

It can be argued that both policies have either failed or are expected to do so. One the one hand, I would agree with the notion that the two-child policy will not be enough to solve the issues. In fact, I do not believe that applying any sort of restrictive policy is going to have any effect. Considering the lack of response to the policy from the families, it could be argued that it is in the government best interest to abolish any kind of policy on reproduction control. I would also argue that doing so would not provoke a "baby boom" as the government fears if we look at the global as well as the local tendency towards having smaller families. On the other hand, if the government is interested in urban families having more children, they should give them more incentives such as economic help or the implementation of a policy that favors family reconciliation. It could even be argued, that it would be beneficial even when talking about women who delay marriage since family reconciliation is often cited as one of the reasons women chose to do so.

Regarding the Care for Girls campaign, I agree with the notion that it tends to ignore the socioeconomic realities that some families face when it comes to the son preference issue. At the same time, it also ignores the shift some rural areas are already making by stigmatizing said areas as backwards and traditionalist when that is not always the case. This shows that the matter is across the board oversimplified thus rendering the campaigns ineffective since they fail to recognize the important issue which is gender inequality. As Ganatra (2008) says, this sort of campaigns only helps to further stigmatize single men as dangerous to society and women as commodities while ignoring the problem with the patriarchal system and the prevalence of gender norms.

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