

An “army of bachelors”? China’s Male Population as a World Threat

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Abstract: *The recent formation of the field of security demographics has drawn attention to the importance of population as a security issue. For example, Hudson and den Boer argue that the populations of Asia’s largest countries are a threat not because of size but because of an unusual composition – excess males. Their argument is based on the observation that, after thirty years of population limitation policies, the Chinese population has a distinct gender bias. There are millions more males than females, creating what has been dubbed a ‘bachelor army.’ Hudson and den Boer posit that the problems caused by this ‘bachelor army’ may lead to war. This paper argues that fear about China’s population is not new but has shaped the way China has been portrayed since the foundation of the PRC. The large size of the Chinese population was originally seen as a weakness likely to bring down the government. However during the 1950s and 60s the industrious and organized nature of the Chinese population earned the Chinese people the moniker ‘blue ants.’ It seems more than coincidental that the development of recent fears about China’s population coincides with the emergence of China as a major economic power. After analyzing the development of the gender ratio imbalance, this paper concludes that the re-surfacing of fear about China’s male population continues a tradition of Orientalist stereotypes.*

Keywords: *China, Population, Marriage, Public Policy*

1. Population in China

In 2020 it may seem to China that it would be worth it to have a very bloody battle in which a lot of their young men could die in some glorious cause.

Andrea Hudson, co-author of *Bare Branches*, 2006.

There is one universally known and inescapable fact about China: it is the country with the largest population in the world. With over 1.3 billion people, China is a population behemoth. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, this

fact has been frequently repeated in a multitude of newspaper articles, books and commentaries on China. The size of the population is one of the framing 'truths' of China; an unavoidable statistic which can be imagined simultaneously as an opportunity and a threat. China can be a nation of a billion producers of *both* cheap goods *and* environmental pollution. It can also be framed as a nation of a billion consumers of imported products *and* also natural resources. The implications of the size of China's population are huge – and not only for China. Any discussion of Chinese population can most fruitfully begin with an exploration of the broader issue of how population in China itself has been constructed and understood both within China and in the west.

The contradictory nature of China's population has been addressed within China. The dualistic nature of China's size has been noted by the current Chinese government as apparent in recent changes of discourse regarding China's development. President Hu Jintao has shifted discussion from the slogan popular at the start of his presidency concerning China's 'peaceful rise' to a nationwide campaign for 'harmony' in society. 'Harmonious China' is an imaginary place where the internal contradictions amongst the people to use earlier, Maoist, terminology) have been smoothed out. As China aims to take its place as a responsible world community member, the proffering of a 'harmonious China' aims to offer less threat to the world's hegemonic powers than the vision of a rising China.

The prospect of 'harmonious China', however, appears inadequate for soothing world fears about China's increasing economic and military power. A flurry of recent literature demonstrates that China is still perceived as a threat, thus building on a long history of fear about China (communist takeover, 'yellow peril'). China is judged by more than how 'population' is constructed as an object of government regulation, intervention, and control. As this article demonstrates, fear of both the size and the composition of China's population is central to the notion of China as threat, both economically but also militarily.

From the 1990s onwards a plethora of 'security experts' and political pundits revisited the Cold War notion of China as a military threat. This time it was China's

dramatic economic development and the resumption of business as usual (after the Tian’anmen massacre of 1989) that sparked off concern. For the first time, China was perceived as an *economic* threat. China has since been described variously as the awakening dragon, a growing power, a potential super-power, and so on. (Yee and Storey, 2002: 8). A huge scare-mongering publishing industry has sprung up. Many of these books argue that China is targeting America directly, as well as developing into a military threat. Some examples are *The Coming Conflict with China* (Bernstein and Munro, 1998),¹ *The China Threat: How the People’s Republic Targets America* (Gertz, 2002), *Red Dragon Rising: Communist China’s Military Threat to America* (Timperlake and Triplett, 1999), *China: The Gathering Threat* (Menges, 2005). The argument that China was behind the 9/11 attacks in 2001 can be found in *Seeds of Fire: China and the Story behind the Attacks on America* (Thomas, 2001),² *Unrestricted Warfare: China’s Plan to Destroy America* (Santoli, 2002).³ Others describe China’s grand plans for

¹ Written after the tense military stand off over Taiwan in 1996 and before the hand back of Hong and Macao, this book argues that war between the United States and China is unlikely but that conflict will continue to arise in the Asian region as China flexes its muscles.

² Thomas’s book is predominately an account of the 1989 Tian’anmen massacre. The ‘attacks on America’ referred to in the title are the events of September 11 which are made relevant by Thomas declaring in a short epilogue that much of the money for terrorism comes from China. There are no sources or back up references for this claim.

³ This book purports to be a translation for the CIA of a ‘manual for warfare’ by China against the US. The subtitle was added by the editor, a Viet Nam war veteran who heads the Asia America Initiative which claims to promote US international politics as a way of guaranteeing universal human rights. Santoli has also worked as an aid to US Congressman Dana Rehrbacher, who advocated denying China ‘Much Favored Nation’ status during the 1980s and 90s. Although Santoli attempts to draw strong connections between bin Laden and the Chinese military in his introduction and by using a sensational cover photograph of planes crashing into the World Trade Center on September 11, a close read of the text reveals the book as nothing more than a description of new forms of warfare written by a writer from the air force’s political

world domination: *Hegemony: China's Plan to Dominate Asia and the World* (Mosher, 2000), *The New Chinese Empire: And What it Means for the United States* (Fishman, 2005), *China, Inc.: How the Rise of the Next Superpower Challenges America and the World* (Terrill, 2005). Taken as a corpus, these books seek to clearly establish China as an active threat to U.S. hegemony in the world and to argue for China's containment. This is a claim that the Chinese government rejects vociferously (Thyer, 2002). Other authors contend that China may 'become like us' due to the proliferation of fast-food outlets like McDonalds and KFC although China will always remain 'fundamentally different' to western countries (Bernstein and Munro, 1998). One of China's key differences which draws the attention of many of these commentators is the large Chinese population and the way that population is regulated.

Population is perceived as both a strength and a weakness. Indeed, before 1950, the size of the Chinese population was seen as a weakness of China serious enough to undermine any new government. Some commentators at the time portrayed the Chinese population as 'swarming millions', thus describing China as a nation of mindless 'blue ants' who could be made to achieve superhuman feats through sheer people power. Anti-communist and essentialising attitudes persist into the twenty-first century around two themes: first, the cruelty of Chinese communism towards the population, and secondly, the threat to peace posed by China's worsening gender imbalance. This article takes up the issue of what has been labelled China's bachelor army to further emphasise how population in China has been central to fear about China in the past and remains the case today.

2. The 'swarming millions'

Even before the proclamation of the People's Republic of China in October 1949, the Chinese Communist Party's ability to feed the people of China was under question. In a

department and a political commissar from the air force. Both are colonels.

note accompanying the China White Paper on United States’ relations with China, the United States Secretary of State Dean Acheson (1949) claimed that successive Chinese governments had always failed to meet the nutritional needs of the most populous country of earth. Acheson predicted that even the new Communist regime would also struggle. In Acheson’s view, ‘the first problem which every Chinese government has had to face is that of feeding its population. So far, none have succeeded.’(Acheson, 1949:iv). Revolution, according to Acheson, was prompted by over-population which had plagued China since the size of the population had doubled through the 18th and 19th centuries. Acheson argued that ‘By the beginning of the twentieth century, the combined force of over-population and new ideas [from the West] set in motion that chain of events which can be called the Chinese revolution’ (Acheson, 1949: iv).

Acheson’s views were considered controversial both in the United States and China. The White Paper was intended by President Truman to provide an objective record of events which would demonstrate that U.S. policies, aid and military assistance supporting the Nationalist government in China had been correct. The underlying belief was that ‘the impending fall of China to the Communists was in no way attributable to American policy’ and that the facts as outlined in the White Paper would substantiate that belief (Van Slyke, 1949). For Acheson, it is clear that events in China cannot be blamed on American policy, action or, indeed, non-action.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s response to Acheson’s paper came in the form of five short essays by Party Chairman Mao Zedong. In ‘The bankruptcy of the idealist conception of history.’ Mao makes a famous and oft-quoted statement on the population question: ‘Of all things in the world, people are the most precious.’ He goes on to claim that, ‘Under the leadership of the Communist Party, as long as there are people, every kind of miracle can be performed...before long there will arise a new China with a big population and a great wealth of products, where life will be abundant and culture will flourish’ (Mao, 1969: 454).

The Chinese government’s riposte – that the large population was an asset for China – replicated elements of a longstanding but largely unrecognised debate within the

nascent field of Chinese demographic study. Bao Shichen (1775 – 1855) had argued that ‘the land of China is sufficient to support the people of the country. His argument was that more people meant more labor; and that labor is the basis of wealth, not the cause of poverty’ (Bao, 1999: 167). For Mao Zedong the Chinese term for population (人口 *renkou*) clearly incorporates notions of both production as well as consumption: 人(*ren* – person, hands) and 口 (*kou*- mouth). In Chinese, each mouth comes with two hands (White, 1994). The answer to famine specifically and poverty in general was to utilise the large population in production:

It is a very good thing that China has a big population. Even if China’s population multiplies many times, she is fully capable of finding a solution; the solution is production...revolution plus production can solve the problems of feeding the population.’ (Mao, 1949: 483)

For Mao, the Chinese population, not *despite* its size but *because* of its size, already held the answer to the problem of food production. Mass effort in production would overcome all obstacles. Furthermore, Mao’s retelling of an old Chinese tale in a well-known speech during 1945 (published as ‘The foolish old man who moved mountains’) drew attention to the other qualities he thought were needed for China to prosper: determination and tenacity. As Mao told it, an old man in ancient times decided to remove a mountain in front of his house. In reply to sceptics the old man explained that although his own individual efforts could not achieve the aim, he would be succeeded by infinite generations who will then continue the work until the mountain is removed. As a political policy, the tenacity and determination alluded to in Mao’s “parable” were enacted through the mass mobilisation campaigns of the 1950s. Labour-intensive campaigns such as land reclamation, flood control and irrigation schemes, and even pest control (killing sparrows, flies, rats and so on) demonstrated the value of a large population.

The West’s pessimistic view of the population situation in China was politically motivated, claimed Mao. Not only would the CCP be able to meet the needs of the population, extreme measures such as birth limitation policies were unnecessary. For the CCP, political and social circumstances had led China to famine in the past and, through good government famine could be averted in the future. The government would use food rationing, a compulsory grain procurement policy, new forms of agriculture (such as new planting techniques, use of fertilisers, crop choices) and reforms of the land ownership system (introduction of cooperation and collectivisation) throughout the 1950s as measures to maximise the benefits of a large, and predominately rural, population (Lin, 2004: 34).

For many external commentators, the breath-taking size of the Chinese population could neither be ignored nor valued as an asset. Indeed, the very conditions being lauded by the new Chinese government as the new base for a prosperous China were seen by others to be setting China up for potential demographic disaster. Peace and economic stability had led to a post war baby-boom which saw the population size increase rapidly. At the end of 1954, the results of the 1953 population census were released. Instead of the estimated 475 million people being used by the CCP at the end of the 1940s, the population of mainland China was calculated at 583 million, an increase rate in the 1950s of two percent per year (White, 2006: 27). China’s ‘China’s critics saw the census results as further proof that the challenges facing the Chinese government were insurmountable. swarming millions’ were a concern for all, not just the Chinese government (Paloczi-Horvath, 1962: 11).

One major conflict brought the question of the value of a sizeable Chinese population to the fore during the initial establishment phase of the People’s Republic of China. During the war in Korea (1950 – 3) the United Nations forces commander, General McArthur, suggested that the most efficient way to stop the Chinese forces would be to deploy the newly developed nuclear military weapons that were considered at the time to be so effective against Japan (Kane, 1987). In response Mao boasted to the Indian President Nehru that an American nuclear attack on China may be devastating but would still fail to force China’s submission:

Chinese people power would always triumph. According to Mao, China's 600 million people and 9,600,000 square kilometres of land would ensure China's survival (Shapiro, 2001: 31). As one frequent visitor to China noted at the time, 'Faced with the ever more dangerous consequences of the Chinese population explosion, the Mao leadership is less worried by a possible nuclear explosion than any other government in the world' (Paloczi-Horvath, 1962: 394). For China's rulers, therefore, China's population was its most valuable asset yet for China's critics population remained a liability.

The critics' concern about the inability of China to feed its people later seemed justified when the extent of the famine and the other difficulties faced in China during the years 1958 – 61 was fully revealed. At the time the extent of the famine was not known even within China's leadership and, although food aid had been offered to China, China was still exporting grain (Becker, 1996). The policies of the 1958 Great Leap Forward mass campaign (such as the focus on steel production and the reorganisation of farming by expanding socialist cooperatives into collectives) combined with the effect of difficult weather conditions led to a famine. The extent of the famine is still contested and estimates of the number of deaths vary widely. The more extreme claims are clearly flawed, as they rely on a simplistic method of calculation which fails to take into account the number of births that did *not* occur due to the difficult conditions such as lack of food (Kane, 1988). The Chinese government, however, acknowledged the famine in the 1980s and blamed the 'three difficult years' primarily on the extremist policies of Mao Zedong (CCP, 1981). The famine, in their view, was not an inevitability. Rather it was due to Mao's failure to 'seek truth from facts', a euphemism for taking a political and idealistic view rather than the more pragmatic approach later followed by Deng Xiaoping.

The famine appeared to show not only that in the 1950s China was incapable of feeding its large population but also that Dean Acheson's predictions were accurate. After the famine, however, the government maintained power despite Acheson's conclusion to the contrary. There was no political uprising and the Government did not collapse. Acheson's connection between inability to feed the

population and government breakdown seemed disproved. Indeed, internal manoeuvrings within the Party saw Mao seemingly sidelined and another approach taken to economics and production. Large scale political and economic campaigns continued. The fears that China’s critics held about the power of the Chinese masses remained.

For China’s critics, however, the Chinese population was problematic for more than its size. Paloczi-Horvath claimed that the way the ‘swarming millions’ were organised revealed ‘the pattern of the most thoroughly total dictatorship the world has ever known’ (1962: 11). For Paloczi-Horvath, at the heart of this chilling organisation was a basic aspect of humanity which Chinese people seemed to lack: individuality. According to this view, China’s people were not only too numerous but also closely resembled insects in their acceptance of mass organisation. The Chinese worker’s ability to subsume personal desire for the common good and endure hardship and suffering whilst working collectively in large numbers earned them the moniker: the Blue Ants.

3. The Blue Ants

Post-revolution China was commonly portrayed outside China in the 1950s and 60s as an organised anthill. All Chinese were alike, according to the French writer Robert Guillain (1957). That is to say, both men *and* women were uniform and sexless. As an industrious collective, the Chinese people were numerous, productive, and unstoppable. What made communist China so threatening was the ability of the government to tap into what Guillain implies is an inherent characteristic of the Chinese people: collectivism and an unlimited capacity to subsume the personal good for the collective goal.

This is exemplified in another text from the same period. The caption to the opening photograph of Lucas’s *Women of China* (1965) shows a hillside bare of vegetation leading down to a river bed. The hill and riverbed are covered with hundreds of Chinese workers. According to the caption, these workers are clearing out the riverbed in preparation for a new dam in Shandong province. For Lucas, the photograph

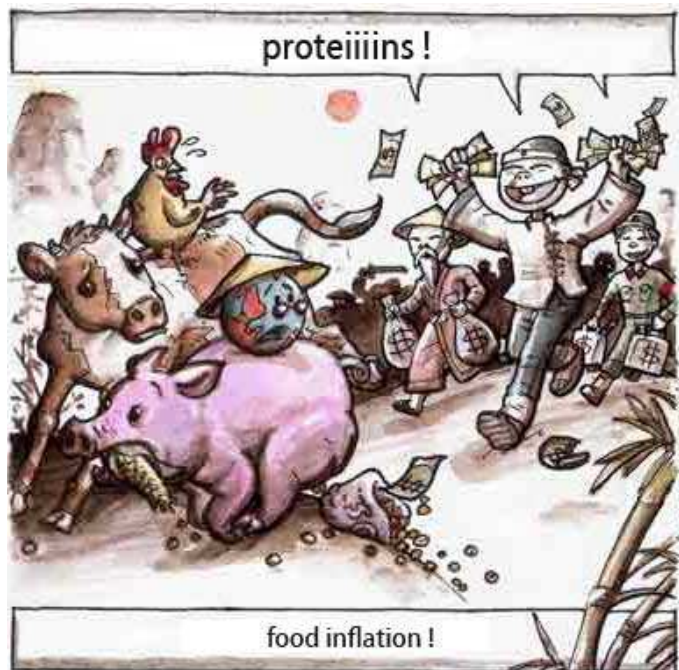
is an illustration of Guillain's description of China in the 1950s: 'A human anthill – industrious, uniform and sexless.'

The mass mobilisation strategies adopted by the Chinese government emphasised the value of collective action. Mass action was a fruitful approach, particularly in the absence of high levels of industrialisation, expertise, and even literacy. Mao's comments on the power of a large population motivated by revolutionary fervour seemed borne out by the success of campaigns like the 'Death to snails' anti-schistosomiasis campaign of the 1950s and 60s. This campaign relied on engaging the entire population of an infected county to wipe out the snail hosts of the parasitic disease schistosomiasis. As the eye-witness observer Dr Joshua Horn noted, this public health campaign was based on political strategies developed during the civil war which combined people power with military style planning. The mass line approach used to eradicate snails required more than issuing shovels and instructions. It required firing the people 'with enthusiasm, to release their initiative and to tap into their wisdom' (Horn, 1969: 97). Every battle was planned and 'all weapons brought into play' At the heart of the success of the campaign, however, was mass labour. In one county, Horn estimates that '300,000 man-work days' were used in a two month period to eradicate snails from a town which used to swarm with them (1969: 102).

The force of the 'anthill' could be used not only for the public good (e.g. the anti schistosomiasis campaign) but also as a force of destruction, as the mass campaigns such as the eradication of the four pests (*chu si hai* – sparrows, rats, flies, mosquitoes) of 1958 and the Cultural Revolution (1966) demonstrated. These campaigns showed the obvious dangers in mass physical action. Reducing the numbers of sparrows, one of the targeted four pests, proved to be disastrous as sparrows were shown to eat less grain than the grubs which flourished in their absence. Amongst other consequences, the environmental impact of the Great Leap Forward included extensive clearing of forests for fuel to feed steel furnaces which led to serious erosion and other land problems. In sum, it was the sheer number of 'blue ants' and the ability of the Chinese government to mobilise the 'anthill' as one for achieving goals which caused concern for China 'watchers'.

The concerns of commentators such as Lucas, Paloczi-Horvath and Guillain regarding ‘blue ants’ resurfaced in the late twentieth century around two aspects of the Chinese population. The first is the remarkable phenomenon of the ‘floating population’, an annual migration of an estimated 140 million workers from China’s provinces to towns and cities primarily on China’s eastern seaboard (Liang and Ma, 2004). The productive power of this newly mobilised workforce has seen concerns raised about China’s growing power in the world economic market. The sheer size of the ‘floating population’ has ensured an endless supply of cheap labour for the construction of China’s cities and for the vast network of manufacturing enterprises which have sprung up since China ‘opened its doors’.

The second issue is that of food. The concerns regarding food seen first in Acheson’s report of the late 1940s have now been expanded. Now no longer limited to whether or not the Chinese government can feed the population, two other questions have been raised: food quality and threat to the larger world food supply. As recent food contamination scandals have highlighted, the production of food in China is under-regulated and policed. Extensive pollution of Chinese land, water, and air means that, even without illegal substances being added, food may not be safe for human consumption. In the twenty-first century, the question to be answered is not whether or not China can feed its population but, as the milk scandal of 2009 demonstrated, can China do so safely? The second aspect is China’s impact on the world. Are there enough resources in the world to feed the increasing Chinese appetite for natural resources? As China modernises and the standard of living rises for large sections of the population, the dietary demands increase. A recent cartoon succinctly captures the threat some see in China’s change of diet (Guevarra, 2009):



Source: Garcia Guevarra, Opinion Sur, 2009

Here Chinese people are caricatured as cheerful, badly dressed communist cadres, old men and peasants, all with squinty eyes and protruding teeth. Waving armfuls of cash, they strike fear in their potential food source animals which flee before them. The cartoon resonates with the image of Chinese people as uncouth eaters of anything that moves. As the well-known Chinese saying states: 'So long as it has legs but is not a table or chairs it can be eaten.'

Although published in 2009, the cartoon draws on a long argued debate about the security of the world's food resources in the face of a developing China. Some scholars have argued that the prospect of a prosperous and developed China was more menacing than that of a starving China (Brown, 1995). Brown painted a grim picture for the planet if China achieved the level of prosperity reached by most developed countries of the world. A cashed up, wealthy and rapacious China was a frightening apparition. Earlier fears about the impact of China's large population and its mass-like nature are invoked in these examples (Brown's vision

and the cartoon of rapacious Chinese). Like a nightmarish army of driver ants, the Chinese clear all before them.

4. Chinese population as threat? – the gender imbalance

Population in China has been incorporated into a discourse of China as threat. In general, books dealing specifically with the ‘China threat’ rarely address the question of Chinese population directly. Concern with Chinese population size, population composition, and population policies and practices overshadow many of the ways in which China is discussed, debated and analysed outside China. The concern with sex-selective abortion in China has been used to support anti-abortion campaigns in places like the United States as well as to prove an ongoing argument against the apparent inhumanity of the Chinese government

There is a tension here which is never discussed: population policies are condemned as inhumane and oppressive yet the size of the population and the potential threat from not only hungry but dispossessed Chinese men lends to tacit support for population control. Until recently the concerns of the security contingent of political pundits and the anti-abortion, anti-population control did not merge. This has changed with the emergence of what is being called ‘security demographics.’ In a post 9/11 climate, the tag ‘security’ garners attention, support and resources from policy makers and governments especially in the United States. Population and environment organisations are using national security as a strategy to ensure that international family planning programs receive assistance (Hartman, 2005). These groups are returning to arguments from the 1954 Population conference in Rome which emphasise the danger posed by population growth in developing countries. Security demographic locates four main sources of security problems: a youth ‘bulge’ in a population, competition for land and water, rapid urbanisation, and increased mortality rates of people in the prime of life due to HIV/AIDs deaths (Cincotta, Engelman and Anastasion, 2003). Since 2002 the

Chinese 'bare branch bachelor army' has been added to the list.

Chinese men currently outnumber Chinese women by between 32 million (Zhu, 2009) and 111 million (Manthorpe, 1999). As a result, China has a high number of bachelors.¹ Even before the full effect of the reproductive control policies introduced by the government in the late 1970s took effect, Chinese bachelors outnumbered spinsters significantly. The 1980 census revealed a sex ratio at birth (SRB) of 108.5 males for every 100 females, a slight deviation from the international accepted norm of 105 - 107 males for every 100 females at birth (Johannson and Nygren, 1991). In 1982 only 1% of women but 9% of men had never married (Thorborg, 2005: 6). Since the 1980s, the imbalance in the sex ratio has grown substantially. During the 1980s the SRB reached a national figure of 111.4 by 1990 and 115.6 by 1995. The most recent census revealed an alarming national ratio of 116.9 males for every 100 females in 1999 (Lavelly, 2001). The problem of large numbers of men being denied access to marriage is set to get worse as the imbalance in sex ratios is most marked in the youngest age group, 0 - 4 (Banister, 2004).

The sex ratios vary widely from place to place and from ethnicity to ethnicity. Some areas of China have extremely high ratios - Hainan (135.64), Guangzhou (130.30), Hubei (128.18) and Anhui (127.85). Other areas are close to the international norm - Guizhou (107.03) and Yunnan (108.71). In large cities there is a difference between the resident population and the 'floating population' of migrant workers. Ethnicity is important, with provinces not dominated by Han Chinese slower to show a rising sex ratio. Only Muslim Xinjiang (106.12) and Tibet (102.73) provinces did not show high sex ratios at the 2000 census. Even within the same province there may be vast differences between ethnic groups. In 1990 the Dong ethnicity (SBR of 112) had the highest SBR of the 12 largest minority groups in Guizhou province (Yusuf and Byrnes, 1993). It is difficult to generalise

¹ In demography a 'high sex ratio' is one which exceeds 106 males at birth for every 100 females. Because males die at slightly higher rates than females due to innate biomedical genetic factors the rate of 105 - 107 at birth declines to 102 - 107 for the 0 - 4 age group.

across urban and rural areas. Some provinces record higher sex ratios in rural areas (Anhui – urban SBR 118.80, rural SBR 130.87) while others show the opposite (Beijing urban SBR 112.57, rural 104.89) (Greenhalgh and Winkler, 2005:267). Provincial level statistics occlude differences between counties. In Yisong County, Anhui, and Xingan County, Jiangxi, ratios of an almost unbelievable 185 to 190 were recorded in the 2000 census (Greenhalgh and Winkler, 2005: 267).

In the 1980s and 1990, some demographers began to see the 'missing girls' problem as transient – a temporary result from a massive change in China's social, economic and fertility traditions. Others were less optimistic. All, however, acknowledged that the 'missing girls of China' continues to be a real and existing problem. As Banister states, 'By now [2004] essentially all PRC and foreign demographers agree that, after adjustment for any such errors [e.g. under enumeration], the relative shortage of girls and the distorted sex ratios at birth are still very pronounced. This means that the high sex ratios in PRC demographic data are approximately true, not merely an artefact of faulty data (Banister, 2004: 20)'

Demographic statistics have been notoriously inaccurate in China due to the size of the population and the sheer difficulty of collecting accurate information. From 1949 to 1982 China carried out only two censuses – 1953 and 1964. After 1980, however, the collection of demographic statistical data and the dissemination of results improved dramatically (Greenhalgh and Winkler, 2005). Inaccurate statistics cannot account for the total girls 'missing.' Smith argued that even the wildest estimates of over-reporting of stillbirths and under-reporting of infant deaths could not account for the sex ratio imbalance (Smith, 1994). Some other mechanism is needed to explain the fact that many of the girls had either not been born or had died after birth. Yong and Lavelly have argued that of their estimated 12.8 million fewer girls in the cohorts born between 1980 to 2000 only 8.5 million were *actually* missing (Yong and Lavelly, 2003: 25). A combination of infanticide, under-reporting, abandonment and a new explanation - sex-selective abortion - was posited as the reason (Ma, 2005).

Abortion, legalised in 1957 after a long battle by women within the Communist Party, was not commonly performed until the introduction of a national family planning program in the 1970s (Tu and Smith, 1995). The number of abortions increased in 1983 due to the implementation of a strict one child per couple policy. In 1984 a relaxation of the policy allowed many rural couples to have a second child if the first was a girl. As a result, the number of abortions fell dramatically. By the late 1980s the number of abortions had again increased when family planning restrictions mandated a spacing of some years between first and permitted second births. By the 1990s a cultural acceptance of abortion was enhanced with the technical means to discover the sex of the unborn child.. This had a dramatic effect on the practice of abortion.

As new technology became more readily available throughout the 1990s sex-selective abortion became the most likely explanation for the missing girls.¹ The Ministry of Public Health had forbidden foetal sex determination in the mid-1980s and further legal regulations were issued in the 1990s. The aborting of planned pregnancies was forbidden. This was significant. For couples to give birth legally they needed to have permission. Once permission was granted and the pregnancy had occurred, any abortion not linked to deformity was almost certainly as a result of sex determination of the foetus. If the couple had decided the sex of the baby was not what they wanted, they would seek an abortion. The regulations applied to more than the individual, however. All government officials were directed to 'take effective measures' for the good of 'the nation and descendants' (Peng and Huang, 1997: 500) Strong penalties were introduced for those who breached the regulations (Johnson, 1996: 81).

Despite government intervention in the form of regulations, laws with harsh penalties, and education campaigns, a large number of Chinese couples continued to express their preference for a son through illegal sex

¹ The first ultrasound machine was manufactured in China in 1979. By 1987 at least 13,000 locally made and imported machines were in use. By 1991 the largest Chinese manufacturer of ultrasound machines had an annual production capacity of 5,000 machines.

selective abortion. With the rise in living standards and a government supported shift towards an increasingly urbanised society, it may be presumed that the desire for sons would actually fall. After all, the desire for a son, many researchers argued, was due to the need for productive farm labour as a form of social security for the rural elderly (Davin, 1987). The underlying attitudes towards son preference seem to continue to guide reproductive behaviour.

The Chinese sex ration imbalance can be understood in two ways: as a problem of ‘missing girls’ or as an excess of males. It is this latter view which has attracted the attention of those working on security issues. The notion of a bachelor army of excess males ties neatly into the long-held fear outside China of China’s population.

4. Threatening the world – Chinese ‘bare branches’ and security demographics

In the controversial book, *Bare Branches: The Security Implications of Asia’s Surplus Male Population*, Valerie Hudson and Andrea den Boer claim that the long term security and stability of China (and thus, the world) will be threatened by a surplus of males (Hudson and den Boer, 2004). Internal instability, they argue, is heightened in nations with exaggerated gender equality as indicated by high sex ratios. The consequences are serious and hold global implications. Peaceful foreign policy and meaningful democracy are less likely in such nations, they claim. Hudson and den Boer have flipped the attention being paid to high sex ratios. Instead of focusing on the plight of neglected, murdered or aborted girls, they want to shift the debate to the potential plight of unmarried men, a ‘bachelor army’ which has even been described as the ‘world’s largest lonely heart’s club.’

The ‘bare branches’ threat argument relies on crude evolutionary theories and animal studies. Hudson and den Boer claim that ‘Beginning with non-human primate studies and moving up the evolutionary chain to humans, when females are scarce, the only reproductive failures are low-status males.’ They argue that many social problems are caused by excess male hormones which is dangerous when combined with class as ‘the lower class is physically more

aggressive and violent in its social relations than the middle class' (Hudson and den Boer, 2004: 197) Sexual selection, they aver, has favoured 'male temperaments that revel in high risk/high gain ventures...men drive cars faster or gamble more intensely or perhaps play sports more recklessly than women...In groups males quickly become aggressive and lethally serious.' These claims, despite their weakness, form the base upon which Hudson and den Boer build their argument about China's excess bachelors.

Because of high sex ratios caused by sex-selective abortion and other practices in China a generation of 'surplus' restless males, known as 'bare branches', will grow up without the possibility of marriage.¹ Hudson and den Boer argue that the fields of history, biology and sociology all yield proof that societies with large numbers of males have high levels of crime and social disorder. The security logic of high sex ratio societies, they contend, differs tremendously from those nations with normal sex ratios. In order to contain these 'surplus' males the governments of countries with skewed sex ratios such as China and India will have no choice but to build up the number of troops in the armed forces. (The only other less viable option, Hudson and den Boer argue, would be to encourage vice such as prostitution and the trafficking of women in order to keep the bachelors happy).

The authors support their arguments with statistics on crime, violence, drug use and prison incarceration. Nearly all of this research, however, is focused on populations of men outside of China. That China has a different cultural, societal, and governmental structure and history seems to be of no concern to Hudson and den Boer. This is a problem. Work by Chinese criminologists on the 'floating population' of internal migrants is appropriated and used out of context. According to Hudson and den Boer, 'surplus' males form transient populations with no ties to the communities they pass through. They create a 'bachelor subculture' and are social outcasts. The question of whether this argument holds in China then arises.

¹ The term 'bare branches' (*guanggun*) can also be used colloquially in Chinese for a bandit (Ownby, 2002).

Within China, anxiety about 'excess' bachelors is palpable. Media reports (in both English and Chinese) concerning 'bachelor villages' are common. In a country with an almost universal marriage rate, lack of opportunity to marry is seen as a serious concern. Sons of farmers are now in the position of having to compete for the affections of the few women in their rural area. There is an upward trend in the abduction and selling of women into marriage or prostitution. It may seem to rural men in remote areas that buying a wife is the only way they can get married. They may go to further extreme lengths to keep possession of the woman they have purchased. As one policeman said in reference to the difficulty of rescuing a 12-year old girl sold as a wife, 'Villagers like that aren't afraid of anyone or anything; even if we turned up there, they'd torch our cars and beat up our officers. They will go to incredible lengths to make sure that their family lines are perpetuated so as not to sin against their ancestors by failing to produce and heir.' The kidnapping and selling of women has even featured in a recent Chinese film, *Blind Mountain (Mang shan)*.

However, as one researcher scathingly points out, most of the concern expressed in China is regarding the marriage-less future for China's young men rather than for the conditions for women. Ci Qinying's survey of online Chinese language references to the sex ratio showed that a much greater proportion discussed the marriage difficulties for men compared to the rights of women and that the news media had a strong bias in favour of the countless 'bare branches' and the marriage squeeze (Ci, 2006). Ci argues that the sex ratio is closely linked to the low economic status of women in China. To devote so much attention to the situation for males is to be distracted by the trivial. In China, therefore, the 'bare branches' debate has mostly focused sympathetically on the plight of men.

Alarm has been expressed in China about a rise in crime particularly in city areas. This concern is often directed at the large population of migrant workers who suffer from discrimination and stereotyping. Since the early 1980s the floating population has grown enormously and has been the subject of much research, both within and outside China. City dwellers are often heard to complain about the 'floaters' and these migrants are blamed for crime,

violence, overcrowding, disease and so on (Bakken, 200; Kochhar, 2008). Those who make up the floating population are second-class citizens in the cities. They do not have full citizenship rights and are forced to pay for housing, education, health care and other services which are provided free or at low cost for city dwellers. The work they perform is essential for maintaining China's ongoing economic growth yet prejudice against them is strong (Solinger, 1991). This prejudice is not only directed at male 'floaters'. The 2000 census shows that women migrate in comparable numbers to men. Both men and women are treated as second class citizens in the cities. The most common complaint against the migrants is that they are *bu wenming* (uncivilised), *suzhi di* (of low education, genetic, moral quality) and prone to crime. The floating population may only be temporarily based in the cities but instead of being anonymous transients, the migrants tend to stick together according to their place of origin. As a result, they form a visible and identifiable minority population of 'others' which, conveniently, can be blamed for some of society's ills. Migrant workers, rather than 'bare branches' are seen as the cause of crime.

The 'bare branches' argument, however, *has* hit a nerve with the American press and public. The book was extensively publicised and covered in sources such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *U.S. News and World Report*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Boston Globe*, *Washington Times* and broadcast on VOA, and CNN. The story was also reported in media across Europe and Asia: *The Times*(London), *Financial Times*, *International Herald Tribune*, *China Daily*, *Straits Times*, *South China Morning Press*, *Times of India* and broadcast on the BBC. It has had an immediate impact on the U.S. security field. The House International Relations Committee discussed the book in their hearings on China's one-child policy in December 2004. Both authors were interviewed by CIA agents who wanted to know what attitude the US government *should* take towards sex ratios in Asia (Glen, 2004). Hudson has been quoted as saying that 'In 2020 it may seem to China that it would be worth it to have a very bloody battle in which a lot of their young men could die in some glorious cause' (Glen, 2004). For many

outside China, this confirms fears concerning China’s recent so-called military build-up (Roy, 1994; O’Rourke, 2008).

Conclusion

The ‘bare branches’ argument presented by Hudson and den Boer ties into old fears about China in two ways: overpopulation (the supposed military threat caused by an excess of men) and the dangerous or aberrant Chinese bachelor. A key component of their argument is that single men are more likely than other males to turn to vice and violence’ and to spend their meagre wages on gambling, alcohol, drugs, and prostitution in short (but intense) sprees (Hudson and den Boer, 2004:194). They argue that unmarried men have higher serum testosterone counts which are linked to criminality, and alcohol and substance abuse. It is worth noting that the research quoted by Hudson and den Boer was conducted in the United States and that the epidemic of crack cocaine and methamphetamine use cited in reference to single males is not relevant to China. Hudson and den Boer resort to an old stereotype – the Chinese opium addict – to connect all drug use with crime:

Opium, the Chinese intoxicant of choice, was a powerful tranquilizer. Those who were under the influence seldom exhibited the irritable aggressiveness of men drinking liquor in saloons, nor did they beat women and children. But opium smoking did lead to theft by impoverished addicts...an [was] an indirect cause of criminal violence in the form of rivalry among the tongs’ (2004: 198)

Despite the pacifying effects of opium, Chinese men are portrayed as dangerous. Even the Chinese term ‘bare branches’ (*guang gun*) seems to back this up with its double connotation: it can mean both ‘ruffian/hoodlum’ or ‘bachelor.’ With a large population of poor people, a large ‘floating population’ of migrant workers and a large population of single men, Hudson and den Boer claim that

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'China, it seems, is recreating the vast army of bare branches that plagued it during the nineteenth century'(2004: 212).

The subconscious image of Chinese men evoked here is not new. Portrayals of Chinese men as a vice prone, lascivious 'yellow peril' that needs to be contained date back over one hundred years. Hudson and den Boer have the laudable aim of introducing a concern for women's status and rights into security studies/ Unfortunately, their book does not critically analyse anti-Chinese racism nor engage with the notion of orientalism. Their argument, therefore, reinforces powerful orientalist images of China which have long held a powerful hold over the Western imagination.

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