



Hello everyone. As someone who grew up in China and has access to Western media, I'm aware of China's authoritarian reputation in the West. The clampdown on free speeches is undeniably real.

For example, in April of last year, the Chinese authorities closed more than a dozen radical feminist groups from a popular social networking website called Douban. The government also banned the keyword 6B4T, which refers to a feminist view from South Korea that advocates women to shun heterosexual relationships and child-bearing. I'll quote Genevieve Gluck's piece on this incident:

"The reason for the removal of the radical feminist groups on Douban is not explicitly stated, but it is suggested that the ideas discussed in the forums violated national policies. The Twitter account FreeChineseFeminists shared a screenshot of a notification from Douban which told administrators of the banned groups that the forums contained 'extremism, radical politics, and ideologies.' The uncompromising anti-marriage, anti-sex, and anti-birthing views asserted in the groups contradict government measures aimed at elevating current declining birth rates — now at their lowest since 1949." (Gluck)

Like internet censorship and mass surveillance, another issue that people often bring up when talking about their impression of China is its one-child policy. Here arises a great and enduring myth — that is, China's one-child policy has brought about the country's sex imbalance. For instance, an article on Washington Post says,

"Out of China's population of 1.4 billion, there are nearly 34 million more males than females — the equivalent of almost the entire population of California, or Poland, who will never find wives and only rarely have sex. China's official one-child policy, in effect from 1979 to 2015, was a huge factor in creating this imbalance, as millions of couples were determined that their child should be a son." (Gowen)

Such imputation, in my opinion, assigns sole blame to the one-child policy while ignoring China's long record of female infanticide. Indeed, many Chinese feminists believe that the popular narrative about China's sex imbalance portrays the severely skewed sex ratio as the result of a policy mistake

made by the Chinese government, rather than an age-old phenomenon caused by a specific form of violence against women and girls – female infanticide, which predates the one-child policy.

This entry in the *Han Feizi*, a Chinese literature dating from 230 B.C. (280 – 233 BC), appears to be the earliest mention to female infanticide:

“Parents’ attitude to children is such that when they bear a son they congratulate each other, but when they bear a daughter, they kill her.”

The Family Instructions for the Yan Clan documents the custom, which was observed even in the families of senior officials during the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420-589 A.D.):

“I have a distant relative who has many concubines. When the birth is near, he sends servants to keep watch, and when the labor begins, they peep into the room from outside the window or the door. If a girl is born, she is immediately taken or killed. The mother cries, but no one dares save the baby girl.”

The concept of exalting men and despising women was embraced more fully than ever throughout the eleventh century, nor was it confined to the scholar-official class. The poet Su Shi (1037-1101) was living in exile in a village when he learnt that infanticide was practiced in the district and wrote to the chief magistrate:

“The poor farmers as a rule raised only two sons and one daughter and kill babies beyond this number. They especially dislike to raise daughters, with the result that there are more men than women and many bachelors in the country. A baby is often killed at birth by drowning in cold water...It dies after crying a short moment.”

Female infanticide appears to have been prevalent during the chaos and social upheavals brought on by the wars in the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279). According to one source, Fujian residents, particularly those in Jianping and Nanping, practiced a custom known as “bathing the infant” (xi’er), which was the drowning of babies, especially girls, in a dish of cold water. An assistant prefectural magistrate in Ganzhou, Jiangxi, noted that the villagers murdered all new-born baby girls because they “despised girls” (zeng’nu).

Fei Xiaotong (1910-2005) observed that in a census of the hamlet taken in 1935, the ratio of females in the age group 0-5 was exceptionally low – 87 girls to 118 boys – based on an inquiry conducted in 1936 of a village about eighty miles west of Shanghai. Furthermore, just 131 families (or 37%) had females under the age of 16, and only 14 families had more than one girl.

During the 1920s and 1930s, some Western field researchers in China noticed that the number of males outnumbered the number of females, but they did not attribute this to female infanticide. “In both North and South China, the resident rural population was characterized by a large proportion of males.” John Lossing Buck (1890-1975) concluded from his study. He found 108 men per 100 females overall, with even fewer females than males under the age of twenty. He calculated 112 male births per 100 female in North China and 113 male births per 100 female in South China. He attributed the gap to female under-enumeration and a greater mortality rate among young females.

Olga Lang (1897-1992) heard many incidents of female infanticide from both Chinese and Western observers while conducting field research in China in 1935-37, and the hospital records she used for her research “contained matter-of-fact references to infanticide made by Chinese social medical workers.”

According to Lang’s research, more girls than boys were in the under-five age group, and the major divide between males and females emerged in the five-to-nine age range. How can we explain this? They are most likely evidence of sons receiving preferential care, resulting in indirect female infanticide, as Bernice J. Lee highlighted in her study on female infanticide in China. Even if newborn girls were not killed at birth, the differential treatment of children meant that they had a lower chance of surviving the infancy years. In poor families with limited food resources, sons were generally given a bigger share, and the frequent epidemics took a heavier toll of girls than of boys. Indirect female infanticide was a characteristic common to all periods of Chinese history (Lee 173).

In her paper, Bernice J. Lee summarizes: “It is impossible to draw a full and accurate picture of what happened to baby girls in China at any given time; all that is certain is that this form of discrimination against women, carried out at birth or in very early childhood, persisted in varying degrees over hundreds of years, using techniques that were equally unchanging, whether by drowning in ‘baby-ponds,’ immersion in cold or boiling water, suffocation, strangulation, burying alive or, more commonly, abandonment or exposure” (Lee 164).

One would think that, with China's current economic success, the practice of female infanticide has come to an end. Indeed, sex-selective abortion is taking the place of female infanticide as the main cause of China's sex imbalance, but female infanticide persists.

A well-known practice is inserting sewing needles into infant girls' bodies. A superstition in China is that pushing needles into a girl's body can scare away a female spirit, preventing her from reincarnating as the family's child. Some victims were unaware that needles are implanted in their bodies until they're adults. Women have reported finding dozens of sewing needles embedded in their bodies, some of which have pierced vital organs. In one case, 23 needles were discovered in a woman's brain and torso, making the X-rays look like a dart board. Doctors believe the needles were driven into the woman's body when she was days old. One in the top of her skull could only have been stuck there when the bones in her head were still soft. The hospital said, "They wanted her dead. The fact she is still alive is a medical miracle" (Didymus).

Today, Chinese men outnumber women by more than 34 million. Bride trafficking has evolved into a multibillion-dollar industry across neighboring countries. Women and girls are abducted abroad, bought from family members, or enticed with labor promises. Chinese men buy these women and girls, imprison, rape, and forcibly impregnate them. A study by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and the Kachin Women's Association Thailand estimated that about 21,000 women and girls from northern Myanmar were forced into marriage in just one province in China from 2013 to 2017 (Beech). Human Rights Watch identified victims from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Pakistan, Nepal, and Vietnam in a report released in 2019 (Barr). Underage girls are among the victims. They could even be sold to sex traffickers. Thousands of North Korean women wanting to flee the Kim Jong-un regime are abducted and sold into various types of sex slavery in China, according to a report by Korea Future Initiative (Ochab).

For Chinese women, trafficking of women and girls in broad daylight is not an urban legend. We're all aware that it's been going on, and we've learned to keep our distance from strangers on the street. However, the public's concern over bride trafficking has just recently erupted.

Since January, a video has been circulating on the Chinese internet: A middle-aged woman standing in a doorless brick shack with a dazed expression and no coat although it was the heart of winter. A metal chain was shackling her to the wall around her neck.

The short video, which was shared by a blogger on Douyin, China's version of TikTok, sparked a flurry of responses from social media users. Who was she? Why was she chained? And under what conditions had she given birth to the eight children at the house next door who claimed she was their mother?

The top three hashtags on the Twitter-like social media platform Weibo regarding the chained woman have amassed more than 10 billion views, and the story continues to captivate people online throughout Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The Chinese judicial system was designed up to protect the men who paid for abducted women, the public learned. Buying a woman can result in a term of up to three years in prison, the same as buying 20 frogs. When victims of human trafficking sought divorce, the courts frequently denied them, claiming that staying with the men sufficed as evidence of a healthy marriage.

The public discovered how readily women, even well-educated ones, can fall prey to human trafficking.

A graduate student from Shanghai was kidnapped during a field trip and sold to a hunched man. After 71 days, she was found. A 13-year-old girl in Beijing was abducted on her way to school and sold to a man who repeatedly beat her up. She gave birth to a son at the age of 15 and couldn't flee until she was 19 years old. A young woman from Hangzhou was kidnapped on a business trip, and forced to live in a rural village for the next two decades. After her son went to college and informed her parents, she was rescued.

However, most human trafficking victims come from China's poorest corners. Few were rescued. Because entire towns kept an eye on them, it was hopeless for the women to escape. When they were caught, they would be beaten and imprisoned.

Instead of rape and false imprisonment, the man who chained the woman was just charged with abuse. Two women attempted to visit the shackled woman in February and were detained and beaten by local police. Their social media accounts were taken down by the government. Some others who published their posts on social media received police calls (Yuan).

In China, gathering data and compiling statistics on violence against women is extremely difficult. On the one hand, under present Chinese law, marital rape is neither a criminal nor a civil infraction. The censorship, on the other hand, prevents women from recording statistics on violence against women and girls.

In November 2020, screenshots and links to a GitHub repository called The Evils of Chinese Men were uploaded on Weibo and soon went viral.

The repository, which shows updates going back 11 months, features news on violence against women and girls in China, with over 1,800 entries classified into 22 categories. Intimate partner violence, sexual assault, and sexual harassment are among the items on the list. It also offers links to unjust judicial rulings from 2015 forward.

Commentary or quotes are occasionally included with the entries. The first category of intimate relationship violence has the subtitle: "Not like I was hitting anyone else; she is my wife!" 75 entries on intrafamilial sexual assault were accompanied by the comment: "Not like I was doing it to anyone else; she is my daughter!" (Lin).

Both comments are variations of a quote from a 12-year-old boy who murdered his mother in 2018 and told his uncle, "Not like I killed anyone else; she is my mom!"

The case that inspired the first variation was a husband from Sichuan who viciously beat his wife in public while inebriated, and when asked by the police, responded, "What, whacking my own wife is illegal?" The second variation derives from a father from Guangdong who raped his then-12-year-old daughter and stated, "She's my own kid. I just wanted to fool her around a little. I couldn't help it."

The author of the project named herself as "All Surviving Chinese Women." The concluding remark appeals, "Women's lives are as cheap as flies in this corrupt East Asian civilization. The world will never improve if we ignore what is happening before us. We cannot remain silent. We shall not dwell in oblivion."

The post describing the repository was deleted after more than a thousand shares. The woman who was the first to draw attention to the project on social media urged people to save the link and the screenshots in case of censorship.

When I went to access this GitHub repository earlier this year, I discovered that the creator had taken it down. Fortunately, the Wayback Machine allows us to access the [archived](#) webpage. However, this also means the author will no longer update the repository.

One Chinese lesbian feminist I knew once asked, “Would those millions of Chinese girls have been spared from being aborted and killed if they’d identified as boys?” The answer is obviously no, and the question can be extrapolated further. For example: “If a girl had identified as a boy, would she have gotten away from being raped by her stepfather?” or “If a woman had identified as a man, could she have avoided being trafficked and chained?” The violence against women and girls is sex-based. This is exactly why Article 8 of Declaration on Women’s Sex-based Rights is so crucial. To suggest that millions of women could have survived by claiming a gender identity is ridiculous. To say that a man who claims to have whatever “gender identity” poses no threat to women is equally absurd and insulting. In China, the subjugation of the female sex by the male sex is a sensitive topic that the state is trying to downplay. We lack statistics and have trouble documenting the male violence against women and girls, although it’s a pronounced characteristic throughout Chinese history. It would be a shame if the West followed suit by obscuring the sexes of the victims and criminals due to a postmodern and harmful ideology. Thank you.

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