Part VIII

Imperiled Fatherhood

Chapter 15

"Bare Sticks" and Other Dangers to the Social Body

Assembling Fatherhood in China

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Introduction

For a culture that loves numerology, the date 11/11/11—six lonely ones—was made in heaven. A major pop culture holiday, 11 November 2011, was billed as the biggest *guanggun jie* ("bare sticks" day) of the century. Created in the early 1990s by college students to mark the plight of men who cannot find a spouse (known in Chinese as *guanggun*, or bare branches, because they have not married and produced offshoots), the holiday was the occasion for aggressive marketing, online advertising of profiles, and the appearance of vertical "sticks" on the landscape of major cities around the country. In a country where potential grooms greatly outnumber potential brides, marriage costs (especially for the groom) have skyrocketed, and young people are on the move spatially and economically, the holiday is but one part of a larger, urban-centered culture that seems to be obsessed with mate-finding. For the marriage-anxious, there are huge matchmaking fairs, television dating shows, dating coaches, and countless online dating web sites to consult.

Chinese men's (and their parents') obsession with mate-finding reflects an increasingly male-heavy gender imbalance due in large

part to three decades of the one-child policy enforced in the masculinist culture of a globalizing China. Because many rural parents have aborted or otherwise disposed of their daughters, in China today there are 118 boys for every 100 girls born, the highest sex ratio at birth of any major country. Experts estimate that 10.4 percent of men who should marry between 2005 and 2025 will not be able to marry in the conventional way. If the marriage problems of older urban men are serious, those of older rural men, especially in the poorer regions of the country, are dire. Rural men face two almost insuperable additional problems: the massive, usually long-term out-migration of rural women to the cities, and the huge urban-rural income gap, which gives urban men an advantage in meeting the often heavy demands of brides' families (these days, for a house, a car, and a good-paying job). (Some of course migrate to the cities themselves, but many must remain in the villages to meet family obligations.) Older rural men are the barest of bare sticks. They remain culturally invisible. As far as I can tell, no retailer is marketing to them. And no one plants sticks in their yards on *guanggun* day.

Although small numbers of urban Chinese are now opting to remain childless, marriage and fatherhood are still essential to being a "real Chinese man." This is undoubtedly especially true in the countryside. The limited literature on masculinities in China suggests that, despite the growing preoccupation since the 1990s with sexuality, the traditional arenas of marriage and family remain central to the construction of men's gender identities (Brownell and Wasserstrom 2002). Despite the rise in divorce, for men, marrying and perpetuating the family line remains a social imperative. By definition, men who do not marry and rear children cannot be "good men." Although the situation is in flux, in the countryside, having a wife and (at least one) child remains essential for social and even physical survival. Most critically, wives and children are crucial parts of the farm family labor force. Children provide crucial support in old age.

This volume is about fatherhood, but my chapter necessarily focuses on the prior question of the conditions of possibility of fatherhood, especially for China's rural men. For a number of reasons—including the continued sensitivity of the one-child policy, and the Chinese Communist Party's practice of not addressing social issues until they reach urgent level—there is as yet no official framing of the *guanggun* issue or state policy on the matter. A late 2013 interview with China's top birth planning official suggests that this is unlikely to change soon. The reality of men's lives, as well as the official, scholarly, and popular perceptions, can be perceived

only dimly, at best. Even the name for this problem is not settled. One never hears talk of a "fathering crisis"; instead, one reads of the problem of the "men who cannot find brides," the "bare sticks," and, in academic work, the "involuntary bachelors." Though the naming and framing are in flux, what seems to be a problem—at least for those with a public voice—is not the quality of fathering but whether a man is able to rear a child. In this chapter I draw on media items, official sources, leader speeches, scientific research, and my own interviews in China, to sketch the outlines of the emergent field of thought and practice surrounding the *guanggun*. This inquiry helps us understand the troubling reality that, despite the dire conditions these older rural men face, their problems scarcely register in the public and official consciousness in China.

In this chapter I examine how this problem-space of excess masculinity (or potential non-fatherhood) is coming together in China. Since the economist Amartya Sen (1989; 1990) published his path-breaking work on "the missing women" of Asia two decades ago, the distorted sex ratio at birth has become a globally recognized problem, with many experts and policymakers—especially in the international development community—reflecting on and responding to it. Not only in China, but across Asia, the masculinization of sex ratios has been proceeding at a pace unprecedented in recorded history. Male-heavy sex ratios are rising throughout the region, reaching levels ranging from 112 boys per 100 girls in India, Pakistan, and Vietnam, to 120 to 121 in tiny Azerbaijan and Armenia (the international average is 105 to 106) (Guilmoto 2009).[1] Far from mere social or demographic "facts," in each region, the numbers are framed or problematized (and even collected) in particular ways that reflect local histories, cultures, sciences, and politics. Put another way, in each area, the numbers combine with local histories into distinctive assemblages, out of which the problem is articulated by actors in technoscientific, political, and cultural discourse. By articulated I mean they are problematized—that is, reflected upon and intervened in in particular ways (cf. Ong and Collier 2005). My interest here then lies not in the messy social world of the "surplus men"; it lies instead in how that world is being understood and acted upon by actors with the power to shape dominant societal discourses and policies toward them.

As Bruno Latour (2005), among others, has argued, the notion of assemblage captures the real-world contingency, heterogeneity, and instability of the things that actually go into the making of problematizations and social life. More formally, by "assemblage," I mean

the loose collection of heterogeneous, often incommensurate elements that come together for a period of time, sometimes quite fleeting, to produce a particular articulation of a social problem.

Studying assemblages requires a distinctive methodology and benefits from a particular expository structure. Conventionally, scholars doing qualitative research employ narrative modes of explanation and craft social scientific accounts that tell a particular story about the world they study. The story is often historically arranged, with a beginning, middle, and end. In studying an assemblage one instead brings together diverse, often incommensurate, and apparently unconnected elements of social life, with the intention of showing how a particular problem-space has been raggedly constituted. Both theoretical literatures and my prior work on China's population policy (Greenhalgh 2008) suggest that the most important clusters of elements are particular cultures, politics, and technosciences.

In this chapter I bring together some of the diverse histories, cultures, politics, and technosciences that form the assemblage that is shaping how the problem is being framed in China. Instead of relating a straightforward story or history, I introduce each element in a separate section, suggesting its impact on an emerging problem-space, and then bring together the intersections of all the elements in the conclusion. What I can offer, of course, is but a partial accounting of some of the most important elements of the assemblage forming around the bare sticks today. I ask two sets of questions: First, which specific histories, cultures, and so on are coming together to form the assemblage around the bare sticks? Second, how is the problem being defined, reflected on, and intervened in within technoscientific and political discourse?[2] These reflections and interventions are highly consequential, helping to constitute the very field that is emerging. Such an analysis, and the notion of assemblage that underlies it, not only help us see the outlines of a sociopolitical field in the making, they also move us beyond the dominant approaches to this issue today—the demography of the sex ratio and the feminist analysis of gendered inequalities—to see the larger, multidimensional constellation of forces that is at work in the making of Chinese men's lives, and the contingency of their interactions and effects. Equally important, it illuminates what is at stake in how this issue is being articulated, including the reproductive prospects of rural men. Fatherhood is not normally discussed in these terms, but I hope to show that they are highly productive, bringing out the role of technosciences and elite politics in the construction of official framings and interventions that shape identities and practices on the ground.

A "Modern Population": Global Aspirations

The roots of today's "*guanggun* problem" (for lack of a better name) can be traced to the early reform years (the late 1970s to early 1980s), when the new modernizing regime of Deng Xiaoping sought to transform China's "backward," largely rural population into a modern populace suitable to a global power. In Deng's scheme, that modern population would both foster, and in turn reflect, China's status as a rich, globally prominent nation. It was Michel Foucault (1978), of course, who first illuminated the centrality of a biopolitics of the population to the making of power and governance in the modern era, when, he argued, life itself has become a central object of power. Elsewhere I have argued that post-Mao China, with its still-strong state and its ambitious, globalizing agenda, provides the world's most striking case of the rapid "governmentalization" of population and the emergence of a vast biopolitical field aimed at administering and optimizing the vital attributes of human life at the collective level (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005).

Though generally treated as a naturalized object, a biological entity of no particular interest to human scientists, "population" is a technophenomenon, the product of technologies of science and governance created by situated human actors (Lock and Nguyen 2010). In China's case, the type of population sought was a deliberate product of human design—indeed, the term social engineering is not too strong—created in a particular historical context by specific scientific and political, human (and non-human) actors. Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution (1966–76) had taken China to the brink of disaster. In the late 1970s, an ambitious new Deng party eager to overcome Mao's ideological legacy turned what it deemed the opposite, Western science and technology, as the basis for its modernization agenda. Science would be the source of the party's truth claims and the basis for the Deng party's right to rule in the new era. Ultimately, the problem of the childless men stems from the scientific history of the new, Deng-era policy on population.

The work of mapping out a new, modern population fell to a group of newly designated population scientists in the social sciences, mostly statisticians and economists. As China's goal was to take its place among the advanced industrial nations, it is not surprising that the new specialists took the populations of Western nations such as the United States, Great Britain, France, and Japan as the global norm and the model for China. Using United Nations publications and other statistical materials and textbooks that flooded into the

country after a long data drought under Mao, they determined that a modern population was one with low growth and fertility rates, low death and infant mortality rates, a balanced age structure, and an urban distribution. The special (in the sense of peculiar) characteristics (*tedian*) of China's population—the things that marked it as "backward" and were thus targeted for change—were its rapid growth, its gargantuan size, its peasant character, and its young, double-peaked age structure. Although the new population experts calculated age-sex structures, in establishing the goals for the new population, they emphasized the age structure. This was deemed important because the age distribution had been greatly distorted by the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution; if left unchanged, the lumpy age structure would cause distortions in labor force and dependency ratio (of workers to dependents) for decades to come, slowing the nation's modernization.

By contrast, according to interviews and literature produced at the time, the sex structure of the population was little discussed. The sex ratio at birth was not a norm at all. Whether because the sex ratio among infants was not a measure of demographic modernity in international demography, because China's ratio appeared to be relatively normal at the time, or because the possibility of female infanticide was far too politically sensitive to air, in planning the population that would be the target of state policy, the framers of China's "modern population" did not establish a normative sex ratio at birth. This meant, among other things, that the sex ratio at birth would not be measured, at least for over a decade; in a very literal sense, *it did not count.* It meant too that the sex ratio among infants would not be deliberately engineered; instead, it would be a political and cultural byproduct of the engineering of other population characteristics.

"No Other Choice": The One-Child Policy

In China and around the world, it is widely believed that the one-child policy was China's demographic destiny—that because of rapid population growth under Mao, the nation's post-Mao leaders had no alternative but to limit all couples to one child. Yet far from demographically determined, both the policy that was adopted and its framing in political and scientific discourse were products of particular scientific logics and political choices. I can sketch only the barest outlines of those connections here. If social scientists created a map of the ideal population, it was a group of natural scientists,

missile experts with expertise in cybernetics and connections to the top leadership, who fashioned the core policy on population. Drawing on the population alarmist writings of the Club of Rome (think Paul Ehrlich [1968] and the "population bomb"), the scientists created a narrative of "population crisis," in which China was drowning in human numbers. Using cybernetic techniques and population numbers that were mere estimates, they argued that the nation's economic prosperity, global rise, and very survival were threatened by a demographic time bomb. Such a crisis, they argued, could only be averted by a drastic policy placing sharp limits on all couples. The state would take charge of population countrywide, creating a program in which not only material production, but also human reproduction, would come within the purview of state planning.

That policy—also a product of cybernetic equations—called for drastically reducing population growth by limiting all couples to one child, beginning immediately. In a protracted process of political debate and scientific struggle that lasted about six months in 1979–80, there were protests from many quarters. Many declared the one-child rule unenforceable in the countryside. Others insisted that the peasants would be ruined if their family labor and old-age security systems were undermined by such a radical policy. To overcome widespread doubts, the scientists developed a powerful framing in which the one-child policy was not a "good policy," but given the economic and demographic crises facing the nation, it was China's "only choice." Advocacy of single children was officially adopted in late 1980, and in 1982 it was designated one of a handful of "basic state policies," off limits to criticism from anyone.

The policy was to be phased in gradually. In 1981 and 1982 it would be implemented in the cities, where fertility was already low. Then in 1983 it would be carried out across the vast countryside, where childbearing and fertility desires were much higher. The vehicle would be a nationwide mass-mobilizational campaign aimed at sterilizing one member of all couples with two or more children, putting IUDs in women with one child, and aborting all unauthorized pregnancies. The rural campaign, which relied on physical coercion, backfired, as rural couples desperate to have a son began attacking rural birth planning cadres and disposing of their baby girls. To save the lives of little girls and to rescue its own legitimacy, the party-state quietly modified the policy to allow rural couples whose first child was a girl to have a second. This "1.5-child policy" was adopted on a trial basis in 1984, and in 1988 it was extended countrywide. Official "advocacy" of single-child families was en-

coded in the National Population and Birth Planning Law of 2001–02 and remains in place today.

From the beginning, there were many, especially in the social science community, who abhorred the policy, decrying its effects on rural women, families, and livelihoods. These voices were publicly silenced for decades, emerging only during short periods when debate was allowed. Since the turn of the century, as the sex and age structures have become ever more distorted by the rapid fertility decline (see below), many voices have been arguing, increasingly openly, that the social and economic costs of the one-child-with-exceptions policy are so severe that the state should move to a two-child policy as soon as possible (F. Wang 2005; 2011; Zeng 2007).

For a regime that has asked generations of Chinese to sacrifice fundamental family-building aspirations for the greater good of the nation, and taught them that China had "no other choice," a wholesale change in the policy would carry substantial political risks. Despite growing calls for change, the regime has held fast to the one-child-with-exceptions policy, while expanding the exceptions. In October 2011, Population Minister Li Bin announced that China would stick to the existing policy while working to advance population quality (improve gender and age structure, as well as reduce infant birth defects) (Xinhua 2011c). In the meantime, however, there has been a quiet shift underway to a two-child policy for certain couples (a change seen as conforming to the one-child-with-exceptions policy). By late 2011, all thirty-one provincial-level units allowed couples composed of two single children to have two children of their own (Xinhua 2011b). In late 2013, the state announced that couples in which just one parent was an only child would be allowed a second child. This was an important policy shift, but it is expected to have only a modest impact on the birth rate. For many couples, the high costs of child rearing in China today make having two financially impossible (Levin 2014). Both this "only choice" framing of the one-child policy and its political sensitivity have meant that talk of its adverse effects was not especially welcome. Only some unwanted effects would get constituted as problems worth attention. The "surplus men" would not be framed as a problem until a very late date.

"Surplus Men": The Numbers

The notion that China has a "surplus of men" is the product of China's socialist development-planning model, which assumes near-equality

of the sexes and requires planning by the state to remediate any "imbalances." The problems of the gender gap and male marriage deficit are also a product of particular scientific counting schemes and bodily technologies (discussed just below). Following the international scientific norm, the core measure is the sex ratio at birth, which gives the number of boys born per 100 girls born, uncontrolled for behavioral factors such as the conventional age gap between husband and wife. Since the introduction of the one-child policy in 1979–80, that number has been steadily rising, climbing from 108.5 boys per 100 girls in 1982 to 118 in 2011, far outstripping the international average of 105 to 106. The China-wide average, worrying though it is, understates the extent of the problem in some areas, especially poor, rural ones. A county-level analysis of the ratio among children aged zero to four reveals a national average of 120.2, but spatial clusters of counties in which the ratio ranges from 150 to 197.2 to 100. In those areas, scattered around the poorer regions of east, central, and south China, there are now three or four boys for every two girls (Cai and Lavely 2007).

Although the fundamental cause of the growing gap between the genders remains little changed—a male-centered culture and political economy—the immediate behavioral factors underlying the imbalance have changed over time. In the very early years, infanticide and the short-term concealment of girls were important; since the mid-to-late 1980s the major "proximate cause" of the distorted sex ratio has been prenatal sex determination followed by sex-selective abortion (Chu 2001). The key technology in this new techno-phenomenon is the ultrasound scanner, available throughout the countryside since the mid 1980s, which allows identification of the sex of the fetus by around the fourth month. In areas of the country where fieldwork has been done, the scanning of fetuses, especially of second children, has become a routine part of the culture of family formation (Chu 2001).

The disappearance of girls from China's male-centered society, coupled with the rapid rise in marriage costs, has led to a growing crisis for men unable to find brides. Demographic research indicates that, of the cohorts born between 1980 and 2000—those expected to marry between 2005 and 2025—there is an excess of 22 million men, meaning that 10.4 percent of all men will fail to marry in the traditional way. Those affected appear to be mainly poor, ill-educated men from the rural areas. These "surplus men," as they are called in state planning speak, are overwhelmingly poor, illiterate, and rural. For these men, and perhaps for the nation, these numbers portend a real-world social crisis of monumental proportion.

One interesting aspect of these numbers is the state's public silence about them. The rise in the sex ratio at birth was not even acknowledged by the population establishment until around 1993, when the fertility rate fell to below replacement level, allowing the regime to address some of the adverse consequences of rapid fertility decline. Today, the media are constantly flooded with social and economic statistics demonstrating the nation's modernization and global advance, yet, with the exception of a short period around 2007, statistics on the sex ratio and number of older rural bachelors have rarely been publicized. Until very recently, when the campaigns against sex-selection abortion and human trafficking (described below) have picked up, the numbers were surrounded by a stark silence.

Guanggun: Cultural Histories

The term "*guanggun*" may have been appropriated recently for commercial purposes, but it holds much deeper, historically rooted cultural meanings. The "bare stick" was one of the most pitiable figures on the social landscape of pre-Communist China. Poor and ill educated, village men who had no wife, no children, and no way to fulfill their filial duties had no place in the social order. In the eyes of most Chinese, an unmarried and sonless man was consigned to being a perpetual adolescent, unable to become a true adult or a man (R. Watson 1986). In the early years of the People's Republic, such people-out-of-place largely disappeared, only to reappear after Mao's death.

"*Guanggun*" meant not only unattached, but also outcast and vaguely if not explicitly threatening to public order. Throughout late imperial and Republican-era Chinese history, the bare sticks were widely disparaged and even feared. That is because marriage and family tied men to their village community; those without family connections were seen as itinerant, unsettled, untrustworthy, and threatening to the social order. Work on bandits and rebels suggests that unattached men on the margins of lineage and village life, and unable to fulfill gender expectations, often engaged in petty violence and took on the role of village bullies. Sometimes they formed heterodox groupings such as rebel bands and secret societies (Ownby 1996; 2002). At other times they formed fraternal associations, that, according to the work of historians and anthropologists, involved people banding together for mutual aid and protection, rather than

gangs of criminals or rebel bands challenging authority (J. Watson 1989). Although these groups appear to have been at least as much about mutual support as about petty to serious violence, in popular lore the *guanggun* were known as bullies, bandits, and rebels. Informal conversations with colleagues in China suggest that these associations linger, subtly shaping cultural and political constructions of the *guanggun* as a contemporary problem.

"Women": State Logics and Practices of Gender

After over a decade of silence, in the early 1990s the party-state began quietly addressing the growing gender gap; a decade later, it put the sex ratio at birth on the public policy agenda. This pattern of state care has a certain logic. As noted above, in the early reform years, the party-state took charge of the Chinese population, taking upon itself for the first time responsibility for using science to foster a biologically optimal population. Following a Foucauldian logic, if only implicitly, the goal operated at two biopolitical poles—improving the welfare of the Chinese people (an anatamo-politics of the body) and boosting the nation's place on world stage (the field of biopolitics proper). Drawing on a series of Western population sciences, the state set its initial bio-goal as solving the crisis of "too rapid population growth" (the quantity problem). As rapid fertility decline in the 1980s and early 1990s led to not only below-replacement fertility but also a widening gender gap and accelerated aging, the state added a second bio-commitment: ensuring a reasonable age-sex structure of the population. A distorted age-sex structure would create havoc in state development planning and in people's lives as they sought to marry, raise one or two children, and create a good life for themselves. A distorted sex structure in the reproductive age group would mean some would be unable to marry—a disaster for the regime as much as for the individuals involved.

The commitment to fostering a "quality" population structure was also part of China's responsibility to the world at large. China takes its international reputation with utmost seriousness; in a world in which major transnational development agencies, such as the United Nations Children's Fund, the United Nations Population Fund, and the World Bank, are constantly stressing gender equity and the "missing girls," righting the sex structure is a crucial piece of China's emergence as a responsible member of the world community of nations. State legitimacy, then—in eyes of the people and of the trans-

national social policy community—now hinges in part on righting the gender imbalance and so bringing the population into quality state.

How, then, would the party-state tackle this thorny problem? After years of public denial, around 2000 China's government finally began to openly acknowledge the gender imbalance problem and place it on the policy agenda. The socially oriented administration of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao (2003–12) made arresting the rise in the sex ratio at birth a top priority and, drawing on the work of expert advisors, introduced numerous laws, policies, and programs to enhance the well-being of young girls and women (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005; Shen 2008). Given China's longstanding commitment to making women equal to men, it is perhaps not surprising that the issue of the sex ratio at birth was fitted into preexisting Marxian framings of the woman question. Following well-established constructions of "women's subordination," in the official and scientific framing, the missing girls problem is attributed most basically to feudal culture (*zhongnan qingnu*, "valuing males, devaluing females"); the solution is for the party-state to promote advanced gender-equitable culture, support women's continued liberation, and protect women, guaranteeing their constitutional equality with men. In support of this agenda, in 1995 "male-female equality" was made one of only a handful of top-priority "basic state policies" (Zhao and Qiu 2008).

Formalizing the approach, an important 2007 decision on population set out a wide range of educational, social, economic, and legal responses to "comprehensively address the abnormal sex ratio at birth" (China 2007). The birth establishment has initiated a broad set of activities designed to eliminate discrimination against girls and women and improve their status in the family and society. These include a massive propaganda effort aimed at reducing son preference and promoting gender equality, wide-ranging programs to improve job and other opportunities for women, and a much-publicized Action to Foster (or Care for) Girls designed to boost their well-being through preferential treatment for rural girl-child families that have accepted birth planning. On the legal front, the state has worked hard to popularize legal knowledge about the protection of the legitimate rights and interests of women and children.

Beyond these two approaches—involving cultural change and socioeconomic incentives—since the early 1990s, the state has also relied on law-and-order measures to crack down on medical workers who engage in illegal sex determination and sex-selective abortion for non-medical reasons. In August 2011, the Population Commis-

sion, together with the Ministries of Health and Public Security, launched an eight-month nationwide campaign to reduce the incidence of these "two illegals" (*China Daily* 2012). As of May 2012, according to the Minister of Population, authorities had investigated fifteen thousand cases and punished thirteen thousand people for violating the law (Xinhua 2012b). These numbers are likely to represent a small fraction of the total number of cases of illegal gender manipulation. Officials were clearly not satisfied with the results, for the campaign was extended (*China Daily* 2012; Xinhua 2012b). With legislators in the National People's Congress calling for harsher methods—including crippling fines and multiyear jail terms (Xinhua 2012a)—this law-and-order approach, which relies on criminalizing gender-biased medical practices, is likely to remain a major plank in the state's approach to the problem for some time to come.

In addition to these measures, the state has introduced two other important measures designed in part to normalize the sex ratio among infants (and reduce rural fertility). First, it has greatly improved the rural social security system (including old-age pensions), hoping to discourage parents' preference for boys to support them in old age. And second, it has quietly softened the birth policy to allow couples made up of two single children or, more recently, containing one single child, to have two offspring of their own.

In the mid 2010s, the distorted gender structure is a growing concern, as the number of men unable to find brides rises year by year and the social problems they face—and cause—become more visible. Today the gender gap is one of "five major population problems" the population establishment is addressing (Xinhua 2011a). Reflecting concern that the state will not achieve its goal of lowering the sex ratio at birth to 115 by 2015, 2012 was designated the Year of Focused Management of the Sex Ratio at Birth (Y. Wang 2012). With state support, many foreign and Chinese non-governmental organizations have flooded into the field of girl-care. How effective these efforts have been or will be remains unclear. Although the officially measured ratio has fallen recently—from a high of 120.56 in 2008 to 117.78 in 2011—it is not clear if this decline is real or an artifact of measurement procedures (Xinhua 2012b). What one can say with certainty is that, in a larger culture and political economy that in many ways encourage discrimination against girls and women, restoring the sex ratio to normal is likely to be a long-term prospect indeed.

Effectiveness aside, two things are striking about these measures. First, virtually all of them aim to normalize the sex ratio at birth in

the future. None addresses the gender gap among children or young adults today. Second, following dominant party framings, all are addressed to helping women and girls; none is aimed at alleviating the problems of men, in particular, the men who cannot find brides. These efforts—which are part of a much larger package of policies, programs, and ten-year development plans for women—are critical to the legitimacy of a party-state that has made "male-female equality" part of its foundational charter. Men are the unmarked, presumably advantaged, comparison group. This difference in official attention is rooted in part in Chinese Marxism, in which gender equates with women, and gender policies with helping women (and girls). Men (or "patriarchy" or "son preference") are positioned as the problem, the object of party and state ire. In practice—if not in official policy—men are treated as much less worthy of humanitarian care or support and concern.

The rural men who cannot find brides suffer not only from their maleness, but also, and equally importantly, from their peasantness. Although there is not space to elaborate here, in the reform decades, rural people have been positioned as "backward" in the Chinese scheme of things, hindrances to the nation's modernization and upward mobility. As the divide between rural and urban has widened, rural people, and especially poor, ill-educated villagers, are seen not as treasured resources who might contribute to the nation's goals, but as problems to be dispensed with as quickly as possible (Cohen 1993; Gaetano and Jacka 2004; Kelliher 1994; Whyte et al. 2010). Far from deserving official support, they are viewed as deeply unworthy of much consideration or care. For the rural bachelors, gender differences have interacted with rural/urban inequalities to place them apparently beyond care and support.

"Social Stability": Western Science and Party Priorities

Given the centrality of marriage and family in Chinese society, the inability of growing numbers of men to form families has worrying implications for China's future. Just as scientific logics shaped the one-child policy, they have also shaped official thinking about which of those implications should matter for politics and state policy. For many years, Chinese social scientists have been hampered by state restrictions on this sensitive topic, but Western scholars in security studies, demography, and public health have plunged into the issue, creating a narrative in which growing numbers of bach-

elors will form a mobile army of violent males that will threaten China's sociopolitical stability and perhaps make it more bellicose abroad. In the absence of concrete data on how the surplus men are coping on the ground, the scholarly literature has drawn on theoretical insights, historical precedents, scattered journalistic reports, and survey data on other groups to assess the implications. In their influential book, *Bare Branches: The Security Implications of Asia's Surplus Male Population,* security scholars Valerie M. Hudson and Andrea M. Den Boer (2004) foresee the spread of violent crime—from smuggling and prostitution to robbery, rape, and murder—and the export of violence to neighboring countries (see also Ebenstein and Jennings 2009; Edlund et al. 2007). Public health researchers and demographers warn of the potential for an HIV/AIDS epidemic of previously unimagined scale, as the surplus men migrate to cities to have sex with commercial sex workers, risking contracting HIV and becoming a bridge population from high- to low-risk individuals (Ebenstein and Jennings 2009; Poston and Zhang 2009; Tucker et al. 2005).

The scientific figure of the sex-starved, violence-prone rural bachelor accords with the Chinese Communist Party's own rural imaginary, at least the one that became public for a short time a few years ago. In January 2007, the party's Central Committee and the governmental State Council issued a report saying that the gender ratio imbalance amounted to a "hidden danger" for society that "will affect social stability" (*China Daily* 2007), an obsession of the ruling party. Reflecting the top leadership's official security framing, in 2007 and 2008 the population establishment began articulating a narrative of impending demographic crisis in which a large mass of potentially violent unmarried men constitutes a "social time bomb" (*China Daily* 2007) that threatens the regime's cherished goals of creating a "harmonious society" and fostering China's "peaceful rise" in the world. Commissioned by the government, some universities began studying the matter, labeling the topic "surplus men and social stability" (Xinhua 2007).

Although this rural bachelor–threat framing seems to have been short-lived, at least in public utterances, social stability remains a predominant concern of the party, especially given the recent leadership transition in late 2012. In a mid-2012 statement, Population Minister Wang Xia expressed concern about the sex imbalance because it causes a "series of social problems," including sex crimes and trafficking in women (Xinhua 2012b). The scientific and, in turn, official framing of the problem is critically important because it will

shape the policy measures adopted, and, in turn, the kinds of subject positions, forms of citizenship, and solutions to their life problems available to these men. Although no policy directed toward the men specifically has been articulated, a threat framing implies harsh, authoritarian measures, quite the opposite of the supportive measures directed toward rural women and girls.

Official and scientific framings aside, what is happening at the village level? The very limited research on the rural bachelors suggests a plight not that different from the one the *guanggun* faced in earlier centuries. Some, of course, have migrated to the cities in search of work and wives. Yet for many, obligations in the villages foreclose that option. In one small-scale study in the northern province of Hebei, bachelors were allotted poor-quality land and housing at family division. As the last in their families to find wives, they were responsible for the support of the parents. Unable to take jobs outside the village, they were often forced to work for others, leading to a loss of face. Lacking support from their families and their communities, the bachelors faced lives of severe social discrimination and economic destitution. Another study—in the east-central province of Anhui—paints a picture of extreme privation in which involuntary bachelors experience lower socioeconomic status, weaker social support system, and more fragile psychological states than married men (Huang 2007; Li et al. n.d.) Whether some are turning to violence to right these social wrongs, we simply do not know.

"Crime": Party Crackdown

Given the personal stakes, older rural men seem to be trying every means conceivable—legal and illegal—to secure a bride or, failing that, simply a child. Informal discussions with Chinese researchers over the last few years suggest that men in different areas are dealing with the bride shortage in different ways. In the border areas of the northeast and southwest, the dearth of local brides has been met by importing women from North Korea, Vietnam, and Myanmar, and, more recently, also from Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Mongolia. (Xinhua 2011d). Men in border provinces sometimes travel abroad to select their bride personally; in other cases, they work through middlemen to acquire "mail-order brides." Both ethnographic research and some press reports suggest that many women from these countries are eager to marry men they perceive as wealthier than men in their home countries (Belanger et al. 2010). In poor interior

provinces, interviews suggest, the scarcity of marriageable women has given rise to culturally non-preferred forms of union, including polyandrous unions (*yiqi duofu*) in which the wife of one man informally services several others.

Increasingly since the late 1980s, the urgent need of poor peasant men for brides has been met by the development of clandestine smuggling networks involved in the long-distance buying and selling of young women (*maimai hunyin*) (Chao 2005; Han and Eades 1995; Zhuang 1993). In the most common pattern, girls are purchased or kidnapped from their families in poverty-stricken areas of the southwest, often promised jobs, and then transported long distances to villages in the northeast, where they are bought by poor villagers desperate for a wife and family (Fan and Huang 1998). To pay the high bride prices, men often save for years and borrow from family members. These arrangements have sometimes proven disastrous, with brides absconding with the bride payments, to the great distress of the grooms and their families (Fong 2009; He 2010). In central China, some men unable to marry are adopting daughters to provide future support.[4] Those unable to find brides in these or other ways may have no marriage prospects at all. These men may live together in bachelor communities, where they join forces to manage life's problems, or form a spatially dispersed bachelor underclass (for reports from the Guangxi and Guizhou regions, see He 2010).

Reflecting the official construction of the men as violent threats to social stability and public security, the party has responded by criminalizing the trafficking in women and children. Although police efforts to crack down on smuggling networks and *maimai hunyin* (marriage by purchase) started as early as the 1980s, as the number of men who cannot find brides has grown in recent years, these efforts have become increasingly public and strident. Frequent media reports announce how many kidnapped women and children have been rescued and returned to their homes by the police (e.g., forty-two thousand between 2001 and 2003). Between April 2009 and December 2011 a special campaign reportedly broke up 7,025 human trafficking groups with 18,518 children and 34,813 women rescued (Xinhua 2011e). In July 2011, the party announced a "people's war" against infant traffickers, who are now targeting rural transients in the cities who are too busy to watch their young children. Of course, there is no way to verify these numbers or put them in larger context. Nor is there any way to know how many of the women did not want to be "saved," but rather willingly left their

home counties or countries in an effort to escape poverty. What does seem clear is that, at least in official discourse on this issue, the unmarried rural men are being framed as violent, anti-state, quasi-criminal elements, while the party appears as the heroic rescuer of vulnerable women and children.

Conclusion: The Problem of the *Guanggun*—Reflections and Interventions

How then is the problem of the *guanggun* being articulated? Let us begin with how it is being framed. As the notion of assemblage suggests, the official framing of the issue is highly contingent, reflecting local cultures, sciences, and politics. Echoing a culture in which *guanggun* means threatening to the social order and gender often means women and children needing rescue from feudal patriarchal culture, a constellation of sciences in which the Western nations are the norm and the one-child policy is China's "only choice", and a politics in which the one-child policy is a key to transforming China into a global power under the Chinese Communist Party, the *guanggun* problem is being largely subsumed under the master problem of the sex ratio imbalance. Surrounded mostly in a shroud of silence, the rural bachelors appear in public discourse not as sympathetic figures to be helped, but primarily as threats to the sociopolitical order to be contained by a firm criminal justice system and an able police force which courageously uncovers criminal smuggling networks and rescues vulnerable women and children.

As for interventions, the dominant one is a cluster of cultural and socioeconomic (and legal) measures aimed at helping women become equal to men. As the open discussion of the rural men as "threats to sociopolitical stability" of 2007 and 2008 makes clear, the leadership is concerned about the unmarriageability of China's older rural men, taking quiet measures to alleviate the situation for future generations. These include a gradual relaxation of the one-child policy (dubbed an "extension of the one-child-with-exceptions policy") and a strengthening of the rural social security system, as well as continued education to teach the populace that "women are the equal of men." What is striking is how few measures are directed at helping the older men now in the population resolve their marriage and fatherhood problems. Although rural local officials in some areas are reportedly breaking the law to assist some of the men in their villages secure families and in that way become stable forces in the

village, at the level of the political center, little that is visible is being done. The most visible central-level measure is to criminalize men's efforts to purchase brides (and sometimes children) from intermediaries, making unavailable one of the only ways open to many to secure a family and ensure themselves a life that accords with the conventions of Chinese culture.

Clearly, much is at stake in how this problem is articulated, not only for the rural men—many of whom seem to face dim prospects of ever marrying and having a child—but also for the leadership, whose promises to ensure sociopolitical stability are fundamental to its continued legitimacy. As an assemblage of changeable, historically fluctuating elements, the problem-space of the older bachelors remains unstable, so the framing could shift in response to any number of changes. Certainly, as the number of *guanggun* rises—and it will, given the demography of the one-child policy—this issue will become more prominent on the political agenda, whether quietly or publicly. The state may be forced to address the issue, if not by helping them find brides or children, then by essentially taking them out of the reproductive population by providing long-term jobs in national construction, say, or the military.[3] Yet as long as the cultural presumptions about gender (among others) remain in place, whatever the measures directed at them, China's rural men are unlikely to be the objects of compassion and care. Facing the dual burden of manhood (and thus not needing help) and peasanthood (thus inherently "backward" in the grand scheme of Chinese modernity), they seem to be just one of the barely mentionable social costs of the one-child policy.

Notes

1. See Attane and Guilmoto (2007) for a deeper analysis.
2. The emergence of the "bare sticks" also poses many ethical problems, but ethical reflections remain publicly indecipherable so I do not pursue them here.
3. Indeed, given the "low quality" of the rural bachelors, evidenced by their poverty, farm status, and low levels of education, the state may quietly prefer that they not reproduce, since their reproduction would likely lower the overall quality of the population. Such logic is consistent with calls over the years for well-educated urban professionals to be allowed more than one child.
4. Based on conversations with Kay Ann Johnson, a professor of Asian Studies and Politics at Hampshire College; for more on this see Johnson (2004).

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