Patriarchal Demographics?
China's Sex Ratio
Reconsidered

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Since Amartya Sen published his pathbreaking research on the "missing women" of Asia two decades ago (Sen 1989, 1990), the distorted sex ratio at birth and consequent masculinization of Asian societies have become a growing focus of scholarly and media attention. Across East, South, and even West Asia, the masculinization of sex ratios has been proceeding at a pace unprecedented in recorded history. Christophe Guilmoto has documented male-heavy infant sex ratios that range from 112 boys per 100 girls in India, Pakistan, and Vietnam, to 120–121 in China and tiny Azerbaijan and Armenia (the international average is 105; Attané and Guilmoto 2007; Guilmoto 2009). Seeking to draw attention to this relatively neglected "revolution" of "rampant demographic masculinization," Guilmoto foresees a future in which Asian sex ratios will continue to rise over the next few decades, spreading in epidemic fashion, before eventually falling below 110 before 2050 (Hvistendahl 2011, p. 5; Guilmoto 2009). If high sex ratios are part of the world's post-transition demographic future—they have already boosted the global sex ratio at birth from 105 to 107—how we understand them is critically important.

The prospect of a "world without women" has attracted keen interest in the news media. Journalists, of course, add human interest by enlivening the scholarly narratives with provocative words and images. For example, in a recent commentary in *Newsweek*, historian Niall Ferguson (2011) suggests that Ernest Hemingway's 1927 collection of short stories, *Men Without Women*, provides a preview of tomorrow's Asia. The stories feature gangsters, bullfighters, wounded soldiers, and killers—clearly what Ferguson envisions for Asian men.

Fundamental to the growing body of work on the sex ratio at birth (below, simply sex ratio) is the explicit or implicit notion of patriarchy. Although rarely defined, the term tends to be deployed as an overarching concept to signify a fundamental power differential between men and

women in which women are invariably the victims and men the unnamed perpetrators of gender wrongs.[1] In this literature, the term often implies not just gender inequality in social resources, but also an essential, biologically based difference between men and women. Perhaps precisely because it is not defined, its meaning assumed to be already established or just obvious, the term patriarchy (or a surrogate) has proven remarkably supple, fitting comfortably into the otherwise distinct discourses of demography, public health, anthropology, and security studies (among other fields), where it quietly structures—and limits—data collection, analysis, and interpretation. In demography, patriarchy, "based on the submission and exploitation [of women]," is a central concept in Guilmoto's (2009) theory of sex ratio transition: the sex ratio rises in response to the patriarchal value of son preference (in combination with falling fertility and the spread of sex-selective technology) and then falls when "the patriarchal system" is undermined. Demographers Poston and Zhang (2009) see the high sex ratio as in part a product of a Confucian patriarchal tradition marked by strong son preference and female subordination. In anthropology, Barbara Miller offers the term "patriarchal demographics" to describe the social and cultural roots of uneven sex ratios among infants (Miller 2001). In security studies, Hudson and den Boer (2004) do not use the term patriarchy, but their depiction of a world of violent, testosterone-driven unmarried males who threaten social stability embeds core assumptions associated with the term. The examples are countless.[2]

Population specialists are familiar with the troubling political effects of such loaded constructs as "fertility crisis" and "population bomb." Yet few have reflected on the political work done by more mundane, seemingly neutral, and even politically progressive terms such as "patriarchy." Few have considered the possibility that that term (and its surrogates) has not only reflected the world they are trying to understand, but also actively shaped the field of demographic reality, constraining their views of it, narrowing public policy responses, and perhaps even reproducing the wrongs they are trying to undo. In this essay I consider such possibilities.

Such possibilities emerge from an analytic perspective that emphasizes how scientific and political discourses on social problems are humanly shaped and, in turn, shape social and demographic reality. Described elsewhere, this "governmental" problematic sees science as situated within politics, and it views power as not only negative and repressive, but also positive and productive, giving rise to new fields, new subjects, new bodies, and more.[3] Stressing the power of discourses—historically specific bodies of knowledge that structure how things can be said and that produce effects—I take a close look at scientific and official state discourse to see how particular social problems are probematized—that is, framed or formulated, and intervened in in particular ways (cf. Ong and Collier 2005). As elements of discourse, scientific and of-

ficial framings of the problem are highly consequential, helping to constitute the very political and sociodemographic field that is emerging and to shape the policies and other interventions that are adopted. By specifying particular "subject positions" for their targets ("rural girls," "two-daughter couples," and so on), policies also shape people's subjectivities, or identities, and the life options available to them. My interest here then lies not in the demography or anthropology of the "surplus men," but in how the problem of excess men is understood and acted upon by actors with the power to shape dominant societal discourses and policies toward them.

I examine how the problem of excess masculinity in China is being framed and intervened in and with what effect. Studying the problem in China, where the unmarried men are called "bare sticks" (*guanggun*), will allow us see how that huge nation is coping with one of the most adverse long-term social effects of its extremely rapid, essentially forced transition to low fertility. I ask four sets of questions. First, how is the problem being defined in scientific and political discourse? What assumptions about women and men do these framings make? Second, what larger historical, cultural, and political forces have shaped the formulations that have emerged? What notions of gender or patriarchy have emerged from each of these sites and been imported into the construction of the men? Third, how is the problem of the involuntary bachelors being managed (by what measures, policies, laws, and so on)? And fourth, what political work are the discursive framings and real-world measures doing? What is at stake in the making of this new field of biopolitics? I begin with a brief portrait of the "patriarchs" who are the focus of so much (or so little) attention.

The rural marriage crisis is still a very sensitive topic in China, one that remains little studied. The reality of the men's lives, as well as official, scholarly, and popular perceptions of them, can be only dimly perceived at best. I draw here 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 "bare sticks." What I offer, of course, is only a partial picture and preliminary interpretation based on the limited information available at this time. My hope is that my arguments will spur rethinking of the categories used in this work as well as new research on how those categories are reshaping life on the ground.

Rural patriarchs? A portrait of China's bare sticks

China is often called a patriarchal society, but the rural bachelors who dot the countryside are unlikely to see themselves in that term. Let us start with their numbers.

Some numbers

Since the introduction of the one-child policy in 1979–80, the sex ratio at birth has been steadily rising, climbing from 108.5 boys per 100 girls in 1982 to 118 in 2011.The gender gap is especially pronounced in poor, rural areas. An analysis of the ratio among children aged 0 to 4 reveals a national average of 120.2, but spatial clusters of counties in which the ratio ranges from 150 to 197.2 (Cai and Lavely 2007).

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 conventional way. Unless the sex ratio at birth declines, by mid-century over 15 percent of men will face that fate (Ebenstein and Jennings 2009). The situation is particularly severe in rural and remote areas, where men face massive out-migration of women to the cities as well as razor-thin incomes that make it impossible to meet the often heavy demands of brides' families. China's "surplus men" are thus overwhelmingly poor, illiterate, and rural.[4] For these men, these numbers portend a real-world social crisis of monumental proportion.

Not "real men"

Although small numbers of urban Chinese are now opting to remain childless, marriage and fatherhood remain essential to being a "real Chinese man." Without doubt this is especially true in the countryside (Brownell and Wasserstrom 2002). Despite the rise in divorce, marrying and perpetuating the family line remain a social imperative for men. By definition, men who do not marry and rear children cannot be "good men." Despite rapid social change, in the countryside having a wife and at least one child continues to be essential for social and even physical survival. Wives and children are critical parts of the family labor force, children provide vital support in old age, and sons are essential to carrying on the ancestral line.

Although some men have migrated to the cities in search of work and wives, those left behind, the limited research suggests, lead lives of social and economic marginalization. In one small-scale study in 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 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 (Huang 2007).

An important survey conducted by Xi'an Jiaotong University in 2009 (below, Xi'an survey) provides the first nationwide picture of the fate of involuntary bachelors throughout rural China. The survey covered 264 villages in 28 of China's 31 provincial-level units.[5] The survey reveals gender imbalance to be a pervasive feature of life in rural China today. In the villages surveyed, the sex ratio was 121.5 and there were 9 involuntary bachelors per village (or 2.7 per 100 households). Those men most likely to remain unmarried were poor or disabled. Unmarried older men (the average age was 41) suffered discrimination in nearly half (48 percent) the villages. In a society in which parents are responsible for finding brides for their sons by a reasonable age, the parents suffered as well, facing not only the lack of a son and daughter-in-law to support them, but also social disapproval and feelings of shame from not fulfilling one of their most fundamental duties.

Obtaining a bride, legally or otherwise

Given the personal and familial 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 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 2011c). Men in border provinces sometimes travel abroad to personally select their bride; 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, Lee, and Wang 2010). In poor interior provinces, interviews suggest the scarcity of marriageable women has given rise to culturally despised forms of union, including polyandrous arrangements (*yiqi duofu*) in which the wife of one man informally services several others.

Since the late 1980s, the urgent need of poor peasant men for brides has led to the proliferation of underground smuggling networks engaged in the long-distance purchase and sale of young girls and women (Zhuang 1993; Han and Eades 1995; Fan and Huang 1998; Chao 2005). Such trafficking appears to be on the rise. To pay the high prices for brides, poor rural men often save for years and borrow from family members. These arrangements have sometimes proven disastrous, as wily "brides" have turned to crime themselves, absconding with the bride payments (Fong 2009; He 2010). In the Xi'an survey, men in 40 percent of the villages had experienced abandonment by brides who were either stealing the brideprice or escaping forced marriages. In rural China these days, even smuggling often fails to produce the needed wife.

In some poor and remote areas, men cannot find wives by any means. Some work through informal networks to adopt daughters to support them in old age (Kay Johnson, personal communication, August 2012; also Johnson 2004). Others have no marital or parental prospects at all. Scattered reports suggest that these men may live together in bachelor communities where they join forces to manage life's problems, or form a spatially dispersed bachelor underclass (He 2010).

The term patriarchy would seem to have little relevance in this context. When masculinity is rural and poor, many men do not even have the power to secure a bride, the essential condition for social adulthood. Although few individuals in rural China are winners in the game of Chinese modernization, rural women seem to benefit from the new environment more than men, for they can migrate to cities to find jobs and look for higher-status husbands. The older rural men, far from perpetrators, would seem to be victims of China's gender culture and population politics, forced to turn to illegal means to survive. These brutal realities of rural bachelorhood, however, are rarely acknowledged by the political center.

Official framings

Official framings of social problems bear close attention, for they shape public policy and, in turn, individual identities and life prospects. The official construction of the sex ratio problem in China has changed over time, as the issue has moved from party to scientific discourse.

1979–93: An undiscussable issue

In the 1970s, when Chinese reproduction was guided by the later-longer-fewer policy, the sex ratio was not an issue because fertility limits were high enough that couples could achieve their preferred gender composition. That would change with the advent of the one-child policy in 1979–80. Unlike the age structure of the population, which was made a main target for normalization, the makers of China's new policy on population did not establish a normative sex ratio and make it a goal of official policy. This meant that, initially at least, the sex ratio would not be officially measured; in both literal and political senses, it did not count.

At the same time, the strong possibility that a strict one-child policy would lead to female infanticide rendered the sex ratio a politically sensitive and undiscussable topic. Throughout the long 1980s (1979–93), when female infanticide came to light and the sex ratio was beginning to rise, scholars were forbidden to do research or publish on it. Throughout the decade it would be framed in party, not scientific, discourse.

1993–2000: Rural girls and women as victims of feudal patriarchal culture

Despite the prohibition, during the 1980s some demographers began to use large-scale surveys done by the state to measure infant sex ratios. Far from some random killings of baby girls, the demographers discovered a worryingly large and growing gender gap at the national level. This demanded central-level attention. In the early 1990s, just as the party-state was winding up its last nationwide mass birth control campaign, some Beijing-based demographers took advantage of the political opening provided by the decline in fertility to replacement level, and energetically pressed then–Population Minister Peng Peiyun to bring the issue to the attention of top leaders. Their efforts bore fruit. (The results of their research were published in *PDR*; see Zeng et al. 1993.) In response, the state quietly reversed course, authorizing scholars to quietly study the sex ratio problem and how to fix it. In the early 1990s the party-state began addressing the growing gender gap. But given the political sensitivity of the problem, how would it be framed?

Initially, attending to gender issues was part of China's response to the new emphasis within international population policy on women's reproductive health and rights, which emerged from the UN Cairo Conference in 1994. In a world in which major transnational development agencies (UNICEF, UNFPA, and the World Bank, for example) were stressing gender equity and the "missing girls," attending to the gender question—which in China included women's health, gender equality, and the sex structure —was a crucial aspect of China's emergence as a responsible member of the world community.

In the late 1990s, the gender imbalance issue was given further emphasis by a new concern about "population quality." Since the advent of the one-child policy, China had sought to foster a new generation of healthy, well-educated "quality" single children. In the 1990s it became clear that the rapid decline in fertility was producing rapid aging and rising sex ratios at birth. A distorted age-sex structure would create havoc in state development planning and in people's lives. An abnormal sex structure in the reproductive age group would mean some would be unable to marry—a disaster for the regime as well as for the individuals involved. Worries about these issues gave rise to a new concern about creating a "quality population," one with a modern age and sex structure.

Given China's adherence to Marxian ideology and its longstanding commitment to women's liberation and male–female equality, it is not surprising that these gender issues, including the sex ratio at birth, were lumped together and fitted into pre-existing Marxian framings of the woman question. Following well-established constructions of "women's subordination" in the official and scientific framing, the missing girls problem was attributed most basically to feudal culture (*zhongnan qingnu*, valuing males, devaluing

females). Men were simply the unmarked perpetrators of gender wrongs. They did not appear in official discourse.

2000 to present: Men as threats to social stability

As their numbers began to rise and their presence to trouble the rural landscape, around 2005 official concern started to focus for the first time on unmarried older men. If previous constructions had focused on women as victims, these newer formulations emphasized men as perpetrators of various wrongs and dangers, biologically driven to violence. Unhampered by state restrictions, Western scholars in security studies, demography, and public health began delving into the issue, creating a narrative in which growing numbers of bachelors will form a mobile army of violent males who will threaten China's sociopolitical stability and perhaps make it more bellicose abroad. Lacking access to concrete data on how the "surplus men" were coping on the ground, the scholarly literature drew on limited sources—certain 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 Hudson and den Boer (2004) foresaw the spread of violent crime—from smuggling and prostitution to robbery, rape, and murder—and the export of violence to neighboring countries (also Edlund et al. 2007; Ebenstein and Jennings 2009). Elevated testosterone levels helped explain the tendency of unmarried males to be more violent, indeed to possess the potential to create some of the worst violence in Chinese history (Hudson and den Boer, pp. 195–196). Public health researchers and demographers warned 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 (Poston and Zhang 2009; Tucker et al. 2005; Ebenstein and Jennings 2009).

The Western-scientific figure of the sex-starved, violence-prone rural bachelor may have had an interested audience in Beijing, for it accorded with the party's own rural imaginary, at least the one that became public for a short time a few years ago.[6] In January 2007, the Central Committee and State Council issued a report saying that the gender ratio imbalance amounted to a "hidden danger" for society that "will affect social stability," an obsession of the ruling party. Reflecting the top leadership's official security framing, in 2007–08 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." Commissioned by the government, some university-based population centers began studying the matter, labeling the topic "surplus men and social stability." As a report by People's University put it, "When their basic biological demand is unable to be satis-

fied, the sex-starved male adult will become more violent" (Xinhua 2007). Although the language of the Population Commission[7] is less virulent now, the involuntary bachelors continue to be seen as threats to national stability. 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 2012).

Sources of anti-bachelor bias

If the violent tendencies of the rural male have not been scientifically or empirically established, what, besides some Western sciences, drives the animosity toward rural men? Although associations of violence and masculinity are found in many parts of the world, each society has its own variant of the image of "the violent male." China's is shaped by particular features of its culture, history, and politics. Here I offer a partial account of some of the elements that matter most.

Cultural histories: The "bare sticks"

The "bare sticks" were some of the most poignant 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 villagers, an unmarried and sonless man could never be seen as a true adult or real man (R. Watson 1986). In the early years of the PRC, such people-out-of-place largely disappeared, only to reappear in the post-Mao years.

In Chinese culture, *guanggun* has meant not only unattached, but also outcast and subtly or not so subtly threatening to public order. Throughout late imperial and Republican-era Chinese history, the "bare sticks" were widely disparaged and even feared. Historical research on bandits and rebels indicates that unattached men on the margins of lineage and village life, and unable to fulfill gender expectations, often engaged in petty violence and were known as "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 involved people banding together for mutual aid and protection (J. Watson 1989). In popular lore, however, the *guanggun* were known as bullies, bandits, and rebels. These associations appear to linger today, perhaps encouraging framings of the men as threats to social stability.

Class prejudice: "Backward peasants"

The rural bachelors suffer not only from their maleness, but also, and perhaps more importantly, from their peasantness. If, under Mao, peasants were the

makers of the Chinese revolution, in the reform decades rural people have been positioned as "backward" in the Chinese scheme of things, obstacles to the country's modernization and global rise. As the divide between rural and urban has widened, rural people, and especially poor, ill-educated villagers, are seen not as resources who might contribute to the nation's goals, but as problems to be dispensed with as quickly as possible (Cohen 1993; Kelliher 1994; Gaetano and Jacka 2004; Whyte et al. 2010). Far from deserving official support, they are viewed as deeply unworthy of official consideration. For rural bachelors, gender differences have interacted with rural–urban inequalities to place them apparently beyond official care and support.

Political constraints: An uncriticizable policy

A third reason for the hostility toward the bachelors and the silence regarding their plight can be found in the complex politics surrounding the one-child policy, which remains in place today (with significant exceptions for second children). Despite the many social costs the policy has incurred, in official discourse it remains a sacrosanct gift of the party to the Chinese nation, responsible for accelerating modernization by averting 400 million births. Clearly, talk of social costs such as the surplus men is never welcome, for it serves as an uncomfortable reminder that the policy's cost–benefit scoresheet is not as favorable as the party's glowing assessment suggests. Tellingly, only after the policy had done its most important work and fertility had dropped to replacement level was the regime willing to listen to its demographers' warnings about the sex ratio. It was only after an official determination that the rise in the sex ratio was due not only to the one-child policy, but also to a range of other features of China's development, that relatively open discussion of the problem was allowed. Given the continued sensitivity of the one-child policy, the bachelor issue must be framed in such a way that that policy escapes culpability. Alternative framings of the men—such as "unfortunate victims of the one-child policy"—are unlikely to be politically viable.

Party priorities: Stability above all

Finally, the regime's obsession with social stability makes it ever alert to threats to social harmony, especially in remote areas, and keen to smash them. During the 1980s and 1990s the party pursued economic growth at any cost, ignoring the social and cultural problems that inevitably emerged in its wake. Deeply worried about political unrest and social instability, the Hu Jintao–Wen Jiabao leadership (2003–12) redirected the party's priorities to solving those new social problems and to containing threats to political security. Given this larger concern, any evidence that one element of society poses threats to social order is likely to be seized on and acted upon. The

apparent receptivity of the leadership to the social science research portraying the men as social threats and disease vectors makes sense in light of this regime focus.

Interventions

How, then, has the party-state tackled this thorny problem? A review of a wide array of measures shows a close connection between the gendered framing of the problem and its official solution.

Helping rural women and girls

After years of public denial, around 2000 China's state finally began to openly acknowledge the gender imbalance problem and place it on the policy agenda. The socially oriented administration of Hu and Wen made halting the rise in the sex ratio at birth a 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). Following the Marxian framing of the gender question as women's subordination, the missing girls problem was attributed most basically to feudal culture. The solution was 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 a handful of top-priority "basic state policies" (Zhao and Qiu 2008).

　　Formalizing this broad approach, an important 2007 Decision on population set out a large set of educational, social, economic, and legal responses to "comprehensively address the abnormal sex ratio at birth" (Decision 2007). The population establishment has initiated a wide range 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 (1998–2000); wide-ranging programs to improve job and other opportunities for women; and a large-scale Action to Foster (or Care for) Girls designed to boost their well-being through preferential treatment for rural girl-only families that have accepted birth planning (2000 to present, with official launch in 2003). The state has worked continuously to popularize legal knowledge about the protection of the legitimate rights and interests of women and children.

　　In the 2000s, girl care has become a major industry. With state support, many foreign organizations (such as UNFPA, UNICEF, UNIFEM, Ford and Asia Foundations), as well as Chinese nongovernmental organizations, have flooded into the field of girl care, offering programs that treat rural girls as

victims of patriarchal culture who require care and support. To take but one example, the website of the organization All Girls Allowed calls for ending gendercide, educating abandoned orphans, rescuing trafficked children, and defending mothers («allgirlsallowed.org», accessed 29 August 2012). These activities, of course, are worthy, but they embed and perpetuate certain myths about the gender problem in the Chinese countryside, ones that seem to exclude men as figures deserving of assistance.[8]

"Perfecting" policies and programs

Beyond these cultural and socioeconomic approaches, the state has introduced two other measures designed in part to normalize the sex ratio among infants. 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. Second, since around 2000 it has quietly supported a two-child policy for certain couples (a change seen as conforming to the one-child-with-exceptions policy). As of late 2011, all 31 provincial-level units had adopted policies allowing couples composed of two single children to have two children of their own (Xinhua 2011b).

Criminalizing prenatal sex selection, sex-selective abortion, and human trafficking

The state has also relied on law-and-order measures to crack down on medical professionals who engage in illegal prenatal sex determination and sex-selective abortion for non-medical reasons. Since the early 1990s, all organizations and individuals have been "strictly forbidden" to perform these procedures, but these rules have been notoriously hard to enforce. In August 2011, the Population Commission, working with several other ministries, launched an eight-month nationwide campaign to reduce the incidence of these "two illegals" by revoking medical licences and meting out jail sentences. Officials were clearly not satisfied with the results, for the campaign was extended into 2012 (*China Daily* 2012; Xinhua 2012).

Although no official policy toward rural bachelors has been announced, the construction of these men as violent threats to public security implies harsh, authoritarian measures. Reflecting precisely that approach, the party has criminalized and actively prosecuted the trafficking in women and children. Although police efforts to eliminate smuggling networks and *maimai hunyin* (marriage by purchase) started as early as the 1980s, these efforts have become increasingly public and strident as the number of men unable to find brides has grown in recent years. Frequent media reports announce how many kidnapped women and children have been rescued and returned to their homes by the police (e.g., Xinhua 2011d). 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 the numbers or to know how many of the women did not want to be "saved," but instead willingly left their home counties or countries in an effort to escape poverty (Chao 2005). What does seem clear is that, in official discourse and practice, unmarried rural men are being treated like anti-state, quasi-criminal elements, while the party appears as the heroic rescuer of vulnerable women and children.

A growing concern

The distorted gender structure is a growing concern to the central government, as the number of men unable to find brides rises year by year and the social problems they face—and appear to cause—become more visible. Today the gender gap is one of "five major population problems" that the population establishment is addressing (Xinhua 2011a). Reflecting concern that the state will not achieve its goal of lowering the sex ratio to 115 by 2015, 2012 was designated the Year of Focused Management of the Sex Ratio at Birth (Wang 2012).

Despite the many resources devoted to reducing gender inequality and lowering the infant sex ratio, the results have been discouraging. Although the officially measured ratio has fallen recently—from a high of 120.6 in 2008 to 117.8 in 2011, it is not clear whether this decline is real or an artifact of measurement procedures (Xinhua 2012). In a 2007 report, the Chinese demographer Li Shuzhuo indicated that the efforts had had "a preliminary impact on the attempt to control SRB," yet were marred by continued weaknesses in many areas (Li 2007, p. 12). Li pointed to a host of obstacles, including the persistence of regulations supporting gender inequality, weak implementation of related laws and policies, the difficulty of carrying out policies in rural China (where sex-selective abortion is conducted in secret), the absence of an efficient evaluation system, and the difficulty of raising funds for the sex ratio issue in a political environment with many other issues competing for state attention and resources. As Li's report suggests, given the now-entrenched nature of the gender-imbalance problem, finding effective measures will be difficult indeed.

Effectiveness aside, what is striking about this large collection of measures devoted to lowering the sex ratio at birth is that, adhering to dominant party framings, all are geared to helping women and girls; none is aimed at alleviating the problems of rural men, in particular the men who cannot find brides. These efforts—which are part of a much larger package of policies, programs, and multi-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 and that sees its woman-work as important to its

identity as a responsible member of the world community. Men are the un-marked, presumably advantaged, comparison group. There are no ten-year development plans for them. 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 (carriers of "feudal patriarchal culture" and beneficiaries of "son preference") are positioned as the problem, the object of party and state ire, and subject to criminal restraint. In practice as well as in policy, China's rural men are treated as much less worthy of hu-manitarian care or support and concern than are women. They are, in short, targets to be punished, not helped.

Political productivities

How, then, is the problem of rural bachelors being framed? And what is that framing producing?

A Chinese articulation of the male marriage problem

Echoing China's distinctive culture, politics, and history, the *guanggun* prob-lem is being largely subsumed under the master problem of the "sex ratio imbalance," which in turn means "women's subordination." 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 socio-political order. As for interventions, the dominant one is a cluster of cultural, socioeconomic, and legal measures aimed at helping women become the equal of men. Clearly, the leadership is concerned about the unmarriage-ability of China's older rural men, taking quiet measures (relaxing the one-child policy, strengthening the social security system) to ease the situation for future generations. What is striking is how few measures are directed at helping older men resolve their marriage and fatherhood problems. Al-though rural local officials in some areas have occasionally broken the law to help men secure families and thereby become stable forces in the village, at the level of the political center little is being done. The growing number of bachelor villages suggests that the de facto policy seems to be to leave the men to their own devices. The most visible central-level measure is to criminalize men's efforts to purchase brides from intermediaries, making un-available 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.

Not quite human

Far from "mere discourse," the Chinese notion of patriarchy—women as needing state protection and support, men as inherently threatening and

requiring state restraint—has done a lot of political work. It has helped to narrow the range of framings that are thinkable, leaving only one way to understand and intervene in the rural bachelor problem. In principle, there are at least four ways the problems of rural men could be framed in Chinese official thought. Given the critical role of wives in the farm family economy, the bachelors could be labeled "poverty households," deserving of limited state support. Alternatively, they could be deemed innocent victims of the one-child policy; like couples having only one child or two girls, they could be labeled "sacrificers for the nation" who deserve state support. Third, they could be understood as "victims of their families' bad planning," undeserving of assistance from anyone. Finally, they could be considered potential threats to village stability to be dealt with by harsh, authoritarian measures. Each of these would fit into contemporary party discourse. As far as I can tell, only one—the last, and least humanitarian, framing—has been used to understand and respond to their situation.

The current approach to the issue works to dehumanize the bachelors, leaving them socially marginalized; economically at risk, with no one to support them in old age; politically excluded from the circle of citizens deserving care; and, for the many who will never have children, reproductively extinguished, with no offspring and no one to carry on the family line. The current strategy effectively treats them as not quite worthy of the category of human being. As poor, uneducated peasant men, they are already by definition "low quality" persons who not only do not help, but may even hinder, the nation's modernization. The state may even secretly welcome the men's non-reproductivity, fearing that any offspring would further lower the overall quality of the population.[9] But there is a risk involved: by using legal and other means to prevent the men from obtaining brides, and closing off the only route for many to marriage, the current approach may end up producing the very group of "sex-starved violent bachelors" the state seeks to check. Put another way, by offering the men only one subject position, one way of being in the world—that of "violent offender"—and treating them in that way, the policy encourages them to adopt that subjectivity and encourages others to marginalize and discriminate against them.

Rural realities: Complicating the story

If the current framing sees the world through only one gender lens, what aspects of rural reality remain outside the frame and thus invisible to policymakers? Although some women are indeed "vulnerable victims," this frame neglects the calculating women who cheat men by manipulating the marital inequalities in the countryside to their advantage, as well as those who are willing and eager to be transported long distances to marry. As for the men, do the bachelors threaten village security and social stability? Until

very recently, the claims that they do have been largely speculative, based on other types of data and historical analogies that are problematic at best. The 2009 Xi'an survey provides some empirical answers to these questions. Compared to married men, involuntary bachelors were seen by village cadres as more likely to be irritable (31.8 percent). Perhaps because, with no families, they had time on their hands, they were seen as loafers (45.6 percent) and gamblers (35.6 percent). In a very small number of villages they reportedly engaged in commercial sex (6.7 percent), harassed women (5.0 percent), and damaged others' marriages (4.7 percent). If such individual threats to public security and welfare were rare, group security incidents were even rarer. The proportions of villages experiencing group trouble-making, stealing, and fighting were 10.6, 8.4, and 7.8 percent, respectively. As the authors state, "Most village cadres report that problems caused by bachelors do not exist or are not serious." Only 6.3 percent indicated that the bachelor problems are "very serious," while another 15.5 percent indicated that they are "somewhat serious" in their villages. The authors conclude: "Thus, the problems caused by gender imbalance and the marriage squeeze at present appear not to be too serious...so there is still an opportunity for the government and society to take positive measures to prevent further deterioration" (Jin et al. 2012, p. 26). In other words, at least so far, the threat narrative is overwrought. Although it is impossible to know what the future will bring, I am suggesting that the state can influence the future by how it chooses to frame this growing problem. By reframing the bachelors as poverty households deprived of a family labor force or by labeling their plight an "unfortunate social cost of the one-child policy," the state would have the political grounds to provide the kinds of support to the bachelors that would discourage them from turning to violent or other anti-social means to meet their needs.

The need for new constructs

This discussion, though limited by a lack of data, suggests the need to rethink the core concepts used in the study of the sex ratio at birth and subject them, including their underlying assumptions about the genders, to empirical test. Such concepts must reflect social life in countryside. When scholarly research and public policy rely on the notion that rural men are violent and threatening, most of the data gathered on them and made available to policymakers seem to relate to their violent behaviors. But the Chinese bachelors have other attributes, including admirable traits that might contribute to village welfare. In the Xi'an survey, village cadres viewed the involuntary bachelors as being helpful (40.4 percent), thrifty (52.5 percent), and, above all, filial (62.2 percent). While many scholars and government officials have railed against the perceived negative behaviors of the "bare sticks," few have (at

least openly) considered the possible benefits involuntary bachelors might offer their villages—and society as a whole. But they should do so—and the Xi'an project may have been designed precisely to begin changing the discourse in Beijing.

This discussion also suggests the need to rethink the larger field of research and policy on the sex ratio and male marriage. Certainly, the notion of patriarchy captures the reality of sharp male–female disparities throughout Asia and, indeed, much of the rest of the world. In the literature on the sex ratio, the term patriarchy has served as a useful consciousness-raising device, pointing to a problem that deserves much more attention. But, left undefined and unattached to a robust theory of gender that recognized gender's already classed, raced, and sexed nature, the term patriarchy has done some not so helpful work, work of analytic, political, and even ideological sorts. Too-easy use of the term has limited understanding and data collection, constricted vision, and narrowed policy choices. Failure to carefully define and delimit patriarchy has allowed ugly biases about certain men, certain ethnic groups, and certain classes to enter the field of discourse unchallenged. In the policy arena, constructions of men as inherently violent and outside the field of humanity both imply and, in China, have encouraged, the application of harsh, authoritarian measures that may be counterproductive, fostering the very violence they set out to contain. The constructs population specialists use matter because, among other things, they inform state perception and public policy. My aim here has been not to present a definitive interpretation, but to point to conceptual lapses and unexpectedly worrying social and political productivities in hopes that others will take up the intellectual and political challenges mapped out above.

Notes

1 In some other demographic research on gender, the term patriarchy is carefully defined and theoretically contextualized.

2 They extend into the media as well. Media treatments of the looming excess of men rarely mention the word patriarchy, but its implicit assumptions of female victimization and biologically rooted male aggression infuse popular discourse on the topic. In his *Newsweek* essay, for example, Ferguson writes:

> It may be that the coming generation of Asian men without women will find harmless outlets for their inevitable frustrations.... But I doubt it. Either this bachelor generation will be a source of domestic instability, whether Brazilian-style crime or Arab-style

> revolution—or, as happened in Europe, they and their testosterone will be exported. There's already enough shrill nationalism in Asia as it is. Don't be surprised if, in the next generation, it takes the form of macho militarism and even imperialism. Lock up your daughters. (Ferguson 2011)

Although such language is extreme, this passage illustrates with particular clarity the ease with which patriarchal assumptions can travel between the academy and the wider culture.

3 See Greenhalgh 2008; Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005.

4 In 2000, roughly 4 percent of men aged 40 had never married, while 27 percent of

those with the lowest level of schooling were not married (Wang and Mason 2004; Tucker et al. 2005).

5 Although the use of village cadres as respondents (rather than the bachelors themselves) limits the value of the findings—cadres' own political interests may well have colored their responses—the data are valuable nonetheless.

6 The Western science work may have had an influence on the 2007–08 framing; this possibility requires further research.

7 Formally, the National Population and Family Planning Commission of China.

8 Urban bachelors are better off in the mating game, having access to internet dating sites and even billboards to advertise for brides.

9 Such a logic about the appeal to the state of bachelor non-reproductivity is consistent with calls over the years for well-educated urban professionals to be allowed more than one child.

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