



John James Kennedy and Yaojiang Shi. *Lost and Found: The “Missing Girls” in Rural China*

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Kennedy and Shi make a compelling intervention in debates about China’s masculinised sex ratios and how birth planning policies were implemented in rural regions during the 1980s to early 2000s. They challenge conventional wisdom about the extent of and the reasons for masculinised sex ratios at birth in China’s population statistics during the late 1980s and into the 2000s. They join a handful of other scholars (e.g. Yong Cai, William Lavelly and Daniel Goodkind) in identifying the underreporting of female births as part of the explanation for ‘missing girls’ in the official statistics but they give underreporting far more weight than has hitherto been the case.

Scholarly opinion for the past fifteen years has held that dramatic masculinisation of China’s sex ratios at birth – approximately 111 males for every 100 females in the 1990 census, 117 in the 2000 census and 118 in the 2010 census – is attributable to a combination of: son preference, falling family size, and wide availability of technology for foetal sex detection and sex-selective abortion. Furthermore, after 1984 in most rural regions these afore-mentioned influences on sex ratios at birth unfolded in the environment of a 1.5 child policy: if the first child was a girl, couples could space then have another child, with masculinisation of sex ratios at birth intensifying at second and higher order births. China researchers generally accept that in the twenty-first century at least 20 million males of marriageable age were ‘surplus’ because of the distortions in sex ratios at birth of previous decades.

Kennedy and Shi’s comparison of birth cohorts in 1990 with 10-year olds in 2000 and 20-year-olds in 2010 lead them to the striking finding that just over half of the girls missing in China’s official birth statistics – approximately ten million – ‘appear’ among older cohorts, especially between the ages of ten to fifteen years, indicating that many of the ‘missing girls’ are alive in the general population. Ten million is a revised

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calculation from fifteen million following the authors' exchange with Yong Cai and their subsequent re-examination of census data that is complicated and of variable quality (see *China Quarterly*, September 2017). Kennedy and Shi's revised estimate remains higher than that of Yong Cai's and others' and will stimulate ongoing debate about the number of truly missing girls in China.

Most of the book explores the politics of 'non-reporting' and centre-local relations. The authors judiciously apply Michael Lipsky's (1980) insights about street-level bureaucrats in analysing (1) materials on registration practices from the Ming dynasty through to 2010, and (2) interviews with officials, birth planning cadres, midwives, and families in four villages in two counties in Shaanxi province. This provides a robust basis for them to delineate different facets of local officials' and villagers' *mutual non-compliance* with the requirement to register births after one month. In the four villages where the research team conducted interviews, ten to 15 % of births during the 1990s and early 2000s were unreported while evidence indicates that non-reporting was also common elsewhere.

The book has many strengths. Firstly, it sheds light on 'state capacity' and the 'principal-agent problem' through a thickly contextualised discussion of population policy implementation in rural China in the 1980s to early 2000s. Vignettes enrich this elaboration of context: for instance, in a county public security bureau, when processing people's household registration (*hukou*) applications, officials only glanced at the pregnancy certificates without documenting them. In this way they resolved 'in-house' discrepancies between their records and those of the county family planning department (pp.144–145).

The book also provides detailed analysis of temporal and spatial variation in regimes of registration. The authors show holistically that variation in mutual non-compliance practices influenced not only the accuracy of official data about the registration of births but also of marriages, landholding size, and grain production. This aspect of the text will be useful in research methods courses when teaching students about the critiquing of official data.

Finally, vivid portraits of village officials, rural parents and one unregistered 'missing girl' highlight the human experience of mutual non-compliance. Village officials struggled with performing their compliance with birth registration requirements while concealing out-of-quota births. Rural parents increasingly valued daughters, but still practised an administrative bias in registering boys earlier, often postponing registering births to avoid heavy family planning fines. Rarely addressed in the wider literature, 'missing' girls' lives were also affected by mutual non-compliance, as revealed in the story of Meishan. As a child she moved households three times to avoid detection and suffered bullying for being a 'black' *hukou* person (pp. 182–188). The book would have benefited from the inclusion of more of the stories of the missing girls. This is partly so that the manifold harms of coercive state interventions in reproduction and family life remain in view and are more comprehensively understood, even as the magnitude of one dimension of harm – the sex ratio at birth – may be less severe than previously thought. Overall, this fascinating, provocative and lucid book is a must-read for all scholars of China's history, politics, society, demography and gender.

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