BOOK REVIEWS

Shi Lihong (2017): Choosing Daughters. Family Change in Rural China.
Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 208 pp.

When Amin Maalouf's book entitled *The First Century after Beatrice* (*Le Premier siècle après Béatrice*, 1992) was first published in English (1994), a journal article predicted that the events described by Maalouf will "unlikely to metamorphose."[1] The novel describes a dystopian future of a world in which births of male prevail over births of female children due to an unethically developed chemical. The planet becomes imbalanced because of the broken birth-ratio: once this chemical is taken only boys are delivered. The world breaks on two unjust halves: the North and the South. Violent crime in North rises and the South drops in a dark abyss of civil unrest, riots and finally, anarchy. Women become rare and in the North they face kidnappings and handling of women and girls; the maternity wards are guarded by the army and human trafficking skyrockets and the South descends into a nightmarish no-man's-land from where only a few lucky refugees escape.

At the time when Maalouf wrote his novel the first publications on selective abortions and birth disproportions were already sounding the alarm.[2] Due to the development of the prenatal diagnostic technology[3] ultrasound scanning becomes a routine in prenatal care already starting from the 1980s, hence the prenatal sex discernment of the fetus becomes possible and easily accessible. The development of the ultrasound was declared as one of the greatest advances of the 20th century in Gynecology and Obstetrics[4] but it turned out—as usually—that there is no medical marvel which can't be used and abused at the same time: societies in which for centuries a birth of a girl meant disgrace, abused this prenatal diagnostic to get rid of the unwanted births of girls. In India the ultrasound-technique gained widespread usage in the 1990s and by 1994 the first law prohibiting prenatal sex discernment was passed. China has issued a series of prohibition laws against the practices of selective abortion already from the mid 1980s.[5] These two countries faced a staggering population growth during the past centuries. An uncontrolled population growth impedes a healthy economic growth of a country. Over-populated developing countries are facing the problem of the so-called population explosion. The population growth is swallowing up a large part of the earning in national income brought about by planned economic development and overpopulation directly impacts soil erosion (Murdoch 1980, Blakie 2016, etc.[6]). China alleviated its population growth problem by introducing the one-child policy in 1979; however, by 1986 when the first law against selective abortions was issued the damage was done: millions of girls were not born. Both China and India are notorious for widespread gender selective abortions—the female infanticide *in utero*. Both countries have birth sex ratios that are well off the worldwide average. In 2015, China saw 1.15 boys born per girl, India 1.12, as compared to 1.03 worldwide. The same year, China has loosened its one-child policy, one of the main drivers of gendercide or better put "femicide." Today, on the planetary level, men outnumber women by more than 66 million. And this is an unbroken trend.[7] The two most populous countries in the world are particularly highly imbalanced: India has 48 million more men than women, China nearly 42 million, accounting for 75 % of the male surplus worldwide. The damage is done. The situation is maybe not as hopeless as described in Maalouf's dystopia, however, we are far from reaching safe shores, a point to which I will come back later.

China has managed its overpopulation problem, however the byproduct was, is an imbalance in the sex ratio. In a society where boys were preferred over centuries and the birth of a girl went unnoticed in the best case, things have changed in the past 30 years. In some regions, as for instance in Central China, boys are still more welcomed at birth. Boys who later when they grow up will never marry and never—or rarely—will have sexual intercourse with a woman. In other regions, couples embraced the idea of a single child and even more so if this child is a "singleton" daughter.

Shi Lihong's book describes how this change happened. This book is a powerful study how at least a part of the Chinese society has changed its reproductive choices and preferences. The book analyses in which manner reproductive choices, actually reproductive preferences, shifted and transformed in the past 30 years since the implementation of the one-child policy. It is a rich ethnography, abundant in ethnographic detail and well documented by additional bibliographic research. The book also has the merit of a rigorous theoretical grounding and contains a wide range of references around the globe.

The introduction starts with a description of the birth-policy campaign in China, a country which faced enormous population growth and took its consequences in the 20th century. For the purpose of economic growth and in dealing with limited resources the Chinese government introduced the one-child policy at the end of the 1970s. This policy included rigorous measures across the country in order to achieve the one-child per woman goal. Education and control were the main measures which were massively undertaken. In some cases extreme measures were implemented to control and to penalize couples who were reluctant to accept it. These actions included a close surveillance (that went down even to the checking of hygienic pads on 'suspicious' women), an obligatory taxation (with enormous fees paid by the parents who ventured into having a second child), and forced sterilization and abortion. Ideological brain-washing, compensated sterilization, free abortion and contraceptives were among the "softer" measures. Many gave up, some didn't. Some reproduced clandestinely.

However with all the efforts invested by the Chinese authorities, this situation created a demographic phenomenon today known as "the missing girls." Prenatal diagnostics and the usual corruption practices enabled couples in a quest of having a son despite the legislation which prohibited such practices to abort the unwanted female fetuses. A healthy sex ratio at birth is 103.5 of male children born on 100 females. The 113.5:100 and going up to 120:100 clearly shows that human practices caused the imbalance between sexes at birth.

Besides creating a marriage squeeze with women having the upper hand, this situation produced an immense population of men who are unable to ever have regular sexual lives or to start a family. Not to mention that it encouraged sexual slavery and boosted the trafficking of women. As Maalouf did, some scientists warned more than a decade ago, that bachelors—not having to lose anything beside their lives—could potentially be a threat to the domestic and even international security (Glenn 2004, Hendrixson 2004, Ross 2010 etc.[8]).

Lihong Shi's book is dealing with a fascinating topic in the midst of this situation: she is analyzing a growing phenomenon, a sort of incongruity in the imbalanced birth ratio created by a strict demography-politics: she masterly describes and minutely analyzes an emerging reproductive pattern in which parents willingly choose and accept "singleton" daughters. The idea to explore not the problem *per se*—the problem of communities in which the one-child-policy wasn't accepted and in which a deficit of women was created—but instead to explore its success in regions where it actually worked. This is a valuable methodological lesson which should be retained and reproduced. One can potentially learn more about examining social anomalies than pondering how such anomalies were come to exist.

In her quest to discern the discourses of the emerging reproductive pattern Shi examines households with singleton daughters and questions their choices, decisions of reproduction. The consequences of choosing a singleton daughter are a response to changing familial responsibilities, life styles and to transformed social, economic and cultural environment. The author has chosen to center her research on a Lijia Village, Liaoning province in Northeast China. The province is specific in the sense that, historically, the lineage-culture was less important in communities, than as for instance, in Central China. The

historical Chinese society is patrilocal, patrilineal where the lineage and the prolongation of the lineage by the birth of sons were central. Due to migration in the 19th century, this region was less impacted by the practices of lineage-culture which the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s decimated. Shi has conducted in-depth interviews with more than 40 families, from this village and some neighboring ones, with couples about child-rearing, consumption, old-age support, marital relations, ancestral worship and family continuity and family economics. The reader has in his or her hands a book abundant in personal stories, descriptions of life-styles and personal portraits. The book is, in this sense, an ethnographic jewel.

Chapter One deals with the implementation of the birth-planning policy in Lijia village, it is a chapter, richly illustrated with personal accounts that deal with how this policy was executed and which measures were taken—from education to punishment—in order to crush the resistance of the locals and to achieve acceptance. Chapter Two describes how the preference of small family, the market economy, the emerging social life of villagers and the new ideal of life-happiness guided the couples in their reproductive choices. Chapter Three examines the changing child rearing strategies, the beliefs and practices linked to this change and the gender neutral parental support. Chapter Four analyses the decline of preference of sons and with the impact of the acceptation of singleton daughters; it covers also the gender transformation of filial piety. Chapter Five discusses the burden, mainly the financial load, of having a son in China. This burden is greatly pecuniary but also emotional, and the emerging feeling of parents being trapped in an unending financial debt in order to secure a future wedding for their son under the watchful eye of the community is masterfully painted. Chapter Six describes the fading practices of ancestral worship and the eroding effects of the belief that only sons can provide the continuity of the lineage and family.

Shi's rich ethnography is illustrated by photographs that the author took herself. The book additionally contains tables with demographic data that the author accessed through the registration records in Lijia. Furthermore, each argument or main theme whether the choice of the respondent to choose a singleton daughter or to willingly accept the one-child policy is amply illustrated with collected narratives of the villagers. What is remarkable in these interviews and what immerses the reader in the way of thinking of these people are the colorful proverbs. These Chinese proverbs illustrate in an excellent manner the feelings and the attitudes of the interviewed individuals. In that sense, Chapter Three, its title inspired by such a proverb, potentially expresses what this whole book is about. The chapter is called "choosing one tiger instead of ten mice." This paraphrase comes from the proverb used in this region: "While a tiger can block a road, ten mice are nothing but a meal for cats." This saying not only arguments in the favor of having a single child but put the accent on the quality of the upbringing that can and will guarantee the raising of a "tiger": One child, in which all the parental efforts are invested and who makes all the effort and the resources worthwhile. One cannot help but to think on how Chinese women-students outstrip young men in universities in many areas.

The book is particularly attention-grabbing for those who are interested in contemporary China but it is actually thought-provoking for all those who are either working or who are interested in child rearing practices, the transformation of societies trough demography or who study demographical problems and particularly the impact of strict governmental demographic policies. The book has the potential to serve as a blueprint in understanding how a cultural shift concerning reproductive choices can happen. Beside its opulent ethnography, demographic data, and the well-researched leading themes, the book has other, more down-to-earth merits: it is simply an interesting read, it's a page-turner.

Indisputably the Chinese one-child policy marked forever the demography of our planet. It also raised many questions of the deontology[9] how this policy was implemented. Terrible methods were used such as forced abortion and forced sterilization which were put in action in order to persevere in its execution. Its side-effects were—and still are—also terrible: the trafficking of women, especially of female-defectors from North Korea and the ethnic minority women from Vietnam (just to mention couple of examples) – are a dreadful byproduct of the one-child policy. The author also mentions another problem which is the Chi-

nese aging population who potentially face a lonely and uncertain old age. This is all true and undeniable. There are other regions in Central China which face now shortages in women, and where the financing of the son's wedding only adds to this problem. The amounts required by women and their families from husband-candidates often can reach as much as the unbelievable amount of 50 000€. Many men will never get married and many will never procreate. This is a fact, too. The sons of these regions are punished for the "sins," the desires of their fathers by the cultural expectations that date back to centuries and become obsolete in the process. But this byproduct of the one-child policy is a boomerang-penalization of the communities which are or were reluctant to embrace social change, a change which can be resumed that baby-girls are also important as the baby-boys. Ironically, the societies in which boys were favored face disappearance in a very "Darwinian" manner …

There is not such a thing as a free lunch. These byproducts are the "price" – and a heavy one—that Chinese communities paid and which dragged China from poverty into the most important economic and possibly a cultural super-power of the 21st century. Uncontrolled population not only breaks the economic development of a country and presents enormous challenges in the internal well-being of the population in areas of infrastructure, education and health-service; it actually confines the half of the population to stay home and reduces this half, its women to an unpaid productive work. Ungratified, unpaid procreational work can be a form of slavery, in which women are not free to enter the job-market, can't provide for themselves autonomously, can't get educated, can't decide about their bodies, can't … do many other things. After 30 years of one-child policy in China that ended in 2015, we can summarize that it lifted the quality of life of Chinese women. They have now access to contraception, abortion, education, to work, to social mobility. They have now a choice. Something completely unimaginable in 19th century and even in 20th century China in which female babies were abandoned on the sideroads or were killed by their own mothers in order to avoid social stigma. We are an enormous distance from practices like foot-binding—common just three generations ago when sons were the only desirable offspring. And this alone is priceless.

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Notes

1 John Tague's article from 1994: http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/book-review-the-unlikely-metamorphosis-of-the-future-the-first-century-after-beatrice-amin-maalouf-1397429.html
2 Sen A. *More than 100 million women are missing*, NY Rev Books, 1990, vol. 37, pp. 61–66.
3 The Diasonograph in 1958 by Ian Donald, then Richard Soldner's machine from the mid 1960s; the routine screening starting from the end of 70s (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3987368/)
4 https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3987368/
5 https://academic.oup.com/bmb/article/98/1/7/468425
6 Murdoch W. W. 1980. *The poverty of nations: the political economy of hunger and population*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. Blakie, Piers.1985/2016[2]. *The Political Economy of Soil Erosion in Developing Countries*. Routlegde
7 The data, provided by the World Bank, based on the United Nations Population Division's World Population Prospects: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL.FE.ZS and https://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/
8 Glenn D. 2004. A Dangerous Surplus of Sons? *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 50: 34. Hendrixson A. 2004. *Angry Young Men, Veiled Young Women. Constructing a New Population Threat.* (Corner House Briefing, 34). Dorset: The *Corner House.* http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/resource/angry-young-men-veiled-young-women. Ross K. 2010. An "army of bachelors"? China's Male Population as a World Threat. *Journal of Asia Pacific Studies* 1, 2: 338–363
9 A reviewer who was examining my review of this book raised the question of my choice to use this particular word *deontology* here. I feel that I have to underline, that this choice stems from the fact that often individual interests or desires collude with the interests of the community. The thing is that progress in a society often comes with a lot of conflict in any given society, and that the suffering of one generation can greatly impact—improve—the life of some of the future generation. Only time can tell which sacrifices and sufferings have given birth to something new, something better. This idea leads my choice to use this particular word "deontology."