

Kinship and sex-biased parental investment among the ethnic Mosuo of Southwest China

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Son preference in China has been well established. Most researchers have linked this preference to social norms that value males over females. In conjunction with the birth planning policy that limits most families to one child, such norms have produced one of the most extreme male-biased sex ratios in history. In China, extreme sex ratios have led to the establishment of bachelor villages, to which unmarried men are relegated once the search for a partner has proven unsuccessful. Preferences for one sex have also produced poor psychological outcomes, including suicidal sentiments in the under-valued sex, and tendencies towards reckless and unlawful behavior in the over-populous sex. Clearly, an examination of the factors leading to sex-biased parental investment is warranted if policy-makers are to make headway in preventing such outcomes. In this paper, I will suggest that evolutionary anthropology can partially explain preferences for a given sex, and will show that socioecological conditions modify preferences in ways that increase reproductive success.

Cultural norms influence which sex is preferred in a given context: among the matrilineal Mosuo of Southwest China, daughters are preferred over sons because they are considered more helpful; moreover, mythology and local religious beliefs reinforce the importance and sanctity of the female, whose role as mother is considered paramount to the continuation of Mosuo society. In contrast, sons are preferred among contemporary Han (majority) Chinese, where roles as provider and protector are emphasized over the biological necessity of motherhood. I will argue here that cultural norms, producing vastly different preferences for offspring sex, are mediated

by the prevailing socio-ecological environment in ways that are consistent with evolutionary anthropological theory.

In particular, I will argue that to maximize reproductive success, parents must decide, based on their own characteristics, their children's characteristics, and socioecological conditions, whether their sons or their daughters are more likely to achieve the highest long-term fitness. This paper will discuss how local kinship systems impact parents' investment in sons and daughters. I examine how predictions and assumptions of two well-studied hypotheses, the Trivers-Willard hypothesis and the Local Resource Enhancement hypothesis, change in the context of different kinship systems, asserting that matriliney should produce daughter-preference and patriliney son-preference. Individual characteristics that might modify such preferences within a given kinship system, including wealth, employment status and level of education, will also be considered.

Results will be based primarily on censuses of nearly 200 households (over 1300 individuals) taken from January through October, 2008 among distinct regions where Mosuo identify themselves as adhering to norms of patrilineal or matrilineal descent. Each census interview asked participants to relate household characteristics, including property ownership, income and land holdings, as well as individual characteristics, including age, sex, marital status, number and sex of children, educational attainment and employment status, to the principal investigator. These data are supplemented by focus group data, taken during July of 2006, which looked for evidence of predicted differences among matrilineal and patrilineal subpopulations. Systematic differences in response indicate that parents view children differently in different environmental contexts, even while differential treatment based on offspring gender is not reported. Initial analyses of sex ratios of focus group participants' children are consistent with

hypotheses: female-biased sex ratios are found in matrilineal areas and male-biased in patrilineal. A much larger sample from censuses (which I am presently collecting) will be analyzed to verify preliminary results, including important controls that were not possible during the initial investigation.

I conclude that further evidence is necessary to substantiate a link between kinship and sex-biased parental investment among the Mosuo, but suggest that current evidence underscores the importance of socio-ecological contexts in shaping parental investment. This is of particular interest in the Chinese context, where a fundamental preference for sons has been hypothesized for most populations. If results are upheld, to my knowledge, this would be the first example of female-biased sex ratios in China.