

From the Desk of...

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China's Gender Imbalance; correcting some popular beliefs **Clint Laurent – CEO – Global Demographics**

There can be no debate concerning the presence of gender imbalance in China amongst the younger age groups. While for the population as a whole there are 1.06 males for every one female, within specific younger age groups there are some very big variations in terms of gender balance. For the 0 to 9 year olds in 2007, (the latest actual data available), there are 1.26 males for every one female. For 10 to 19-year-olds the imbalance is less at 1.19. In complete contrast, the over-65 aged ratio is 0.98 males for every one female, reflecting the shorter lifespan of males in China. A popular perception about the reason for this rather high gender bias amongst the younger age groups is China's famous "One Child Policy". Through the process of scanning and other methods, there is a bias toward male births, however, recently published data by the State Statistical Bureau of China has identified quite an unexpected pattern; the data suggest that the One Child Policy might actually only have a minor causative role, and that the bias is more a function of relative education standards and traditionalism.

To explain this, let us first clarify our understanding about the One Child Policy itself. We need to appreciate that the policy applies only to ethnic Chinese living in urban areas and not engaged in agricultural occupations. This means that the policy applies to less than 46% of the population. The rest of the population,

who are in agricultural occupations and or rural areas, are not subject to any official constraint. However, because rural workers typically have lower incomes, they are perhaps subject to an economic constraint. This leads to the natural expectation that people living in urban areas would have the biggest gender imbalance because they can only have one child. But the data now available do not support this. The latest actual data available for this are from 2004 to 2006, so it is not a case of a single year observation but the findings are replicated over three years, and to some extent quite robust.

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Let's look first at city populations: In 2006 there were 1.14 males born for every one female, compared with town populations with 1.3 males born for every

female and rural populations with 1.25 males born for every female. Therefore, the expectation that those with the greatest constraint on the number of children they can have would see the greatest bias towards male births is simply not evident. It would appear that the cities, with their better educated and younger populations, have a much less traditional view towards the 'need' to have a son, and engage in less gender selection than the towns and rural areas. 'Cities' account for 37% of all households in China in 2008.

Next the towns: With smaller, less affluent and less educated populations, where the traditional belief in

having a son is clearly quite dominant and where the constraints of the one child policy exist, we find 1.3 males per female. Urban households, being the ones subject to the one child policy, in these town areas account for 12% of households in China.

Finally, the rural populations: They are not subject to the constraints of the one child policy, but also have a bias towards male births. In the latest year it was 1.26 males per 1 female. This is almost certainly a reflection of the more traditional nature of the rural population.

But there is another key factor that should also be considered as a cause of male birth bias; hepatitis. Hepatitis has been endemic in China and a very high proportion of the population of childbearing age carry this disease. Research has shown that a male who has hepatitis is significantly more likely to have a son than a daughter. However in the context of this paper is worth noting that hepatitis is more prevalent in rural areas than it is in urban ones, and that to some extent would encompass the smaller towns as whole. This in itself could therefore account for a significant proportion of the bias in births. On the positive side, there is now compulsory vaccination for hepatitis at time of birth and so over about

15 years this causative factor will start to diminish. As a result of the combined impact of lower incidence of hepatitis, steadily improving education (and therefore less traditional attitudes) male birth bias is believed to reduce over time.

In the meantime, unfortunately, this does leave China with a growing major social issue; given the current gender and age profile of the population, 2008 shows

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the past 20 years, this number is projected to increase to 19 million by 2018 and to 33 million by 2028. This scenario is inevitable now as the majority of these people are already alive. The question that needs to be addressed is, how will this surplus of males be managed? Put very simply, many very genuine, nice young men will not have the chance to get married and form a stable family unit simply because there too few females to go around. How this will impact individuals, let alone the society as a whole, is a huge unanswered question.

About Clint Laurent and The Insight Bureau

Clint Laurent is the CEO of Global Demographics (formerly Asian Demographics) and an authority on the world's demographic changes and author of unique insights that help organisations get a fuller picture of market opportunities. He has been observing, analysing, forecasting and interpreting demographics for over 15 years and has developed substantial historical databases of the demographic and socio-economic profiles of economies of Asia -- including 31 provinces of China and down to 353 Prefectures - now expanded to 54 countries globally.

Clint presents on topics such as

- the changing nature of the labour forces of Asia
- changing attitudes to retirement age on the size of Asia's labour force
- comparisons across Asia and globally of the future size of future consumer markets
- what the new Chief Marketing Officer needs to understand about demographics

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