

What Counts as a “Family Line”?

Reproductive Politics and Class Differentiations in Postsocialist Rural China

Introduction

On a sunny day in April 2005, I attended a celebration ritual, held by Shu Yan (age 38) and her husband, Da Kui (age 37), for the birth of their second child, a boy, in the village of River Crossing in northeast China.¹ To my surprise, I learned at the celebration that the couple’s first child, a girl, had been born sixteen years previously, and was going to graduate from the local middle school that summer. With a daughter for their first child, the couple would have been allowed by the government to become pregnant with a second child back in 1995, when their first child was six years old. Yet for nearly a decade, they did not try to become pregnant. Thus at the party, in congratulating the mother on the birth of her son, I asked Shu Yan why she had waited so long to have a second child. Shu Yan responded in a proud and joyful voice: “Don’t you see, “a big, big sister with a little, little brother” (*da da jie, xiao xiao di*) is the fashion nowadays?” Without awaiting my response, she immediately enumerated over a dozen families in the village with this childbearing pattern. What explains this unexpected and unusual development?

Beginning in 1980, China’s one-child policy resulted in many rural families having daughters as their only children. Many villagers vehemently resisted this policy because of a continuing commitment to patriarchy, which requires a male to continue the family line. In 1987 the state decided to address villagers’ resistance and began granting a second chance to

¹ The ritual was called *xia nai*, held on the 12th day after the baby’s birth. The aim of this ritual is to stimulate the nursing mother’s breast milk, and is marked by gifts (nowadays, usually cash wrapped in red paper envelopes) from relatives.

“River Crossing” is a pseudonym for both the village and the overarching township. In the pages that follow, I use pseudonyms to protect all informants and conceal all places mentioned.

have a son to rural women whose first births had produced girls. Despite this policy modification, quite a number of rural families with an only daughter did not produce a second child. Government propaganda has claimed such families as exemplars of the state's birth control efforts to successfully transform villagers' traditional gender ideology: as legitimate heirs of their families, these "only daughters" seem to challenge villagers' entrenched notion of family line succession as rooted in patriliney. Nevertheless, as the opening story reveals, since the 1990s, along with China's post-socialist transition toward global capitalism, more and more families with teenage "only daughters" began to have a second child with the intention of producing a male heir. This fertility "fashion"—euphemistically termed by peasants "a big, big sister with a little, little brother"—has not only restored but further reinforced the patrilineal gender ideology concerning what "counts" as a "family line."

In this paper, I explore the ways in which Chinese villagers' reproductive practices have increasingly become entangled with re-surfacing gender discourses in the broader context of the nation's postsocialist transformations. I investigate how ordinary villagers have tried to balance their desire for social mobility with their pursuit of a male heir and their sense of insecurity and powerlessness (Colen 2006, Kaufman and Morgan 2005, Rapp 2001).

Broader Context and Significance

The emergence of a reproductive "fashion," and the associated resurfacing of patrilineal gender discourses, are emblematic of China's recent, post-socialist transformations over the past two decades (Anagnost 1997, Rofel 2007). Since the 1970s, population control policy has been a constituent part of the Chinese state's ambition to "modernize" (Greenhalgh 2008). During the early 1970s, China's population was seen as an

unbearable burden impeding modernization. To rapidly achieve its development goals, the state became increasingly obsessed with controlling population growth. In 1979, the state became so audacious as to formulate a national one-child policy in both urban and rural areas.

Many villagers resisted this policy, as entrenched patriarchal ideologies had traditionally required virtually all families to produce a male heir (Fei 1981, Waston 2004). To make its population policy acceptable to peasants, in 1987 the state began to grant rural women a second chance to bear a son if their first child was a girl, usually after an interval of four to six years—although no state-sanctioned right was granted to bear a second child if the first child was a boy. Along with this shift, in the early 1990s, as the nation began to embrace a market economy, its reproductive policy began to emphasize economic incentives for having fewer children, rather than draconian birth control methods alone (Gu 2002).

At the turn of the new millennium, the Chinese state became preoccupied with constructing an internationally acceptable image of its population policy as central to its eager embrace of global capitalism (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005). In the wake of the 1994 U.N. Population Conference in Cairo and the subsequent World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995), the Chinese government has tried to further transform its reproductive policy from its previous, notoriously stringent measures toward a promise to provide more “humane services” for women’s reproductive health. Thus in 1998, the township authority of River Crossing, like many other local governments across China, banned formerly permissible acts of violence against women, such as forced abortion, in cases wherein villagers breached its population policy. Instead, villagers were allowed by the state to have an additional child beyond the permitted first or second child—but only as long as they could

afford to pay a fee for an “out-of-quota” birth. This fee is quite substantial: usually 3-5 times local peasants’ *per capita* annual income of the previous year. Accordingly, class distinctions have become increasingly explicit in the reproductive policy discourse: richer families now clearly enjoy far more reproductive freedom than do poor and “ordinary” families. Accommodating—instead of countering—both the reality of deepening class differences as well as patrilineal gender ideology, the local government simply reiterated the state’s current claim that its birth control efforts would henceforth focus on providing high-quality “services” (*fuwu*) for rural women, and would cover a variety of issues such as childbearing and childrearing, informed options about contraception and abortion, and women’s reproductive health.

Some scholars have suggested that China’s current engagements with capitalism are, disturbingly, accelerating and intensifying class differentiations (Anagnost 2008, Yan 2008). However, this perspective remains controversial (Arrighi 2007), and has not yet been applied to an understanding of China’s population control policy. Inspired by recent feminist anthropological scholarship on the intersecting ties linking gender, reproduction, and class, in this paper I explore how an emerging consciousness of class distinction has become entangled with villagers’ quest for male heirs (e.g. Anagnost 1997; Chafetz 1997; Collier and Yanagisako 1990; Gal and Kligman 2000; Ginsberg and Rapp 1991, 1995; Moore 2007; Ortner 1996; Rapp 2000; Strathern 1990; Taylor 2008; Thomas 2003; Visweswaran 1997). In the feminist literature from which I draw my inspiration, reproductive practices are viewed as intersecting with policies and politics of gender, race, class, and other aspects of social hierarchies on multiple levels of both the global and the local, allowing reproduction to be seen as a field of both constraint and resistance/empowerment (e.g. Inhorn 1994, 2007;

Martin 1987). Moreover, approaching pregnancy, childbearing, and the constitution of the fetus from a symbolic perspective, this group of feminist scholars view reproduction as a broad cultural category that necessarily entails but is not limited to discourses of power (e.g. Davis-Floyd and Sargent 1997, Feldman-Savelsberg 1999, Gottlieb 2004). Viewing resistors as doing more than merely *re-acting* to domination but also as actively interpreting the contours of that domination (e.g., Moore 1994, Ortner 1995), these feminist writings stimulate me to explore how Chinese villagers engage in both cultural and political discourses of reproduction in facing the state's shifting but sustained interventions.

As Marshall Sahlins has argued in *Culture and Practical Reason*: “Any cultural ordering produced by the material forces presupposes a cultural ordering of these forces” (1976:39). Although Sahlins himself is not a scholar of gender, his insight holds promise for my feminist inquiry: a “thick” understanding of villagers’ fertility behavior surrounding their quest for male heirs calls for an explication of the underpinning symbolic and social order that provides them with the values they pursue and that constrains the strategies they follow. Thus, this paper offers two main contributions. First, by bringing a class perspective into a gendered analysis of reproduction, this paper suggests that villagers' looming awareness of deepening class divides is now reshaping the contours of how the longstanding patrilineal gender ideology of the Chinese countryside continues to shape their reproductive experiences. Accordingly, my analysis foregrounds how villagers’ re-conceptualization of what counts as a “family line” is a joint product of a three forces: the persistent patrilineal gender ideology; the state’s forceful intervention; and villagers’ emerging awareness of enlarging class differences that have converged to shape villagers’ childbearing practices. Second, by providing a feminist reading of how the broader category of “class” is perceived

and articulated through women's bodily experiences of reproduction, this paper further enriches developing perspectives on class distinctions in China. In so doing, at a more general theoretical level, this paper suggests that feminist studies of the seemingly "feminine" issue of reproduction lie at the very center of social science investigations of the complex processes of political economy, as villagers' reproductive experiences encapsulate China's emerging post-socialist conditions. As such, the paper is inspired by work in feminist anthropology that aims to braid discussions of gender and class as linked factors that provide a lens through which cultural norms, individual struggles, and social transformations might be productively viewed and examined (Rapp 2001; cf. di Leonardo 2004, Kanaaneh 2002, Lancaster and di Leonardo 1997, Muller 1985).

Research Setting and Methods

This paper is based on 16 months of doctoral fieldwork (2002, 2004-05) in and around the village of River Crossing in northeast China. As the largest village in the township, River Crossing also lends its name to the overarching township. In 2004, the village contained 651 households with 2,201 residents; the township had 4,213 households, with 13,899 residents.

In the village, I collected reproductive stories of 62 married women—grouped by age, class, and kinship backgrounds—using semi-structured questionnaires. To bring a gender-balanced perspective, I interviewed 53 of these women's husbands for analogous stories. To complement secular views of reproduction, I also collected narratives from local folk healers and ritual specialists concerning their efforts to cure or ameliorate reproductive troubles.

As a male ethnographer working principally with women, I was aware of the subtle yet entrenched gender borders imposed by local conventions, despite my status as a fellow Chinese citizen (cf. Boissevain 1985). Yet, inspired by other male researchers who have

successfully conducted fieldwork with female consultants (e.g., Back 1993, Gregory 1984), I grappled with the challenges of gender barriers by achieving cultural and linguistic competence (in the local vernacular), as well as by maintaining my position as a married, sympathetic outsider trained in cultural sensitivity. I also hired two married women from the village as research assistants, both of whom were helpful in navigating the gender gaps posed by my male identity. Throughout my fieldwork I tried my best to be supportive and search for my own unconscious biases. These efforts also helped me to access local women's worlds. For instance, I volunteer-tutored seven students (two girls in high school, and three girls and two boys in middle school) during my field stay. Through these tutoring experiences, these students' mothers (and some of their other relatives and friends) began to tell me their reproductive stories and commentaries.

In addition to these interviews, throughout my fieldwork I interacted with hundreds of other people in and around the village of River Crossing, providing me with a rich and broader context from which to understand villagers' reproductive concepts and practices. After completing my fieldwork in 2005, I continue to maintain contact with my informants over the phone.² These extended communications have kept me updated of my informants' personal and family stories, including those of Da Kui and Shu Yan, the couple I introduced in the opening story.

“Embracing Singleton Daughters” vs. “A Big, Big Sister with a Little, Little Brother”

In 2005, in River Crossing Village, there were 364 married couples with the wives' ages under 49: these women are the primary target of the government's birth control policy.

² In recent years, telecommunications have developed rapidly in rural China. In River Crossing, in 2004 it only cost some 200 *yuan* (about \$24) to set up a line, with service packages of 10-15 *yuan*/month for local phone calls. As a result, most local families have now installed telephones in their homes.

Among these couples, 263 (72.3%) had one child, 86 (23.6%) had two children, and one couple (0.3%) had three children; in addition, 14 couples (3.8%) were recently married—with seven women being pregnant, and the remaining seven haven't yet become pregnant.

Among those 263 couples who had only one child, 160 had boys and the rest (103) had girls. Of the 160 couples with only sons, 125 (78.1%) had applied for “only-child certificates” (*dusheng zinu zheng*)—a pledge not to have a second child with a reward of an extra portion of farmland (1 *mu*, about 0.165 acre) from the village government. By contrast, of the 103 couples with only daughters, only 19 (18.4%) had applied for “only-child certificates.” In the entire township, a total of 82 such couples with only daughters had applied for “only-child certificates.”

During my fieldwork, local officials always cited cases of rural couples who applied for “only-child certificates” for their daughters, to demonstrate how the government's birth control efforts had successfully transformed villagers' entrenched patrilineal gender ideologies concerning family line succession. Taking this as an emerging phenomenon, some scholars now argue that villagers are experiencing a transition in reproductive choices by “embracing singleton daughters” (Shi 2009:15), and this has resulted in an emerging “new fertility culture” (Yan 2003:205).

Nevertheless a parallel phenomenon seems to counter such progressive claims. Since the state softened its stringent birth control regulations in 1987, most village couples who had produced girls in their first births took advantage of the government's policy modification to give birth to a second child (for a son). This fertility trend has continued into the new millennium. In 2003, 13 couples in the village of River Crossing had their first child (with six boys and seven girls) and two couples had their second child after first having a girl (with

both couples producing boys); in 2004, nine couples had their first child (producing seven boys and two girls) and five couples had their second child (producing three boys and two girls); and from January – July 2005, two couples had their first child (both boys) and the other two couples had their second child (also both boys).

More intriguingly, as Shu Yan has remarked in the opening story, having “a big, big sister with a little, little brother” has become something of a reproductive “fashion” for families with teenage daughters. In River Crossing, since 1992, there were a total of 22 couples, who had their first child—all daughters—as singletons for more than ten years, and then produced a second child, with spacing between the two births being between 10 and 16 years (average 12.3 years). Because these couples did not have their second child for over a decade after their first births, they had been deemed by local officials as unlikely to have another child.

For these 22 couples, the predominant drive that motivated their second births was the desire to have a male family heir. Among a variety of ritual, medical, and pseudo-medical venues, the main method that has most effectively assisted their quest for a son was ultrasound technology. When B-ultrasonographic scanning became available in many hospitals nationwide in the early 1990s, the sex of a fetus (five months or older) became detectable (Tu 1993). Since the 1990s, local government posed strict regulations forbidding villagers from using any medical facilities to identify the sex of the fetus that might lead to selective abortions of female fetuses. Yet such regulations were rendered almost dysfunctional shortly after most local clinics were privatized, and major hospitals experienced market-oriented reforms by the end of the 1990s (Huang 2008). As a result, these local medical institutes were to varying degrees commercialized: they would be willing

to offer any services, including revealing the fetus's sex to a pregnant woman, as long as it was profitable. In the local area surrounding River Crossing, since the end of the 1990s, the government prohibition against using B-ultrasound scanning to identify the sex of the fetus has largely become little more than "a scrap of paper," although it may be effective for a short while during specific occasions, such as when the local government launched month-long movements to counter the increasingly skewed sex ratio at birth. With the introduction of color Doppler ultrasound imaging systems at local major hospitals around the turn of the new millennium, identifying a fetus's sex became more accurate (cf. Taylor 2008).

During my fieldwork, I had the chance to meet in person 18 of these 22 couples (with a child set of "a big, big sister with a little, little brother"), and I learned the remaining 4 couples' stories indirectly. From their reproductive experiences, I found out that having access to color Doppler imaging facilities had an enormous impact on whether the couples' second baby was a boy. Among the 22 couples, 12 had their second child from 1992-99, when ultrasound technology was not readily available locally. Of these, half had a baby son, with a sex ratio of six boys to six girls. Most of the remaining 10 women, however, had found access to the advanced color Doppler imaging during their pregnancies from 2000-05. As a result, most of them achieved their goal of having a son, with a highly skewed sex ratio of 8 boys to 2 girls. Among the eight women who had sons in the second birth, three had a second-trimester abortion and one had two second-trimester abortions—after the color Doppler imaging results had confirmed that the fetuses were girls.

Having introduced their statistical profiles, one intriguing question remains: Why did these 22 couples wait so long to have their second child/male heir, ending up with a child set of "a big, big sister with a little, little brother"?

The Reproductive Story of Da Kui and Shu Yan

To elaborate how such “little, little brothers” were produced in village women’s second births, let us examine in-depth Shu Yan’s reproductive experience, which I introduced in the opening story. In 1995, Shu Yan was “qualified” by the state to have a second child, when her daughter was six. Shortly after her IUD was removed, she became pregnant. Yet at that moment, her husband, Da Kui, had been sick for over a month, and was later diagnosed as suffering from pleurisy. Because Da Kui had been taking antibiotics for an extended period of time, they both worried that his sperm might have been affected by the medicine, and might lead to a congenitally deformed baby. Fearing such a scenario, Shu Yan terminated her pregnancy with a “D & C” procedure at the end of her second trimester. The surgery was performed without any anesthesia, and Shu Yan was horrified by her abortion experience.³

For his part, Da Kui had been lukewarm to the idea of having another child and was very supportive of his wife’s decision to abort. The eldest child of six, since his childhood he had witnessed his parents suffering to raise so many children and see them all married. Now, as an ordinary villager with a modest income, Da Kui felt he was not ready to raise two children, even if the second one were a boy. In his heart—as a Chinese man, heir to a longstanding patriarchal tradition—he never rejected the idea of having a son. Yet, since he had three younger brothers, he calculated that as long as one of his brothers could produce a son, his extended family would continue (using the traditional patrilineal calculus of kinship

³ According to local population policy, if a woman terminates a pregnancy to avoid having a child out of the local government’s annual population plan, or to give up a birth quota already granted (such as in Shu Yan’s case), she can go to a designated clinic to have an abortion for free. However, anesthesia and other expensive medicines including antibiotics are considered “extra” and are not covered by the state’s offer. Shu Yan’s abortion experience was very common among River Crossing women.

reckoning), and no one in the village would dare say that his family would vanish without a male offspring.

Moreover, by this time, Da Kui had other plans in mind. With limited savings, he wanted to build a new house for his nuclear family. In 1997, the couple completed their compound. To accomplish this project, they had borrowed a large sum of money from relatives and friends.

The couple had thought that they would be able to pay off their debts in two to three years if they worked hard. Yet the reality of their circumstances frustrated their optimism, and it took the couple over six years to pay off all their debts. As an ordinary villager, Da Kui came to realize that his hope of getting rich and moving upward in the near future was quite unrealistic, and he would not be able to sufficiently support an additional child with a bright future. With such a gloomy attitude toward the future, during those years Da Kui became less and less interested in having a son.

In the meantime, their daughter was excelling in school, and that, too, diluted the couple's desire to have a son. In elementary school, their daughter had been the best student in her class. In middle school (which she started attending in fall 2002), their daughter continued to be one of the top three students in her class of 58 students. If she could keep her record in high school, she would very possibly go on to attend college, which would certainly bring honor to the family—in this remote and mountainous area, very few girls reached that goal. With this prospect in mind, the couple felt they should concentrate their limited resources on supporting their promising daughter. This priority had further pushed aside any interest in having another child.

However, beginning in the fall of 2003, their inclination not to have a son, at least immediately, began to evaporate. In July 2003, an affine—Xiu Juan, wife of Da Kui’s youngest brother—became pregnant. In the previous years, the wives of Da Kui’s other two brothers had already borne their first children—both girls. With Xiu Juan pregnant, the entire extended family was crossing their fingers that this time they would have a male offspring. Unfortunately, Xiu Juan had a miscarriage around the end of her first trimester.

Da Kui’s parents were especially distressed by the miscarriage. They could not face the fact that, with four sons, thus far they did not have a single grandson to carry on the family line. Wondering if he could have a grandson in the future, Da Kui’s father consulted a fortune teller in the county seat. The fortune teller told him that he would have had a grandson already, instead of a granddaughter, had Da Kui married a year later. Yet things might not be that bad, the fortune teller comforted Da Kui’s father—Da Kui still had an opportunity to have a son if he began to try in the coming two years. Back home with this positive prospect, the old parents urged the couple to try for a second child.

Shu Yan was the first to become motivated. She also consulted a fortune teller in her natal village. To her excitement, this fortune teller corroborated the prediction that she was “destined to have a son” (*mingli youzi*). Since then, Shu Yan began to ponder the various disadvantages of not having a son. Her yard was surrounded by her neighbors’ compounds. Unlike her own family, all her neighbors had a son. She was disturbed by a vision that many years later, her compound would be inherited by “people of different surnames” (*waixing pangren*), while all her neighbors’ compounds would continue to be inhabited by their own offspring with a shared surname. Haunted by this image, Shu Yan couldn’t help envisioning her afterlife, which had never come to her mind in the previous years: she and Da Kui would

be penniless because, as most villagers firmly believed, the “paper money” (*zi qian*) burnt by a daughter could never reach her parents in the other world.

Shu Yan’s words somehow persuaded her husband. Soon thereafter, she had the IUD removed that she had reinserted after her previous abortion. Shu Yan combined her biomedical knowledge of ovulation times (which she learned from fellow village women) with the broad timing recommendations of the fortune teller to try to conceive. Three months later, in summer 2004, She became pregnant.

Seeing that he was going to have another child, however, Da Kui once again became rather upset, worrying that he was still not ready financially. From the middle of the first trimester to the end of her second trimester, Da Kui pressed Shu Yan five times to have an abortion—until he was convinced that the fetus was a boy, after a regular B-ultrasound scan and four color Doppler imagings. In March 2005, Shu Yan delivered her second child, a boy indeed.

Soon thereafter, the couple began a business adventure. In summer 2005, they started to run a small restaurant in their compound’s side rooms that face the local highway. In fall 2008, their daughter went to a college in West China. That October, Da Kui rented out the restaurant, purchased a second-hand dump truck, and became a driver transporting materials for local infrastructure construction projects.⁴ During a phone conversation in January 2009, Shu Yan told me that the birth of their son had greatly invigorated her and Da Kui. With double incomes, the couple were endeavoring to support their daughter’s college years; after that, they also hoped to save enough money for their young son. In River Crossing Village, the reproductive stories of Shu Yan and Da Kui as well as of several other couples with the same “happy ending,” have proven seductive to other villagers despite their continued

⁴ The truck cost him 130,000 *yuan*, most of which were borrowed from the couple’s friends and relatives.

economic worries, and have thus further reinforced the longstanding patrilineal ideology of the Chinese countryside by encouraging others to “try for a son.”

Intensified Social Differentiations, Emerging Awareness of Class Distinctions, and Villagers’ Patrilineal Ideal of Family Line Succession

The reproductive experiences of Shu Yan and Da Kui cited above might help shed light on our understanding of a perennial question complicated by the Chinese state’s population policies: How, and in what ways, do villagers conceptualize and practice their patrilineal family line succession in rural China at the nation’s present post-socialist moment?

To most Chinese, including the majority Han and other “ethnic” Chinese with similar patrilineal traditions (such as the Manchu and ethnic Koreans), the conventional concept of family line succession revolves around the entrenched notion of *chuanzong jiedai*—“to have a male heir and continue the family line.” By producing a male successor, a man becomes an indispensable link in his family line. Underlining this notion is a two-generational, father-to-son framework that expects every man to have a male offspring (Fei 1981).

In the story of Da Kui and Shu Yan, the patrilineal notion of *chuanzong jiedai* continued to be influential. However, this idea did not immediately lead to the couple having a second birth to “try for a son.” Instead, the couple’s decade-long consideration of “trying for a son” has intersected with their emerging consciousness of rising class gaps, as well as with an accompanying desire for social mobility in childrearing practices—both of which are integral to, and emblematic of, China’s post-socialist transformations.

Indeed, shortly after the implementation of the one-child policy in 1980, China launched a reform that transformed the contours of rural society tectonically by redistributing

collective farmlands to individual households (Jacoby et al. 2002). With a series of post-Mao reforms, the state has pushed the entire nation toward a capitalist market economy and hence has become increasingly *post-socialist* (Nee 1989). Along with privatization and market-oriented reform has come growing social differentiation (Anagnost 2008).

In the township of River Crossing, intensified class differentiation has developed a high degree of what the Chinese sociologist Sun Liping terms *yingzhe tongchi*: “winner takes all” (2004:109). In this township, local reality looks like something of a live miniature of Chinese society at its post-socialist globalizing moment, with a “structural rupture” between the elite oligarchy and the rank-and-file (Li 2005). In River Crossing, with the exception of the elite families and a few allied with them, most villagers could hardly dream of sharing any resources owned by the township/village, nor most opportunities provided by it.

For example, in spring 2003, leaders of the River Crossing Village sold the government building to an outside entrepreneur at a price of some 280,000 *yuan*, and they moved their office to a compound owned by the township authority and given to them rent-free. As collective property, the money gained from the sale should have been legally owned by all the village residents. But to the surprise of the villagers, the cash proceeds soon evaporated without a trace. To squelch villagers’ complaints, leaders claimed that the money had been used to repay debts the village authority had owed to a bank. Most people, however, were suspicious of the claim. Insofar as leaders could not provide any convincing proofs such as verifiable documentation from the bank or a rigorous account audit of their spending, villagers believed that most of the money had been pocketed by officials in murky ways. During private conversations, many villagers were scornful of the village government’s ever-increasing “debt.”

“‘Debt’? Don’t fool me!” San Kui, a villager in his early thirties, sarcastically remarked. “Had they [leaders] neither squandered the money through ‘going dining, wining, whoring, and gambling’ (*chi he piao du*) nor pocketed it themselves, would our village [authority] be in debt?”

San Kui’s critique was not unfounded. For instance, although farmland had been redistributed to individual households since 1982, about 3.4% of the village’s farmland (190 *mu*—about 31.3 acres) was reserved for specific farming contracts or nonagricultural commercial contracts, with rental fees paid to the village authority. Yet even with this reliable source of income (as well as others), for more than a decade, the village leaders had never launched a single tiny project for the public welfare. For example, the village streets remained unpaved, full of bumps and hollows; the village drain has been silted up for years; and the village elementary school remained dilapidated for over a decade. Thus the local agents’ continued claim that the government had been “in debt” was utterly unconvincing to most villagers.

From a combination of such interlinked acts of politico-economic corruption and local leaders’ constant disregard for public welfare developed a ruling local elite that evolved into a veritable oligarchy complete with entrenched, class-based privileges.⁵ Thus in 2005, all profitable village positions—the privatized local school restaurant, the farmers’ market, the local post office—were controlled by two families: those of the village Communist Party secretary and the village head. The village head’s brother was the administrator of the local farmer’s market; his daughter became the director of the local post office in summer 2005,

⁵ While corruption was intrinsic to China’s socialism, the recent market reforms have transformed it in particular ways. Nevertheless, the results to a large degree remain in keeping with earlier socialist/communist patterns, no matter how post-socialist China’s economy might be. In future writing, I plan to pursue comparative analysis of the political economy of corruption, comparing socialist and postsocialist regimes of corruption and, more broadly, communist and capitalist regimes of corruption.

shortly after marrying the Party secretary's only son, a government official in a neighboring township; and the Party secretary's wife was the owner of the local school restaurant.

During my 16 months of fieldwork, I heard numerous private criticisms by villagers of local elites. Nevertheless, throughout my entire field stay, no one dared express their condemnation publicly, mainly for fear of open confrontation with local officials and the ensuing potential risks such contestation might incur to their families. The villagers' fears were indicative of the severity of local power inequities, and of class-based social rifts, as well as of the degree of ordinary villagers' sense of insecurity and powerlessness at this postsocialist moment.

Facing such nearly impassable class gaps, for an ordinary village family who was not contented with their current life, one way—sometimes the only way—for them to improve their circumstances was to nurture a child to become competitive enough that, ideally, she/he could go to college and eventually become a success in the city. To address this intriguing issue of childrearing in post-reform China, a number of scholars have proposed a theory of “quality” (*suzhi*) (e.g. Fong 2004, Kipnis 2007). In the late 1980s, a state discourse of “population quality” came to circulate. As Anagnost (2004) has observed, this discourse presented a shift in state policy from regulating births to raising the quality of the population as a whole. In the 1990s, integral to the post-socialist nation's intensified class differentiations, the semantic field of “quality” was extended to encompass minute social distinctions defining a “person of quality” in practices such as consumption and the incitement of a middle-class desire for social mobility.

In *River Crossing*, if a couple hoped their second child—ideally a boy—would achieve such goals, they recognize that they must provide necessary resources to support the

child. In this village, where the annual income per capita hovered around 2,500 *yuan* (about \$330) in 2005, most families could afford the cost for elementary and middle school education, but the costs for sending their child to the high school in the county seat would be beyond most families' financial capabilities. As for college education, few families, except the local elites, could afford the cost.

To take Shu Yan and Da Kui's daughter as an example, during her elementary school years (1996-2002), her family paid 700-800 *yuan*/year in school costs. During her middle school period (2002-05), her family paid about 2,000 *yuan* in the first two years and 4,000 *yuan* in the last year. For her high school (2005-08) in the county seat, her family paid about 22,000 *yuan* (including housing and dining, among other school fees). As of this writing, her first semester in college (fall 2008) has cost her family 11,000 *yuan*. To support this college education, her parents are already in debt.

As a result, as exemplified by the reproductive story of Da Kui and Shu Yan, villagers' quest for a family heir became entangled with a desire for social mobility, and their sense of financial instability had postponed their second childbirth for nearly a decade—both of which were suggestive of their emerging consciousness of the growing and intensifying class differentiations now occurring in post-socialist rural China.

In River Crossing, another group of 11 couples had produced girls for their first child and, after about a decade, became interested in having a second child for a male heir, but had not produced such a second child thus far. Yet convergent with the experiences of the first group of 22 couple I discussed above (with a child set characterized by “a big, big sister with a little, little brother”), the underlying rationale that deterred wives of this group of 11 couples from becoming pregnant a second time also derived from their worry that they could

not raise a “capable” second child (in terms of school and economic success) in the current era of intensified social differentiation.

To cite just one case, Shu Xian and her husband San Jie (both age 40 in 2005) had a daughter born in 1986. Following the birth of the daughter, the couple planned to have another child so as to “try for a son” and thus did not apply for an “only-child certificate.” When the state “qualified” Shu Xian to become pregnant again in 1993, however, the couple—especially the husband (San Jie)—became rather hesitant. As San Jie confessed to me, since he had three brothers, two of whom had a son, he did not feel obliged to have a son right away, since his extended family would “continue” with the birth of his brothers’ sons. To San Jie, to raise a son was a more serious challenge than to simply produce a son. To be sure, he had often dreamt of having a son—but that was only a dream. However, even if his (imagined) son proved to be a strong enough student to attend college, he would not be able to afford the expensive cost; in case his son could not go to college and ended up living as an adult with his parents, San Jie would have to build a new house for his son, in addition to hosting a wedding—if he wanted his son to marry a decent woman—which would cost at least 70,000 *yuan* (some \$9,000 in 2005). Both peasants without much extra income beyond the meager earnings that their farm produced, San Jie calculated that he and Shu Xian simple could not afford having a son. Realizing that San Jie was only considering the possibility of his wife bearing a *boy*, I joked: “If the second child were a girl, then you wouldn’t have the burden of building a house for her wedding, if she couldn’t go to college.” Surprised by my question, San Jie replied without hesitation: “Why bother having another daughter? I have one already.” Although they continue to be haunted by the patrilineal ideal of having a son,

facing the rapid post-socialist class differentiation happening in their life-world, this couple's sense of insecurity has overpowered their quest for a male successor.

As for the nineteen couples who had applied for an "only-child certificate" for their singleton daughters, it is possible that at least some of these couples have "embraced singleton daughters" in their reproductive choices, as some scholars would now suggest (Shi 2009, Yan 2003). In this case, their fondness for their only child/daughter itself may have provided sufficient motivations for their reproductive choices—as the state has encouraged. Yet other factors might also lead rural couples to have a "certified" single daughter.

River Crossing houses the township administration (the lower-end of China's urban-based governing apparatus), as well as a set of state-owned public services and businesses. Officials and formal staff members working for the state's local agency (and in many cases, their family members as well) hold the status of urban *hukou* (urban citizenship—"urban household registration identities") (Cheng and Selden 1994). With urban *hukou*, these state agents and their family members could enjoy a variety of governmental benefits, such as access to urban public schools and jobs in the state-owned industries, which peasants would not be able to share. Yet because of their urban status, they are required to follow the government's *urban* birth policy, which in general has been the one-child policy since 1980, with very few exceptions. Among the 651 households in River Crossing Village, about 120 families had at least one member with an urban *hukou*, amongst whom 80 had all their members holding "urban *hukou*." Accordingly, among the 19 couples who applied for "only-child certificates" for their singleton daughters, six had urban *hukou*, and thus were required by law (and their position) to follow the urban birth policy, regardless of whether or not they were satisfied with having an only child/girl.

Among the remaining thirteen couples (without urban *hukou*) who had applied for “only-child certificates” for their singleton daughters, some did so for economic/class-related reasons similar to those invoked by San Jie and Shu Xian (although the latter couple never did apply for the certificate). To cite just one case, let us consider Shu Wen’s story. Shu Wen (age 32 in 2005) married at 18 and had a daughter the following year. In the coming years, her family experienced some financial difficulties and did not prosper, though not for lack of effort. In 1995, Shu Wen applied for an “only-child certificate” for her daughter. Explaining her decision to me, she said: “I hope my daughter would have a life much better than me. My current circumstances only allow me to raise one child.” Her husband was not that happy with having only one daughter. Yet after the wife of his younger brother gave birth to a son in her first pregnancy, Shu Wen’s husband relented in his efforts to have a son through a second pregnancy. As Shu Wen said: “He [her husband] continues to like the idea of having a boy, but doesn’t have the [financial] ability [to realize it].” She further added, “Now that his brother has a son, we could take a breath [for not being obliged to have a son].”

Taking the above factors into account, I would suggest that along with China’s post-socialist transformation came a diversification of villagers’ fertility strategies—in terms of their timing and number of childbirths, as well as their desired gender composition of their completed “child set” (Gu 1996). Yet in assessing the degree and scope of rural couples’ “transition” in reproductive choices, the trend to “embrace singleton daughters” is only one of several factors that are relevant to villagers in their decision to have only one child, in the case that child is a girl. To some villagers, the patrilineal ideal of having a male heir

continues to haunt them even if they have pledged to “embrace” a singleton daughter by applying for an “only-child certificate.”

Conclusions:

The Gendered Consequences to Re-conceptualizing What Constitutes a “Family Line” in Post-socialist Rural China

Reading villagers’ reproductive experiences surrounding their quest for boys, I propose that the Chinese state’s past three decades of efforts to control its population have greatly challenged villagers’ capacity to fulfill the traditional expectation for family line succession that every man should be succeeded by a son. Meanwhile, population control in rural China has intersected with rural transformations that have been accelerated by post-Mao reforms. Facing growing and intensified social differentiations, an emerging consciousness of class distinctions has come to be entangled with villagers’ quest for sons. Living in a social setting with nearly impassable class gaps, ordinary villagers have tried to balance their desire for social mobility with their pursuit of a male heir and their sense of insecurity and powerlessness in a place that, though seemingly quite remote in its mountainous location, is nevertheless being reshaped by the nation’s determined transition toward global capitalism. As a result, choosing whether or not to pursue a son in a second birth, so as to achieve the patrilineal ideal of family succession, has become entwined with villagers’ lived experiences of China’s post-socialist transformations.

Yet even among those who temporarily suspended, or eventually gave up, the pursuit of a male heir from a second pregnancy, the patrilineal ideal of family line succession has continued to haunt them. Nevertheless, unlike the patrilineal ideal of a two-generational,

father-son framework that expects every man to have a male offspring, to villagers like Shu Yan and Da Kui, the framework that now evaluates family line succession seems to be a three-generational, grandfather-grandson model in the context of the extended family. To Da Kui's father, for example, as long as one of his four sons could produce a boy, his extended family line will continue, and no one in the village would dare gossip that his family would vanish without male progeny.

In River Crossing, this grandfather-grandson framework has to some degree become a supplemental model co-existing with the traditional one in villagers' conceptualizations of family line succession. With this broader and relatively flexible model, the patrilineal notion of family line succession has sustained itself by accommodating changing family structures as a joint product of the state's three-decade-long effort at population control, as well as the accompanying post-socialist transformations. Yet by locating their reproductive practices within an extended family framework, many villagers such as Da Kui, Shu Yan, Shu Xian, San Jie, and Shu Wen have gained precious extra "space" from which to ponder their reproductive choices against the persistent patrilineal notion of family line succession and its relevance during the nation's post-socialist moment. For example, as I discussed in the previous section, because San Jie's two brothers each had a son, he and his wife Shu Xian could consider their reproductive decisions from their own perspectives, after having a daughter in 1986. And for Shu Wen, after the wife of her husband's brother gave birth to a son in 2003, the family pressure she and her husband felt for having an "only daughter" lessened considerably.

Sahlins has argued that a "cultural ordering produced by the material forces presupposes a cultural ordering of these forces" (1976:39). Following his insights, an

understanding of villagers' reproductive behavior commands a mapping of the underlying symbolic and social order that gives people the values they pursue and constrains the strategies they adopt. I would add that the current grave reality of deepening class gaps has come to shape villagers' sense of the "social order" itself. Their awareness of class divides is now reshaping the contours of how their patrilineal ideology influences their reproductive practices and the attendant re-conceptualization of what counts as a "family line."

Entwined with such reconfigured "kinship" frameworks, gender discourse now "signify" underlying social realities (Franklin and McKinnon 2000). As villagers' emerging consciousness of class distinction has become entangled with their quest for male heirs, their reproductive experiences encapsulate China's post-socialist conditions. And yet, while the emerging, supplemental framework of family line succession has provided an extra space for villagers' reproductive choices, it continues to accommodate the entrenched patrilineal ideology—that ultimately sons are the sole, legitimate heirs of the family. For those who are able to produce a son in their second birth, the patrilineal gender ideology underlying their male-preference become further manifested and reinforced.

As the pursuit of male heirs via "extra" births now has a "price" stipulated explicitly in the state's reproductive policy, richer families now clearly enjoy far more reproductive freedom than do poor and "ordinary" families. Moreover, as the largely commercialized medical establishments began catering to villagers' preference for sons by providing sex-selective diagnosis and abortions, female fetuses—in addition to women's bodies—have become the casualty of villagers' quest for family line succession.⁶ Furthermore, as the post-

⁶ One obvious demographic consequence of this is the alarming, increasingly skewed sex ratio at birth nationwide over the past two decades, along with millions of unwanted infant girls being abandoned, let alone more female fetuses being aborted. According to Tyrene White's comprehensive review, the national sex ratio at birth (girl/boy) has been rising steadily: 111 in 1985, 114 in 1989, and 117 in 2000 (2009:203). As to the

socialist state's birth control policy now accommodates both the reality of deepening class differences and the traditional patrilineal gender ideology, childbearing has become refracted to index social distinction. Thus the reproductive "fashion"—epitomized as "a big, big sister with a little, little brother" as I have discussed in this paper—tells a story of how human bodies have become commodified, with "little" boys being desired and valued over "big" girls, and imbued with emerging senses of social distinction. In their pursuit of a male heir, women's bodies continue to be the locus and battlefield of villagers' reproductive struggles, as well as of the state's sustained intervention—no matter how "globalized" and "humane" its birth control policy the government now claims.

In making these claims, this paper is inspired by work in feminist anthropology that aims to braid discussions of gender and class as linked factors that provide a lens through which cultural norms, individual struggles, and social transformations can be productively viewed and examined (Rapp 2001). Drawing on this case study, this paper offers localized insight into the intensely human experience of China's post-socialism and associated globalizing efforts as they are reconfigured in the seemingly intimate space of reproduction.

Finally, while space has not allowed me to pursue this important point, I further hope my paper will contribute to related debates within the U.S. concerning reproductive policy. Bringing American and Chinese reproductive models into conversation should shed light on potential impacts and ethical challenges that legal reforms in reproductive policy and reproductive medicine may hold for the lives of women not only in China but also in the U.S. (Ginsburg 1989). I hope to pursue such comparative research in the future.

area containing River Crossing, as revealed by local officials over informal conversations, since 1999 the sex ratio at birth has been above 120 at both the provincial and county levels (although the officially announced ratios were around 113). For recent studies of China's abandoned girls and sex-selective abortions, see Cai and Lavelly 2003, Chu 2001, Johnson 1996; for the associated practice of foreigners, especially Americans, adopting abandoned female Chinese babies left in orphanages, see Anagnost 2000, Dorow 2006.

References Cited

Anagnost, Ann

1997 *National Past-times: Narrative, Representation, and Power in Modern China.*

Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

2000 *Scenes of Misrecognition: Maternal Citizenship in the Age of Transnational*

Adoption. *Positions* 8(2):389-421.

2004 *The Corporeal Politics of Quality (suzhi).* *Public Culture* 16 (2):189-208.

2008 *From “Class” to “Social Strata”:* Grasping the Social Totality in Reform-era

China. *Third World Quarterly* 29 (3):497-519.

Arrighi, Giovanni

2007 *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the Twenty-First Century.* New York: Verso.

Back, Les

1993 *Gendered Participation: Masculinity and Fieldwork in a South London Adolescent*

Community. *In Gendered Fields: Women, Men and Ethnography.* Diane Bell,

Patricia Caplan, and Wazir-Jahan B. Karim, eds., pp. 215-33. London: Routledge.

Boissevain, Jeremy

1985 *Ethnographic Fieldwork.* *In The Social science encyclopedia.* Adam Kuper and

Jessica Kuper, eds. pp. 272-74. New York: Routledge.

Cai, Yong and William Lavelly

2003 *China’s Missing Girls: Numerical Estimates and Effects on Population Growth.*

China Review 3:13-29.

Chafetz, Janet

1997 *Feminist Theory and Sociology.* *Annual Review of Sociology* 23:97-120.

Cheng T.-J. and M. Selden

1994 The Origins and Social Consequences of China's *Hukou* System. *China Quarterly* 139:644–68.

Chu, Junhong

2001 Prenatal Sex Determination and Sex-selective Abortion in Rural Central China. *Population and Development Review* 27 (2):259-281.

Colen, Shellee

2006 “Like a Mother to Them’: Stratified Reproduction & West Indian Childcare Workers and Employers in New York.” *In Feminist Anthropology: A reader*. Ellen Lewin, ed. pp. 380-396. Oxford: Blackwell.

Collier, Jane and Sylvia Yanagisako, eds.

1990 *Gender and Kinship: Essays Toward a Unified Analysis*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Davis-Floyd Robbie and Carolyn Sargent, eds.

1997 *Childbirth and Authoritative Knowledge: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

di Leonardo, Micaela

2004 Gender, Race, and Class. *In A Companion to the Anthropology of Politics*. David Nugent and Joan Vincent, eds. pp. 135-151. Oxford: Blackwell.

Dorow Sara K.

2006 *Transnational Adoption: A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender, and Kinship*. New York: New York University Press.

Fei, Xiaotong

1981 *Systems of Reproduction* [in Chinese]. Tianjin: Tianjin People's Press.

Feldman-Savelsberg, Pamela

1999 *Plundered Kitchens, Empty Wombs: Threatened Reproduction and Identity in the Cameroon Grassfields*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press

Fong, Vanessa

2004 *Only Hope*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Franklin, Sarah and Susan McKinnon

2000 *New Directions in Kinship Study*. *Current Anthropology* 41(2):275-78.

Gal, Susan and Gail Kligman, eds.

2000 *Reproducing Gender: Politics, Publics, and Everyday Life after Socialism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Ginsburg, Faye

1989 *Contested Lives: The Abortion Debate in An American Community*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

_____ and Rayna Rapp

1991 *The Politics of Reproduction*. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 20: 311-43.

_____ and _____, eds.

1995 *Conceiving the New World Order*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Gottlieb, Alma

2004 *The Afterlife Is Where We Come from*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Greenhalgh, Susan

2008 *Just One Child*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

_____ and Edwin Winckler

2005 *Governing China's Population*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Gregory, James

1984 *The Myth of the Male Ethnographer and the Women's World*. *American Anthropologist* 86 (2):316-327.

Gu, Baochang

1996 *A Synthesis of Demographic Trends in China* [in Chinese]. Shanghai: Shanghai Social Sciences Press.

2002 *On the Reform of China's Family Planning Program*" [in Chinese]. *Population Research* 26 (3):1-8.

Huang, Kaibing

2008 *Reviewing the Past, Prospecting the Future: On Medical Reform in China* [in Chinese]. *Qianjing Forum* 49 (2):26-27.

Inhorn, Marcia

1994 *Quest for Conception*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

_____, ed.

2007 *Reproductive Disruptions: Gender, Technology, and Biopolitics in the New Millennium*. New York: Berghahn Books

Jacoby, Hanan G., Guo Li, and Scott Rozelle

2002 *Hazards of Expropriation: Tenure Insecurity and Investment in Rural China*. *American Economic Review* 92 (5):1420-47.

Johnson, Kay

1996 *The Politics of the Revival of Infant Abandonment in China, with Special Reference to Hunan*. *Population and Development Review* 22 (1):77-98.

Kanaaneh, Rhoda Ann

2002 *Birthing the Nation: Strategies of Palestinian Women in Israel*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Kaufman, S. R. and L. Morgan

2005 *The Anthropology of the Beginnings and Ends of Life*. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 34:317-41.

Kipnis, Andrew

2007 *Neoliberalism Reified: Suzhi Discourse and Tropes of Neoliberalism in the PRC*. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (New Series)* 13 (2):383-399.

Lancaster, Roger N. & M. di Leonardo, eds.

1997 *The Gender/Sexuality Reader*. London: Routledge.

Li, Qiang

2005 *A Reversed "T"-Shape Social Structure and "Structural Tensions"* [in Chinese] *Sociological Research* 20 (2):55-75.

Martin, Emily

1987 *Women in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction*. Boston: Beacon.

Moore, Henrietta

1994 *A Passion for Difference*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

2007 *The Subject of Anthropology: Gender, Symbolism and Psychoanalysis*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Muller, V.

1985 *Origins of Class and Gender Hierarchy in Northwest Europe*. *Dialectical Anthropology* (10):93-105.

Nee, Victor

1989 A Theory of Market Transition: From Redistribution to Markets in State Socialism. *American Sociological Review* 54 (5):663-81.

Ortner, Sherry

1995 Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37(1):173-193.

1996 *Making Gender: The Politics and Erotics of Culture*. New York: Beacon.

Rapp, Rayna

2000 *Testing Women, Testing the Fetus*. New York: Routledge.

2001 Gender, Body, Biomedicine: How Some Feminist Concerns Dragged Reproduction to the Center of Social Theory. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 15(4):466-477.

Rofel, Lisa

2007 *Desiring China*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Sahlins, Marshall

1976 *Culture and Practical Reason*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Shi, Lihong

2009 Embracing a Singleton Daughter. *Anthropology News* 50 (3):15-16.

Strathern M.

1990 *The Gender of the Gift*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Sun, Liping

2004 *Transition and Rupture: Changing Social Structure in Post-Reform China [in Chinese]*. Beijing: Tsinghua University Press.

Thomas, Lynn

2003 *Politics of the Womb*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Tu, Ping

1993 An Exploration of the Recent Skewed Sex Ratio at Birth [in Chinese]. *Population Studies* 17 (1):6-13.

Taylor, Janelle S.

2008 *The Public Life of the Fetal Sonogram*. Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Visweswaran, Kamala

1997 Histories of Feminist Ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 26:591-620.

Watson, James

2004 Presidential Address: Virtual Kinship, Real Estate, and Diaspora Formation—The Man Lineage Revisited. *Journal of Asian Studies* 63 (4):893-910.

White, Tyrene

2009 *China's Longest Campaign: Birth Planning in the People's Republic, 1949-2005*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Yan, Hairong

2008 *New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Yan, Yunxiang

2003 *Private Life under Socialism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.