

Prepared Statement

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Members of Congress, Distinguished Co-Panelists, Esteemed Guests:

It is a pleasure and a privilege to be invited here today to testify on China’s demographic evolution in the era of the One Child Policy.

The general dimensions of what I have called “the global war against baby girls¹” will, I am afraid, already be all too familiar to most of you, as will the general nature of that war as it has unfolded in China over the past three and a half decades.

My testimony this afternoon will therefore simply attempt to provide a few updates on contemporary China’s biologically un-natural sex ratio at birth, and some of the prospective questions arising from this artificially induced gender imbalance. My testimony will rely upon the graphs and tables that accompany this written statement.

I wish to make four basic points in this statement:

¹ Nicholas Eberstadt, “The Global War Against Baby Girls”, *The New Atlantis*, Fall 2011, available electronically at <http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/the-global-war-against-baby-girls> .

First: modern China's un-naturally high sex ratio at birth (SRB) can be understood as a social collision between three powerful forces—ruthless and enduring son-preference; sub-replacement fertility, which perforce freights the gender of each birth with additional import for parents; and inexpensive, universally available prenatal gender determination technology in the context of an unconditional abortion policy.

Ms. Anne Morse of the Population Research Institute has used US Census Bureau estimates of China's fertility levels and gender imbalances to illustrate vividly the strong correspondence between lower fertility levels and higher SRBs in China over the past generation. [SEE FIGURE 1] Of course this gender imbalance is effectuated through mass sex-selective abortion, which presupposes widely available and reliable information on the gender of every fetus. When the One Child Policy commenced in the early 1980s, sonography or ultrasound machines were only found in a tiny minority of China's nearly 3000 counties—mostly of course in urban areas. But by 1988, over 90 percent of China's counties possessed ultrasound machines. [SEE FIGURE 2] Thus by the time of China's 1990 census, all-China second births, third births, and all higher order births were reporting sex ratios of 120 or more [SEE FIGURE 3]—in contrast to the “normal” ratio of 103-105 typical of large established human populations, so far as we can tell, all around the world today and all throughout history.

Its name notwithstanding, China's One Child Policy has never actually managed to enforce a one-child-only regimen over China as a whole: in recent years, by the estimates and projections of the US Census Bureau's International Data Base, China's total fertility rate has ranged between 1.5 and 1.6 births per woman per lifetime. In the 1990s and early 2000s, to judge by officially reported census figures, sex-selective abortion was not common for first pregnancies in China: instead, parents intervened massively across the country with female infanticide at higher-order parities. According to the 2010 census, however, the SRB for first births had risen sharply: to almost 114 boys for every 100 girls. This, even as SRBs for some higher-births appear to have been significantly declining. In effect, sex-selective feticide in China appears to have been increasingly “front-loaded” with respect to birth parity in recent years: fewer first-time parents than in the past are apparently willing nowadays (2010) to take their chances with biologically-determined gender outcomes for their firstborn child.

Please note that China's involuntary population control policy is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for biologically abnormal distortions of a modern society's sex ratio at birth. Un-naturally high SRBs today are witnessed in culturally Chinese settings like Hong Kong and Taiwan; in parts of India and Pakistan; and in West Asian countries such as Georgia and Armenia. None of those societies maintains a forcible birth control policy. To the extent that China's One Child Policy successfully coerces parents into having fewer children than they would otherwise desire, however, we would expect such pressures to result in higher SRBs than would otherwise occur. In 2007 Professor Zeng Yi, one of China's leading demographers, offered his judgment that approximately half of China's surfeit of baby boys at that time was due

to the One Child Policy.² He did not, however, explain how he derived that approximation. Exactly how much the One Child Policy contributes to China’s SRB imbalance is a complex question to answer—and one that requires further scholarly investigation.

Second: there is broad agreement among researchers of China’s population trends that China’s overall sex ratio at birth is no longer rising, and may indeed have begun to decline in recent years—but there remains some disagreement in expert circles about the actual levels and trends here, and these differences are for the moment essentially irresolvable given the non-trivial uncertainties and discrepancies contained in China’s official demographic data.

The two leading institutions that produce worldwide demographic estimates and projections at a national level are quite arguably the US Census Bureau, with its aforementioned continuously updated International Data Base, and the UN Population Division, with its biennially-revised “World Population Prospects” series. One can compare their estimates for China’s sex ratio at birth for the One Child Policy Era. [SEE FIGURE 4] The Census Bureau and the UNPD present their data slightly differently: UNPD offers five year averages whereas Census gives year-by-year estimates or projections, and Census Bureau estimates only start with the year 1990 while UNPD series trace all the way back to 1950. (UNPD also includes Taiwan in its calculations for China, unlike Census Bureau IDB.) Nevertheless, it is apparent from Figure 4 that while UNPD and Census Bureau evaluations of levels in trends in SRB for China over the past generation are generally quite close, they are not identical. Their differences are most pronounced for the most recent years (2010-2015): by UNPD’s projections, China’s SRB for those years would have averaged 116, but Census’ projections for that same period averaged about 112.

Some of this difference may be explained by the fact that the Census Bureau’s projections are more recent than UNPD’s and therefore utilize more up-to-date information.³ But it is also true that the official Chinese demographic data that independent analysts must contend with can afford no certainty concerning sex ratios for those born throughout the One Child Policy Era—least so for small children.

The plain fact is that contemporary China does not yet have a vital registration system that provides accurate and comprehensive national data on annual births and deaths. Further, as Dr. Daniel M. Goodkind of the US Census Bureau has pointed out, there are discrepancies in demographic data from different official Chinese sources: census counts versus hospital records versus primary school enrollment records (primary schooling in theory being universal these days for children 7 years of age). [SEE FIGURE 5] For example: where school enrollment data would have suggested a sex ratio at age 7 of about 110 for boys and girls born in 1993, China’s 1995 “mini-census” placed their sex ratio at about 120. These are big differences.

² Zeng Yi, “Options for Fertility Policy Transition in China”, *Population and Development Review*, Volume 33, Issue 2 (June 2007), pp. 215-246.

³ These UNPD estimates and projections are from the “2012” revision (released June 2013) for the “World Population Prospects” series; the “2014” revisions are expected later this year.

But even if we limit our gaze to official censuses and “mini-censuses” (1% inter-censal sample surveys of the Chinese population) we see major discrepancies. [SEE FIGURE 6] The 2005 “mini-census” tells us that the sex ratio for two-year-old children was 125, but the 2010 census says it was 119 for seven-year-old kids in 2010—even though the two year olds and seven year olds in question were all born in 1993. By the same token, the 2000 census places the sex ratio for children born in 1999 at nearly 123, while the 2010 census puts it at about 117. Clearly all these ratios are abnormally high—but such differences raise considerable questions about what the true underlying levels and trends in gender imbalance for China may be. Differential childhood mortality cannot account for such discrepancies.

Part of the trouble here seems to be a varying undercount from one census to the next for China’s children and youth. [SEE FIGURES 7 THROUGH 9] For males and females born from the mid-1980s onward, China’s successive censuses provide significantly different headcounts for any given birth year. The 2010 census, for example, offers a substantially higher headcount for population born in every year of the 1990s than does the 2000 census. Notably, it is not only girls who seem to have been undercounted in the 2000 census—at least in light of the 2010 census: boys also appear to have been undercounted. Such undercounts speak, among other things, to the incentives for parents to “conceal” non-quota births when reporting those births might risk strictures or other penalties, including financial penalties. We may suspect that such strategic under-reporting of births has continued in recent years, insofar as the One Child Policy itself has continued. But trends and differentials in sex-specific under-reporting today remain a major unknown—and how experts treat this unknown necessarily have implications for calculated estimates and projections regarding current and future trends in gender imbalance in China.

Third: China’s imbalanced sex ratios at birth over the past generation already portend a virtually unavoidable “marriage squeeze” for the generation to come; but that “squeeze” may be even more severe than previously anticipated owing to a new trend just now beginning to emerge on the Mainland: a “flight from marriage” by young women.

Today as in the past, China has embraced what might be called a “universal marriage norm”—and in recent decades, it has actually also achieved something close to universal marriage in practice. According to the 2000 China census, for example, just 3.8 % of men and a mere 0.2% of women in their early forties had never been married.⁴ But these were children of the pre-population control era. With rising SRBs and continuing sub-replacement fertility, any society with a “universal marriage norm” must perforce be consigned to the prospect of substantial numbers of “surplus grooms” or effectively unmarriageable young men.

Professor Zeng Yi and his colleagues are among the demographers who have projected the prospective dimensions of this marriage squeeze for China in the decades immediately ahead. [SEE FIGURE 10] In a study from 2008, their work suggested that about 25% of Chinese men in

⁴ UN Population Division, “World Marriage Data 2012”, available electronically at <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/dataset/marriage/wmd2012/MainFrame.html> .

their late thirties, and over 20% of those in their early forties, would be never-married by the year 2030. The growing army of unmarriageable males envisioned in their projections, it is important to note, was still predicated on the assumption of near-universal marriage for Chinese women.

But that assumption is now being challenged by facts on the ground.

Throughout the rest of East Asia, what has been dubbed a “flight from marriage” by women (and also men) has been underway for more than two decades.⁵ In both Japan and South Korea—but also in such quintessentially Chinese settings as Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan—demographic data have been recording a pronounced and still-continuing tendency for women to postpone marriage to ever later ages—and, increasingly, to forgo marriage altogether. In all the societies so affected, the “flight from marriage” begins as an elite phenomenon, starting in large urban areas and in the strata with the highest educational attainment—then, gradually or not-so-gradually, that elite fashion becomes a mass norm. In Japan and Hong Kong, for example, about 23% of women in their late 30s were still single according to recent census counts (2010 and 2006 respectively), and about 17% of those in their early forties were likewise reportedly never-married. [SEE FIGURES 11 and 12]

As may be seen in Figures 11 and 12, Mainland China is a latecomer the East Asia’s “female flight from marriage” party. Contemporary China’s “female flight from marriage” has thus far been more hesitant than those of other postwar East Asian locales even after controlling for income: as may be seen, the proportions of still single women in their late thirties and early forties for China in 2010 were notably lower than for Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong when those societies had levels of GDP per capita comparable to China 2010. [SEE FIGURES 12 AND 13] But incipient signs of a “flight from marriage” by women are now evident in China, the country’s impending “marriage squeeze” notwithstanding.

Figures 15 through 17 document the first hints of such trends. [SEE FIGURES 15 THROUGH 17] The tendency for Chinese women to postpone, or forgo, marriage is only just becoming visible at a national level: less than 2% of women in their late thirties were never married as of the 2010 census. But that fraction is decidedly higher than in previous decades. And just as in the rest of East Asia, the tendency for women to postpone marriage, or avoid it altogether, is emerging first in the China’s major metropolitan center and in the most educated segments of Mainland society. Although the national average share of never married women ages 35-39 in China in the 2010 census was reported at 1.8%, it was 5.1% in Beijing—still low by current East Asian standards, but nevertheless roughly three times the national average. Within Beijing,

⁵ Cf. for example Richard Leete, “The Continuing Flight from Marriage and Parenthood Among the Overseas Chinese in East and Southeast Asia: Dimensions and Implications”, *Population and Development Review*, Volume 20, Issue 4 (December 1994), pp. 811-829; and Gavin W. Jones, “The “Flight from Marriage” in South-East and East Asia,” *Asian Metacentre Research Paper Series*, No. 11 (National University Of Singapore, 2003) available electronically at <http://www.populationasia.org/Publications/ResearchPaper/AMCRP11.pdf>.

furthermore, nearly 9% of women in their late thirties with some college or post-secondary education were never married as of 2010—as were roughly 18% of those women in their early thirties. This is precisely what an East Asian “flight from marriage” by women would look like in its early stages.

At this juncture we cannot tell how fast, or how far, the tendency to postpone marriage, or forgo it altogether, will progress in Mainland China. But such a trend is already definitely evident. And to the extent that this trend unfolds further, the magnitude of the “unmarriageable male” problem can be expected correspondingly to intensify over the coming generation.

Fourth: while the human rights implications of China’s One Child Policy are well known and widely documented, the question of the program’s actual demographic impact is rather less straightforward. Exactly how much has involuntary population control shaped (or warped) contemporary China’s population structure? There is no immediate, easy answer here because history does not allow re-runs: we do not know what China would look like today if Beijing had never enacted that terrible social experiment.

It may suffice here to note, however, that the East Asian rim today exhibits some of the world’s very lowest fertility levels—all in places that have never toyed with compulsory birth control. In recent years, Japan has reported “snapshot” (i.e., period) total fertility rates below 1.3 births per woman; South Korea’s at times has dropped below 1.2; and in some years Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan have all reported TFRs of less than one birth per woman. In this context, fertility levels for contemporary China—or even just for contemporary urban China—do not look extraordinarily low.

So we may reasonably ask: Has forcible population control accelerated modern China’s fertility decline? Would fertility levels really be higher today without the program? Is it possible they would have been even lower? The simple truth of the matter is: we cannot really address these immense issues with any great confidence as of yet. From a methodological perspective, estimating the net demographic impact of China’s police state population policy presents an exceedingly difficult analytical challenge. There are of course a number of approaches that could be pursued—but none is without its limitations. Such a project, however, in my view strongly merits active pursuit—not least so we may have some sense in advance of the magnitude of demographic responses that will be elicited when the One Child Policy is finally scrapped.