

# Where Have All the Sons Gone?

By Dr Tan Poh Kiang, Editorial Board Member

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## Editorial note:

All names have been changed to protect the identities of the patients.

“*Zong Nan Qing Nu*” is the Chinese expression for the tradition of preferring the male gender. This bias evolved because the male offspring carries the family name and perpetuates the lineage. Historically, sons were given education, material comforts, social status and the major share of family inheritance. Daughters were brought up to accept the inherent injustice and adapt to the cruel reality of this custom. This practice became even more tragic when communist China adopted the one-child policy to stem population explosion. Female newborns were given away or worse yet, abandoned to die. While it is common sense that a country with only males has no posterity, the Chinese mindset decided that someone else could have daughters.

## DIFFERENT BIRTHRIGHTS

That such a biased belief is still alive today was recently made known to me when my wife heard the same comment twice from two different sources. Referring to her brother’s newborn son, she was told, “Your brother must be very clever!” We are still baffled how intelligence of the father is somehow related to the gender of the offspring. That casual remark betrayed a hidden conviction that one sex is better than the other.

My first experience of this preference dated to my early childhood. My grandmother – the matriarch – would reserve the chicken drumstick for me, and my sister would get to eat the other parts. It was not that she did not love my sister but she was unashamed that in the traditional Chinese family, sons and grandsons had different birthrights.

Such flagrant bias did harm to the growing but immature boyish ego. I became a spoilt brat – selfish, demanding and artificially protected. My aunts and uncles relished telling stories of how horrible a kid I was. My only consolation is that after much character bashing, these

elders would admit that even brats like me turn over a new leaf and improve.

My second encounter with the evil of male bias was in the life of my maternal uncle. Being the youngest of seven children with six older sisters, one can figure out that he was a precious child. The Chinese couple would keep trying until the arrival of a son – unless the wallet or the womb failed. Such a son was bestowed an elevated status where he could do no wrong. Make no mistake about it – my uncle is a decent chap. But, much to my grandmother’s chagrin, he married a woman who could not get along with her mother-in-law. The disagreements and quarrels became nasty and frequent. Yet my ageing grandmother chose to live with her son and estranged daughter-in-law rather than with any of her own six caring daughters. This story had a tragic end when my uncle could no longer tolerate the bickering, which also had “fuel added to fire” by his sisters. He and his wife packed their bags and relocated to Australia, leaving my grandmother to dwell in a HDB flat with the domestic maid. He appeased his infuriated sisters by returning to Singapore every two months. My grandmother died two years after his migration – a lonely and heart-broken mother.

Imagine my shock when I discovered in recent times that the same tragedy was repeated in three different families. These three elderly women are my patients and they shared their brokenness with me amidst bitter tears.

## THREE TIMES TRAGEDY

*Madam Lim* has a peculiar habit of leaving her shoes in the waiting room and walking bare-footed into my consultation room. She is always extremely warm and likes to touch my forearm as she speaks. Almost without fail, she would leave after each consultation wishing me prosperity, good health and many children. I learnt from her daughter, *Jane*, that she treats me like a son. Without fail, *Jane* – her other child who is single – would call me on the same day to be updated on her mother’s health.

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*Madam Lim* used to dote on her son but might have exercised a stifling effect on his marriage. His wife had issued an ultimatum some years ago, and ever since, he has stopped calling or seeing his mother. Even the grandchildren do not visit *Madam Lim*. “I have a son but he might as well be dead,” she had told me once.

*Madam Chua* had an empyema of the gallbladder and a stormy convalescence post-operatively. Her infected wound was laid open to heal by granulation. She was too weak to leave the house and thus I had to be called to her two-room flat to change her dressing daily. As the dressing of the extensive wound took a while, the house visits afforded time for her to relate her past.

The poor lady has two sons and two daughters. The first son is a simpleton and did not complete his education. The second son had potential and so the limited family finances were channelled to him in order that he could obtain his engineering degree. His elder sisters worked to contribute to his school fees. He got a good job and became successful. Despite his ability to upgrade to a landed property, he has never given his mother more than a hundred dollars a month. The phone calls and visits dwindled over the years to an annual reunion at Chinese New Year. She was so disappointed that when he called recently to enquire about her health following her gallbladder surgery, she told him over the phone, “Your mother has died.” Amazingly, he failed to recognise his mother’s voice and rushed over to the small flat. He was upset of course but restrained himself when told by his mother that faking death was her only way to see him before the next Chinese New Year.

My last story involves *Madam Teo* who has an obsession with her tongue. She has a false but unshakable belief that her tongue is infected. Although uneducated, she can recognise many antibiotics (from her numerous doctor visits) and demands to be treated with some of the better ones. Her first son was a NUS graduate and the jewel on her crown. He had a bright future till he married a girl who fell for another man soon after the wedding. He was devastated. No one knew how severe his mental and emotional state was till his body was found smashed at the bottom of a HDB high-rise block.

Her second son – not as brilliant as the first – joined the Singapore Navy following his polytechnic diploma course. Unfortunately, he got into trouble with the military and was thrown into detention for a year. His hatred for the authorities and his country was so intense that he left without a word after his release. He has been gone for three years and has only called his sisters once from India. He said he was headed for the Middle East and might return to Singapore in 2006.

Even though these old ladies have supportive and filial daughters, it does not seem to compensate them for their “lost” sons. The chasm created by such sons is too wide to be bridged. The sadness of these mothers is terminal; they refuse to be comforted. Of course, there are many faithful sons as well. The crux of the matter is that “*Zong Nan Qing Nu*” applies double standards to sons and daughters. When a child is granted privileges without appropriate responsibilities assigned and expected, he could be set on the path to becoming unreliable.

Some of my patients joke with me that I am fortunate to have a daughter, for in this age, I gain a son when she marries – this is derived from a growing popular notion that modern men are closer to their wives’ families! Unless one nurtures the child to be a caring and responsible person, one is liable to be forsaken by both sons as well as daughters. ■

