

Son Preference and Early Childhood Investments in China*

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Abstract

Where the fraction of male births is abnormally high, heterogeneity in son preference would suggest that parents of sons may have a stronger son preference than parents of daughters. Child sex may have become a stronger signal of parental sex preferences over time as the cost of sex selection has declined and sex ratios at birth have increased. In this paper, we build on Meng's 2009 analysis of ultrasound diffusion across counties in China, which was found strongly predictive of increased sex ratios at birth. Here, we consider whether ultrasound diffusion changed the pattern of early childhood investments in girls versus boys. If parental investments (like sex ratios) respond to parental sex preferences, postnatal investments in girls should increase with the diffusion of ultrasound and increased prenatal sex selection. In contrast, the prediction for investments prior to birth is ambiguous. For pregnancies carried to term, ultrasound revealed sex as much as six months prior to delivery, enabling gender discrimination in *in utero* investments. In contrast, sex selective abortions would tend to increase *in utero* investments in girls through preference sorting.

We evaluate these competing predictions using microdata on investments in children using the 1992 UNICEF Chinese Children Survey, conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics. We find no effect of ultrasound access on the gender difference in postnatal investments. In contrast, we find early neonatal mortality of girls increased relative to boys with ultrasound access. As neonatal mortality tends to reflect pregnancy conditions, we infer that prenatal investments for girls carried to term may have fallen relative to boys once fetal sex was revealed.

JEL Classification: J13, J16, O33

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