

South China Morning Post

PUBLISHED SINCE 1903 | VOLUME LXVI | NO. 42

Thursday, February 11, 2010

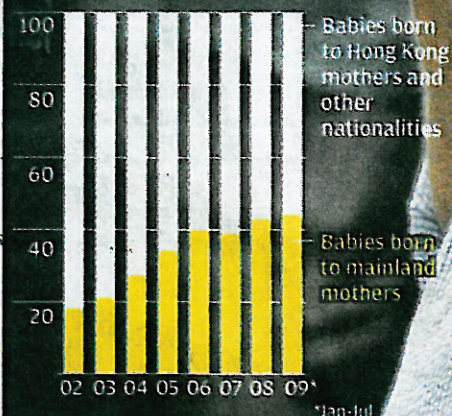
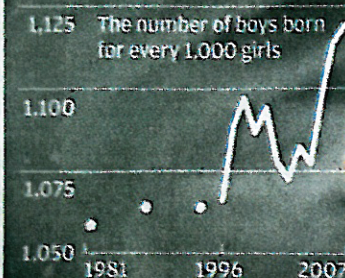
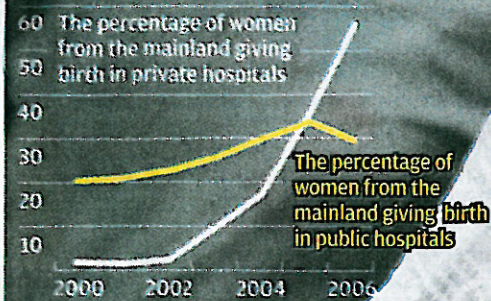
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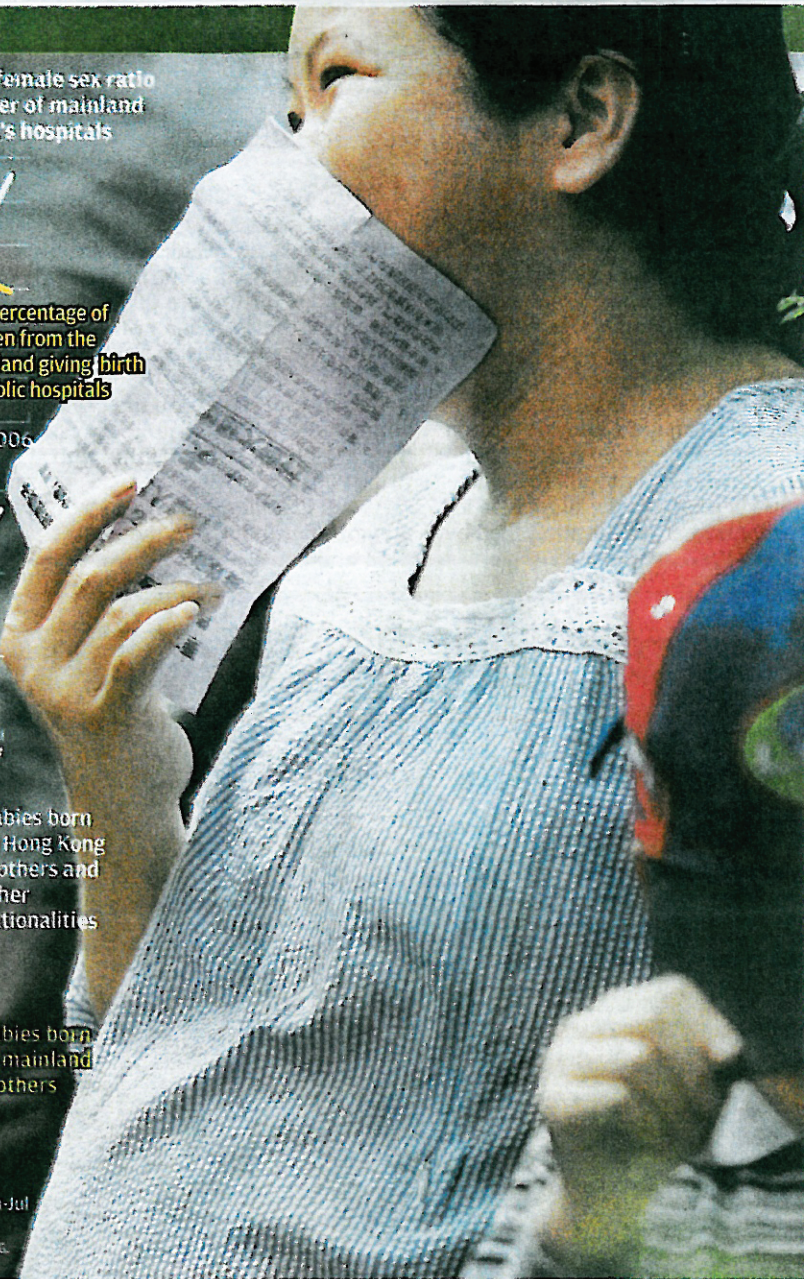
HK \$7.00

Out of balance

How the increase in the male-to-female sex ratio has coincided with a rising number of mainland women giving birth in Hong Kong's hospitals



SCMP GRAPHIC
SOURCES: A STUDY BY GRACE WONG, LEUNG WING CHEONG,
CHIN KEN HOWE, CENSUS AND STATISTICS DEPARTMENT



Test draws mainland women who want sons

A new DNA test that can identify the gender of a fetus as early as eight weeks is now being used as a sex selection tool by mainland women, who come to the city specially for the test.

Their efforts to identify gender and select sons were uncovered in a recent study by Hong Kong public doctors on the gender ratio of the city's births.

A Hong Kong laboratory offering women the DNA blood test, results of which take three days, says it is 92 to 98 per cent accurate in identifying gender.

The traditional ultrasound examination cannot tell a fetus' gender with certainty until 14 or 15 weeks.

While it is illegal for mainland doctors to provide prenatal gender tests, obstetricians in Hong Kong are allowed to reveal gender and "may unknowingly participate in sex selection practice for non-medical purpose", the research team said.

"To find out the gender of their babies, mainland women can simply apply for a tourist visa and have a prenatal gender test in Hong Kong," their report said.

"In Hong Kong, it is legal to perform termination of pregnancies by two registered medical practitioners who are of the opinion that the continuance of the pregnancy would involve risk of 'injury to the physical or mental health of the pregnant woman, greater than if the pregnancy were terminated'.

"Technological improvements have made the detection of fetal sex more readily available and earlier in pregnancy, and the use of ... DNA only involves a simple blood test.

"There have been ethical concerns whether these technologies may be widely used for fetal sex selection for a non-medical purpose in the future."

Chief author Dr Grace Wong Ying said: "As a clinician, it is unethical to participate in sex selection ... we can do very little to change it."

But not all mainlanders have a strong desire for a son. A woman surnamed Chen, who is five months' pregnant and already has a 12-year-old boy, said she did not want to know the

Mainlanders opting for sex selection Scales tipping as more boys born in HK

Ella Lee

The number of boys born in Hong Kong is soaring compared with girls, spurred by an influx of mainland mothers who prefer sons. Many use sex-selection services that are illegal across the border.

Figures from the Census and Statistics Department show that the ratio rose from 109.8 boys for every 100 girls born in 2005, to 111.4 in 2006, 112 in 2007 and 113.6 in 2008.

At this rate it may soon approach the 120 to 130 found in some provinces on the mainland.

The trend is backed up by the first comprehensive study of its kind in Hong Kong. The researchers noted that many mothers came to Hong Kong specifically to learn the sex of their babies. Some would cancel their birth bookings on finding that they were expecting girls.

Since a landmark Court of Final Appeal ruling in 2001 gave permanent resident status to children born in Hong Kong to mainland parents, the city has become a "birth hub".

These Hong Kong-born children may not be raised in the city during their early childhood, but they can come here at any time to enjoy their full rights to education and social services. In 2008, mainland mothers accounted for 42.6 per cent of all births in Hong Kong.

The overall male-to-female ratio

in Hong Kong was only 106.4 to 100 in the 1980s and 1990s, on a par with the international average of 105 to 107.

The study by three obstetricians and gynaecologists at hospitals in Kowloon West - Grace Wong Ying, Leung Wing-cheong and Robert Chin Kien-howe - was published recently in the *Journal of Perinatal Medicine*.

The team retrieved data on all the 194,602 babies born in public hospitals between 2003 and 2007. Of these, 140,962 (72.4 per cent) were born to Hong Kong Chinese and 52,741 (27.1 per cent) to mainland mothers. The overall sex ratio at birth during that five-year period was 108.8 to 100. But the ratio is lower for Hong Kong mothers, at 107.8, than for mainland mothers, 111.6.

Baby boom Children born in Hong Kong enjoy full residency status

In 2008, mainland mothers accounted for the following proportion of births in the city

42.6%

Test for sons

A3

Harry's view

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Wong, the study's chief author, said the rapid rise in the ratio was a result of an influx of mainlanders who practised sex selection more than locals.

The researchers said as most mainland women giving birth in Hong Kong came from southern China, biological or environmental reasons alone probably could not explain such a "skewed" sex ratio.

"The most plausible explanation for this is the practice of sex selection. However, these findings do not provide direct evidence that such a high sex ratio is a result of selective abortion of females in women of higher birth order," the report said.

"It is also possible that patients from mainland China tend to spend more resources on their sons, and are more willing to give birth in Hong Kong if their pregnancy is of a male baby."

Wong, who formerly worked at the public Princess Margaret Hospital and switched to private practice a year ago, said almost 90 per cent of her patients were from the mainland.

"We have come across several cases in which the mainland mothers have defaulted or cancelled their booking for a delivery in Hong Kong after learning that they are carrying a

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Scales tip as more boys born in HK

CONTINUED FROM A1

girl. Some even disappeared without paying the medical fee after an ultrasound scan," Wong said.

The team also analysed the sex ratio of each birth order. They found that while mainland women did not have a clear preference for a son in their first pregnancy, they may have practised some form of sex selection from their second pregnancy.

mainland women - from 104.7 for a first baby, 114.9 for the second and 174.5 for the third child or above.

The researchers warned that the "abnormally skewed" sex ratio may have disastrous social consequences.

"High sex ratios at birth have deprived female fetuses of their birth rights. Mothers also suffer from tremendous psychological pressure and reproductive health risks while undergoing abortion.

shortage of marriageable females," the team said.

There are now more women than men among the Hong Kong population aged 20 to 35. But University of Hong Kong demographer Dr Paul Yip Siu-fai said the changing sex ratio at birth would only have a limited effect on the overall sex ratio.

"This is because many Hong Kong men will marry mainland women and bring them to Hong Kong, and