Addressing Gender-Biased Sex Selection and Skewed Sex Ratio at Birth in China: Case Summary

UNFPA is the United Nations’ sexual and reproductive health agency. UNFPA works to deliver a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe and every young person’s potential is fulfilled.

CPDRC is a non-profit research and consultative institution assisting the decision-making of Chinese Government on population and development.

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Gender equality is a human right and a precondition for further development and poverty alleviation. Empowered women can contribute to health and productivity of family and community, which would benefit the prosperity of next generation.

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

SDG 5 aims to eliminate all kinds of discrimination, violence and harmful practices against women and girls, including child marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM) and gender-biased sex selection (GBSS). It also calls for universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights.

To address gender-biased sex selection

Strong son preference, availability of modern technologies and decreased total fertility rate, altogether have contributed to gender-biased sex selection (GBSS) and skewed sex ratio at birth (SRB), which has brought profound and long-term impacts on society and individuals, such as a marriage squeeze, gender imbalance, discrimination and violence against women, and violation of rights of women and girls.

In the Eighth County Programme (2016-2020) in China, UNFPA continues to support the following interventions to address GBSS:
• Advocate and strengthen multi-sectoral mechanism to address the imbalanced SRB in selected sites.

• Provide technical assistance to strengthen evidence-based policy making and effective implementation.

• Encourage research on polices to deal with issues on GBSS and skewed SRB in the context of dynamic policy environment and rapid social transformation.

• Engage grassroots in addressing skewed SRB through collaboration among media, social media, companies and civil society.

• Facilitate international exchanges and dialogue on experiences, lessons, and best practices in addressing GBSS and SRB between China and other countries confronted with similar challenges.

With funding support from the Kingdom of the Netherlands, UNFPA and China Population and Development Research Center have implemented a project to address gender-biased sex selection and skewed sex ration at birth in China and this case summary is prepared to document the project experiences for knowledge sharing and learning.
Project Profile

Background

China has confronted the most prolonged and significantly skewed sex ratio at birth (SRB) among the countries facing a similar challenge. An imbalanced SRB first occurred as a problem in China in the early 1980s. The sex ratio at birth exceeded 110 in the 1990s and reached an unprecedented 121.18 in 2004. Although there has been a constant decline since 2009 with a SRB of 112.88 in 2016, it is still far above the normal ratio of 103-107. The high sex ratio at birth roots in gender inequality and requires policy and programmatic responses to address root causes.

Objective

To enhance policy environment and public engagement in addressing the root causes of gender-biased sex selection (GBSS) and the skewed sex ratio at birth (SRB) in China.

Project Cycle

Three years from 2016 to 2018
Geographic Location of Project Sites

1. Changfeng County, Hefei City, Anhui Province
2. Yongqiao District, Suzhou City, Anhui Province
3. Huangmei County, Huanggang City, Hubei Province
4. Jiayu County, Xianning City, Hubei Province
5. Binyang County, Nanning City, Guangxi Autonomous Region
6. Ningming County, Changzou City, Guangxi Autonomous Region
Table 1: Basic Information of Project Sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project Sites</th>
<th>SRB in 2015</th>
<th>Population (million)</th>
<th>Township</th>
<th>Village</th>
<th>2015 GDP (billion, RMB)</th>
<th>SRB in 2017</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Changfeng County, Anhui</td>
<td>110.6</td>
<td>760</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>109.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yongqiao District, Suzhou City, Anhui</td>
<td>109.5</td>
<td>1,890</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>368</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>106.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huangmei County, Hubei</td>
<td>122.0</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>517</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>116.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jiayu County, Hubei</td>
<td>120.1</td>
<td>370</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>114.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ningming County, Guangxi</td>
<td>108.5</td>
<td>420</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>108.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Binyang County, Guangxi</td>
<td>114.2</td>
<td>1,050</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>113.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Strategies of the Project

With gender equality as the core idea, the project introduces gender mainstreaming strategy, changes social norms and culture and customs of son preference, emphasizes multi-sectoral participation in governance, and engages communities and families as basic actors and entry point of intervention to enable a societal change.
**Intervention Framework**

- **Macro-level**: At the county and district level, the project is designed to promote gender mainstreaming, to integrate gender equality approach into government work and social development, and to change social policies, systems, laws, culture and macro-environment to ensure women’s equal participation in social development with men. It is carried out mainly by district government departments, county and district institutions, non-governmental organizations and public media. Various training and advocacy activities are organized to improve gender awareness of decision makers and governors, as well as to enhance policy coordination and multi-sectoral cooperation.

- **Meso-level**: At the community level, the project aims to develop positive community culture and environment to encourage public participation. Township governments and village committees/community self-governing bodies launch culture-sensitive advocacy activities, revise gender discriminatory village rules and regulations, and promote women’s participation in public affairs.

- **Micro-level**: At the level of family, the project aims to change traditional gender roles; improve resource distribution among family members; encourage family members to change traditional gender understandings and practices. Village committees/community self-governing bodies and families act as actors of intervention by improving women’s economic and family status and promoting equal domestic division of labor.

**Sources of Funding**

The project is funded by the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and matching funds are provided by local governments.
Project Management

The project is implemented jointly by the UNFPA China Office and the China Population and Development Research Center (CPDRC) under the China National Health Commission (NHC) (formerly known as the National Health and Family Planning Commission before March 2018, NHFC) and coordinated by the International Department, with operational guidance provided by the Family Development Department of the NHFC.

The health and family planning commissions at the provincial level provide funding and policy support for the project. The project is organized and implemented by the health and family planning commission at the county and district levels under the collaboration of the leaders of the county governments and other functional departments.
Fig. 1: Framework of the Project

Core Concepts of Intervention
- Multi-sectoral Governance
- Community and Family based intervention
- Social Norms Change
- Gender Equality and Gender Mainstreaming

Intervention Strategies

Akers of Intervention
- Program Design & Monitoring
  - UNFPA/CPDRC
  - Xi’an Jiaotong U
  - Expert Teams
- Advocacy & Communication
  - Traditional Media
  - New Media
  - NGO
- Third Parties
- Evaluations of Interventions in project counties and districts

Targets of Intervention
- Community and Family
  - Village Committee
  - Community
  - Family
- Monitoring & Evaluation

Modules of Intervention
- Operational Research
- Good Practice Cases of Governance

Operational Research
- Change of Gender Norms
- Macro Social Norms
- Community Norms
- Family Norms
- Good Practice Cases of Governance

Program Design & Monitoring
- Indicator System Design
- Training
- Baseline Survey
- Grassroots Participation
- Granular Communication
- Technical Support

Evaluation of Interventions in project counties and districts
Government Leadership, Multi-sectoral Collaboration Governance and Public Participation

The government plays a leading role in the project and engage many departments. For example, in order to incorporate gender perspective into government priorities and decision-making of social development, Huangmei County in Hubei Province set up a project steering team with 28 functional departments and 16 township leaderships, in which county head and the director of health and family planning serve as the project team chief and deputy chief respectively. The health and family planning department innovatively has strengthened comprehensive governance of SRB besides prohibiting illegal determination of fetal sex and illegal selection of fetal sex by artificial abortion. The issues of sex ratio at birth and gender equality have been added into cadre training in Communist Party schools, and gender sensitive approach has been considered in many sectors like education, civil affairs and social security, public security and finance, resulting in launch of gender-sensitive policies. In collaboration with the local Civil Affairs Bureau and the health and family planning departments have jointly revised gender-discriminatory village regulations in 180 village/communities. The local Education Bureau has introduced gender equality into the extracurricular courses in primary and secondary schools and increased the number of toilet squats for women in 7 renovated and expanded primary and secondary schools. The Agriculture Office, the Industrial and Commercial Bureau, the Human Resources and Social Security Bureau, and the Rural Commercial Bank have issued preferential policies for women's employment and startup business, and the County Women's Federation has intensified its efforts in women's rights protection and selection of positive role models. During poverty alleviation, Jiayu county government has integrated gender equality approach by boosting women's employment and income.

An equal environment for women's growth and success requires full participation of social organizations and enterprises. The successful project interventions include
women’s labor rights and occupational safety protection implemented by Jianghuai Foundry Co., Ltd. in Changfeng County; advocacy activities for promoting women’s employment and rights organized by poetry institutes, Blueberry Corporation and Huangmei Chamber of Commerce in Huangmei County; active participation in the project of The Chi-pao Association and the Volunteers Association in Jiaoyu County; lectures and skills training for female employees offered by Xiangsheng Wood Co., Ltd. and Dechang Wood Co., Ltd. in Ningning County; more job opportunities for women created by agricultural enterprises in Yongqiao District in Suzhou City.

Engagement of communities, public participation and bottom-up changes of traditional rural gender culture and system are crucial to prevent boy preference. During the project implementation, community residents have been mobilized to take group discussion and training. Widespread publicity and advocacy are advanced by local operas and WeChat public accounts. Village regulations are modified in a democratic and legal manner to protect women’s basic rights and interests like land ownership, to advocate various patterns of marital residence and elderly care, and to change traditional custom of son preference. Furthermore, the communities support vulnerable families in economic and livelihood development, encourage women to manage village affairs, advocate model families of gender equality and female entrepreneurship, and family has become an important entry point for intervention. For example, in Yongqiao District, Suzhou City, Anhui Province, the community (village) family development & service center adheres to gender equality at daily work.

Comments: The project introduces multiple players from the society to participate in the governance of gender imbalance, with local governments and health and family planning departments as the core, social organizations, enterprises, communities, the citizens or public and the media all participating in the governance, thus gradually forming a set of governance model of gender imbalance featuring government leadership, collaboration among all parties, public participation and a mechanism combining top-down and bottom-up approach.
Gender Equality Training at Communist Party Schools

Communist Party schools that offer training and education to party members and cadres can act as an effective platform where government decision makers and leaders can get leading ideas. Since the project was initiated in 2016, project experts organized training for teachers of Communist Party schools and Communist Party schools in each project site are required to offer courses with topics on sex ratio at birth, gender equality and governance of village regulations. By combing school teaching with macro social contexts and contested issues, various training on gender, such as special courses, special seminars, case teaching and lectures, have been arranged.

The Communist Party schools in six project counties included sex ratio at birth and gender equality into local training courses with a total of 2,380 training participants including local middle-aged and young cadres. Feedback shows that the training courses have improved knowledge and understanding of party cadres about gender equality and gender sensitive programming.

With adherence to the project theme and local conditions, Communist Party schools in the counties have been leveraged to inform local policy makers and cadres of the causes and consequence of gender imbalance, and gender equality awareness. Many discussions have been organized on measures to address GBSS and SRB, as well as public policy system for gender equality. Cadres at all levels have been encouraged to take various practical measures to effectively promote gender equality.
Xu Juan
A teacher of the Communist Party School in Huangmei County

Close attention should be paid to the worsening gender imbalance. Therefore, the courses on gender equality in Communist Party Schools are very meaningful. As gender imbalance can’t be solved in a short term, more efforts are required to make changes. The audiences of my class unanimously agreed this issue must be settled. But these courses shall be well designed based on local contexts. So far, women are more interested in this issue and are more willing to participate than men. We need to engage more male policy makers for change. Moreover, if we want those gender courses to transform the society and yield fruitful results, government and non-governmental sectors need to work together, for example, Family Planning Association and the Health Bureau working together to achieve better results.

Xia Mingsong
Head of the Armed Forces Department and Deputy Director of Dushan Town, Huangmei County

By attending the wonderful lecture of the Party School, I come to understand gender equality and often think about how to promote gender equality and to reduce the sex ratio at birth. After I returned home, I have organized meetings to discuss with township cadres and village cadres together.

Comments: Gender mainstreaming is a critical and long-term strategy for policy change. Offering gender-sensitive training in the Communist Party School has improved the gender awareness and analyzing ability of leading cadres in formulating and implementing public policies and laid a solid foundation for improving the policy environment for governing the imbalanced sex ratio at birth.
Culture Sensitive Advocacy Campaign

As local operas are favored by local residents, the project counties have fully integrated gender equality and negative impact of high sex ratio at birth into these local cultures. Such publicity and advocacy activities with local characteristics are more acceptable to the public.

The "March 3rd" Song Festival is an annual event in Ningming County, Guangxi Province which is home to Zhuang ethnic group. And all of villages and towns also hold song festivals, including folky duets and Caidiao Opera. Particularly Caidiao Opera is a unique Guangxi drama with over 100-year history, which is very popular in every village in Zhaian Township, Ningming County.

Entrusted by the Health and Family Planning Bureau of Ningming County, the Caidiao Opera Troupe of Zhaian Township prepared Caidiao Opera performances and folk songs about gender equality and governance of the imbalanced sex ratio at birth. Because there are many unmarried men in the village, the troupe created a Caidiao Opera performance "Dating" in which several unmarried men happened to date a widow, revealing real situation of sex imbalance in the village, and arousing people’s attention to consequence of long-term high sex ratio at birth. More typically the folk song "Marry to a Bride’s Family" expresses changed marriage customs and marital residence in which daughters can also take care of their parents. In the song, a young girl hopes a young boy to marry her and live in her family, and the boy agrees happily and actively shares housework.

The Health and Family Planning Bureau in Ningming County prioritized performances of the Caidiao Opera Troupe in the project pilots during Song Festival and many tour shows. With banners saying "Caring for Girls is Important to National Future" or "Boys and Girls Are Equally Cherished for a Future with Population Balance", and brochures on gender equality and Prize Give-away, villagers were encouraged to take
part in these activities with great enthusiasm. Local-style Caidiao Opera and folk songs vividly showed the importance of gender equality, educating people in entertainments. Recently by working with the local Sports News Radio and Television Bureau, these performances were presented across the county as a sustainable culture-sensitive advocacy.

The best practice was also found in other project areas. As Huangmei Opera origins from Huangmei County in Hubei Province, the local Cultural Bureau of Huangmei organized a Huangmei opera "Huang Liu Nv (literally “Sixth Daughter of Huang Family”) Returns Home" in which a lady who was abandoned by her parents at her childhood returned home to run for a village head, and her parents felt so regretful. In Yongqiao District, Suzhou City, Anhui Province, Sizhou Opera was arranged to show bad results from long-term high sex ratios at birth. The drama tours into villages effectively educate the public on gender equality during entertainment.

Comments: Through culture-sensitive publicity and advocacy strategies adapted to local conditions, the root causes and consequences of gender imbalance were publicized in popular and understandable forms to develop a behavior-restrained cultural atmosphere, thereby guiding the formation of public opinion and social norms of gender equality.
Reformation of Traditional Customs

Son preference is rooted in local society, culture and traditional customs. Gender segregation and gender difference in traditional culture deepens gender inequality. Innovative reform of local traditional customs undoubtedly shakes off gender stereotypes and son preference.

In Binyang County in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region live a lot of Hakka people, who worship dragons and are deeply influenced by patriarchy culture. Binyang Firecracker Dragon Festival, a unique and magnificent traditional festival with nearly 1000 years of history, was listed into the 2nd batch of national intangible cultural heritages in 2008. Held on the 11th day of the first lunar month, this festival attracts 100 thousands of or even millions of residents and tourists across the country. All of them are eager to touch dragon beard or scales for New Year blessing. But the Dragon dancing can be only performed by men and inherited to men instead of women.

During the project implementation, the project steering group decided to change traditional concepts by virtue of Firecracker Dragon culture and advocate gender equality and female participation in social affairs by organizing a women's Firecracker Dragon team. This movement aroused many queries like “Are you guys gonna disrupt the world? Dragon dancing has been men’s business for 1000 years. Screw women and gender equality!” But the steering group did not stand back and insisted to “challenge the tradition” and “change history!” Due to active mobilization, 10 women bravely joined in the Women's Firecracker Dragon Team and confidently said, "Look, women are as good as men". Till now, the team has expanded to 44 female players.

Within one year, this women's team participated in over 100 shows across the county, and performed for 800,000 audiences in Nanning, the capital of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. They plan to present 110 performances this year. Women's Firecracker Dragon Team is a milestone at the journey of changing local gender segregation. Those People who had doubts now sincerely praised, "You guys are amazing!" The female players become confident and healthier. They proudly said, "Women should dispel prejudices and enjoy a happy and valuable life."
Similarly, women used to be excluded from dragon boat racing. As one of important activities of Chinese Dragon Boat Festival, dragon boat racing is always limited to men. However, this tradition is broken in Xin'an Village, Huangmei County, Hubei Province. A 40-member women’s dragon boat team was formed on the Dragon Boat Festival 2017 to participate in the town-level competition, becoming media and social focus.

Folk customs generally revolve around ordinary people’s daily life like marriage, funeral, birth and death. People traditionally believe a son is raised for elderly care and funeral rituals. In Chinese ancient funeral culture, the son has a unique role since only son has the right to hold deceased parents’ portraits in the funeral, carry their coffins and bury their bodies. For families without a son, this role has to be replaced by a male member, which shames families with only daughters. In Changfeng County where the project was implemented, the sole daughter of a family hosted her parent’s burial. In Wanglie Village, Huangmei County, it is permitted that daughters in families can hold portraits of deceased parents at the funeral instead of their cousin brothers or the sons-in-law.

Comments: *With tenacious vitality, the folk custom of valuing boys over girls is remaining popular and strong in the name of promoting traditional culture. Therefore, gradual and persistent efforts to change folk customs will be a long-term measure to eliminate son preference.*
Revision of Gender Discriminatory Village Rules and Regulations

Village regulations are conventionally formed to safeguard villagers' interests, life order and local customs. Because of historical inheritance, some of these regulations feature men's superiority over women or even discrimination against women, such as patrilocal residence, raising sons for old age care or for carrying on family line, unequal benefits and no land ownership for live-in son-in-law and prohibiting female entry into ancestral halls. These widespread outdated conventions and customs in counties certainly lead to son preference and skewed SRB.

To uproot gender discrimination in rural areas, the project focuses on revising village regulations at the community level. Based on a thorough investigation on village regulations in the project pilots, the Toolkit for Formulating Village Regulations on Gender Equality was laid out as a guidance and reference.

For example, a lot of preparatory work was done for the revision in Xin'an Community in Konglong Town, Huangmei County, Hubei Province, including distribution of publicity materials, seminars or training on gender equality for Party members and backbone villagers, and cultivation of public awareness on gender equality. By in-depth investigations, township leaders dug out drawbacks in village regulations and folk customs, and supported refined interest-oriented policies and measures with a gender perspective. Under the principle of "people first and collective participation", the revision of village regulations was advanced gradually, involving consultation of the Village Party Branch Committee and the Villagers Self-governing Committee, formulation of village regulations in draft, discussions on the regulations by village Party members and villagers' representatives, review on each articles at the Village Branch Meeting, and final release at the Villagers' Representatives Meeting.

Obviously, it is impossible to revise village regulations overnight. There are interests-related sources allocation and many old traditions such as "No descendant is the worst unfilial thing", "Daughters can't regarded as family members" and "Only son can carry on the family line", all of which hinder the revision work.

Various stakeholders' interests are considered during the regulation revision process, covering daughter-only and son-only families, families with a live-in son-in-law, retired old village cadres, prestigious and well-educated people, and even bad-behavior and
Through discussion and debates, welfare principles of registration outmigration or immigration were agreed: only enjoyment of benefits from husband’s family or mother’s home, and fulfillment of villagers’ obligations. A live-in son-in-law who lives permanently in the village with local registered residence, fulfills his obligations as a villager and support the elder in the family can equally enjoy villager treatment regardless of only daughter in the family or not. All of opinions and disagreements were reviewed and discussed one by one to reach a final consensus.

Articles about gender equality were added into the new village regulations, including advocacy of women’s participation in politics, no less than 30% of female representatives in the village representative, prohibited illegal determination of fetal sex, changed pattern of marital residence, free selection of marriage or residence place, women’s right to be recorded into their family pedigrees, naming children’s last name from either their father or mother with the latter rewarded, and policy supports for women’s startup business.

These democratically voted village regulations were actively implemented by villagers, resulting in significant changes on the village and improved patterns of marriage residence. For example, in Xin'an Community in Konglong Town, Huangmei County, Hubei Province husbands of Deng Yuzhen and her daughter Wang Lixia willingly became a live-in son-in-law and formed a family respectively with offspings. Moreover Lixia’s daughter followed mother’s last name.

Within 3 years of the project implementation, 546 villages in six project counties revised their village regulations, benefiting around 1 million people. The new regulations highlighted gender equalities in management of village affairs, allocation of residential lands and collective income distribution. For example, in Hongwan Village, Huangmei County, interests of the women from daughter-only families and divorced families whose household registration remained were fully considered. Married-out women could take collective dividends in Nongye Village in Litang Town, Binyang County. In Wu Shan Town, Changfeng County, Paibei Village Committee strove to guarantee married women’s rights on land contracts and divorced widows’ interests on lands. In Chuangxin Community in Changfeng County, over 1,500 married-out women without land ownership in husbands’ families all got land certificates for gender equality in allocation of collective resources.

Comments: Revision of village regulations is a good approach to settle the conflict between national laws and folk practices, guaranteeing women’s rights and interests in political, economic and social life, changing public opinion on fertility, instilling gender equality into new rural development, and weakening son preference.
Can the project substantially change China’s grassroots society? It is well proved by personal growth and project practices of a female village head.

Yuan Qing, female, 29, is now the head (acting) of Anfeitang Village, Changfeng County, Anhui Province. Being an orphan, she lived with her grandparents since childhood. As a girl, she suffered from gender discrimination. Specifically, after graduation from her junior high school, her aunt refused to support her through senior high school because she thought girls were supposed to be marry into other families. However, this tough life experience leads to her unyielding personality.

In 2014, Yuan Qing was hired as a family planning official in Anfeitang Village, but troubled by villagers’ uncooperativeness and hostility toward her. But things were changed in June 2015. Driven by the project on gender equality and public participation in the UNFPA/China Seventh Country Programme in China, many villages in Changfeng County began to revise village regulations to publicize the concept and awareness of gender equality. Yuan Qing was responsible for this work. At first she had no idea on how to push the work to promote gender equality. So she visited every villager for their opinions. But some of them ignored her efforts and even complained it as another formalism. Yuan Qing insisted on her door-to-door investigation to get ideas and suggestions, which was finally rewarded by villagers’ understanding and active participation. Consequently, the revised village regulations enabled concepts of gender equality to be rooted in local culture. Meanwhile Yuan Qing and other village cadres gained high reputation in the village.

With the support from UNFPA’s Eighth Country Programme in China, work on gender equality and protection of women’s rights and interests in this village took a further step in 2016. In the traditional rural political structure, women had no voice and just kept silent. Now this situation has substantially changed. After the revision of village regulations, some housewives are elected as villagers’ representatives for the first time. They’re bold and talented in making decisions on village affairs. Yuan Qing said, "In the past, male
representatives dominated and they were too face-saving to consider things carefully, for example causing unfair evaluation of low-income households. By contrast female representatives hold fair and cautious attitude, and would strictly veto any unqualified applicants.”

During implementation of the programme, the employment of women, especially left-behind women, aroused great attention in the village. Yuan Qing said, “Economic independence is vital to change women’s social status.” Accordingly, female villagers were organized to receive training on employment skills and achieved fruitful outcome. The women who become wealthy by hard work win respects from men working in other cities.

As one of the project practitioners, Yuan Qing has grown from an ordinary village cadre to a prestigious female village head, speaking more confidently for villagers’ benefits. She motivated a lot of female villagers to contribute to village development and enhanced broad recognition of gender equality. The village has been totally changed from a poorly-governed and backward situation to a leading village with improved gender equality and weakened son preference.

"The Eighth Country Programme in China witnessed my growth in the past three years. It is deeply rooted in my mind, and I consciously integrate gender equality into my job and daily life," said Yuan frankly.