

Student C:

REACTION PAPER - Lee and Wang, One Quarter of Humanity

Lee and Wang's *One Quarter of Humanity* was a very interesting, though somewhat technical, book. As with Pomeranz's *The Great Divergence*, the book challenged some of the more ingrained notions about the relative level of development (economic, social, cultural) of Europe and China. I had a mixed reaction to this book. On the one hand, I thought it presented a fascinating picture of Chinese society. On the other hand, there were several aspects of the book that made it, at least for me, less effective.

One Quarter of Humanity is another example of question oriented history, and it definitely sits in the social science quadrant on Tilly's schematic of social science and humanities oriented histories.

It sets out to show that Malthus was incorrect in his assumptions about China, and to replace those misconceptions with "realities." The text was presented in a very scientific fashion, which for me was a bit distracting. While this style might be the standard for demographic histories, it seems to me that there are other, possibly more subtle, ways of citing materials and presenting data that allow the argument to develop more fluidly. I appreciated their use of graphs, which I find to be more readable than tables. However, their graphs were not as effective as I think they could have been. While I realize that it is a text oriented towards the expert rather than the newcomer to the field, it seems to me that clearer chart labels would have helped (for example, units like "instantaneous rate of marriage per 1000 person-years at risk").

The argument, however, was convincing and thoroughly presented. They seem to have two related goals. Their first goal is to show that Malthus was generally wrong about China. Their second goal is to explain the reasons that China does not fit the Malthusian demographic model. In regards to the first goal, the authors are very systematic about dealing with each of the problematic segments of Malthus' text.

By first presenting the "Malthusian Legacy" and then directly addressing the discussion of the rest of each chapter to complicating these assumptions, Lee and Wang are able to effectively organize their argument. This organization also ensures that one of the main points of their book (the Malthusian demographics is often surprisingly sophisticated, but at the same time, often quite mistaken) comes across clearly.

However, I thought that the second component of their argument was weakened by their focussing too closely on Malthus. By starting off each chapter with a quote from "An Essay on the Principles of Population," their points about the complexities and tensions in Chinese society start to feel a little secondary. For me, their examination and explanation of the Chinese demographic situation is more compelling than arguing that Malthus was wrong.

However, as the authors show, the two are interrelated. At the same time, by continually linking their observations about China back to Malthusian errors, I felt that a significant part of the power of their examination of Chinese society was lost. Pomeranz effectively

dealt with a similar potential problem by addressing his major theoretical and empirical detractors in his introduction. He then focussed much more - though not exclusively - on his own data and conclusions. He brought in detractors' and supporters' arguments when needed, but did not make them a focus of his work.

Malthus might be such a powerful force in misconceptions of Chinese demographics that Lee and Wang felt they had to structure their book so closely around his essay. However, as I said, the stories of Chinese complexities, tensions, and changes are so interesting in themselves that the references to Malthusian incorrectness seemed unnecessary at times. For example, the interplay between individual and communal decision making as a way to understand Chinese population trends is fascinating; however, I feel that they could have developed this idea further. The individual/communal split is not just a split between east and west. Within both China and Europe, there are interesting tensions between individual and community decision making. Lee and Wang mention such tensions in several places in the text, but do not develop it as much as I hoped for.

I think that a history book is successful if it shows the reader that a situation that they thought was simple was in fact incredibly complex.

In this respect, *One Quarter of Humanity* was very effective. It convincingly shows that a social theory developed based on one relatively small region of the world might not be applicable outside the social and institutional norms of the society in which the theory developed. Aside from my criticism of their focus on Malthus, the picture they present of change Chinese society is compelling.

Reference:

Lee, James Z, and Wang Feng. *One Quarter of Humanity: Malthusian Mythology and Chinese Realities, 1700-2000*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.