

Student B:

Overall, I found Lee & Wang's *One Quarter of Humanity* to be a convincing and well-argued study. Although their argument is generally demographic, Lee and Wang mainly use broad statistics, thus avoiding bogging the reader down in a mess of correlation coefficients for minor trends. Though I think the actual argument sometimes tends uncomfortably towards teleology, a pro-China bias, and over-reliance on statistics (see below), the main points of the book are on the whole proved convincingly through statistical trends. It was comforting (for me) to see that statistics can 'mean' something in history on a grand scale, and are not always debatable or the butt of jokes.

Methodologically, this book struck me most as an example of how comparative history between vastly differing cultures can be done, in the same fashion as in Pomeranz' *The Great Divergence*. Lee & Wang's refutation of Malthus' claim that China's population was controlled by "positive" checks rather than the "preventive" checks operative in the West is effectively a statement that Malthus chose the wrong 'units' to compare between the two cultures. Much of the Lee and Wang's argument is devoted to showing that the right unit is the social unit of decision making, roughly the individual in the west versus families and communities in the east. The similar notion of the right 'spectra' to use to compare cultures also arises. Again, rather than using a positive-preventive check spectrum for their analysis, Lee and Wang use a spectrum of different family types (with Western families on one end and Chinese families on the other (5)) and "a universal spectrum with which we can contrast and explain social organization and behavior in the East and the West" (146), i.e. collective in the East and individual in the West. Their analysis is largely devoted to showing that these spectra are the right ones to use and that both societies occupy similar points on the wrong spectrum (positive-preventive checks). This type of analysis is similar to Pomeranz' argument that East and West were on equal footing across several spectra (economic, technological, monetary) and unequal footing across others (environmental, colonial). In both cases the argument shows both the inadequacies of certain spectra and the importance of others for answering a comparative question.

The establishment of the right units of comparison and clarification of the importance of different spectra allow for fascinating and effective analyses. Lee and Wang show that preventive checks were operative and dominant in China through examination of the role of infanticide, fertility rates in marriage, and the collective nature of demographic decisions, and that positive checks were largely not by examination of the correlation between food supply and economic indicators with fertility. The interesting point is that preventive checks were not only dominant in China, but operated in ways almost completely opposite from the Western preventive checks that Malthus noted. Western individual marriage choices, later marriage with high fertility, early and universal marriage of males, and rational decision making to optimize individual status are contrasted with Chinese collective marriage choices, earlier marriage with low fertility, early and universal marriage of females, and rational decision making to optimize collective status. Like Pomeranz, Lee and Wang show that at the traditionally used level of comparison, West and East actually look

surprisingly similar. Their differences lie within how the similarity comes about, here though all the different ways preventive checks were effected in the two societies. Lee and Wang's argument both discredits a negative and false idea of China and (I think) strengthens a generalized Malthusian argument -- preventive checks and positive checks are indeed universally two major sources of population control, with evidence from China now added to the pile of Western evidence. Malthus was wrong about which checks were utilized in China and the notion that preventive checks are linked with capitalism and democracy, but a generalized version of his theory, more free of bias towards the West, seems to emerge from Lee and Wang's analysis. In this light, it is interesting that Malthus arrived at the valid idea of 'checks' through a comparison of West and East that now seems to be invalid.

In *One Quarter of Humanity*, as in Pomeranz, we see the effectiveness and potential usefulness of real, careful comparative history. I was also struck by the need for comparative studies like Lee and Wang's to dispel myths which have been perpetuated as historical facts. Lee and Wang clearly show through statistics (for example a striking graph of fertility rates (87)) that it is simply not true that China had higher fertility, earlier marriage, and greater mortality than the West, yet these ideas have been propagated through two centuries, largely forming the Western popular idea of China. The frank falsehood of what I at least took to be a historical fact makes me wonder how many other dead-wrong 'facts' I accept about non-Western cultures are the result of assumptions made in 19th-century social theories.

Despite general praise, I think some additional comments on the text are necessary. Short as it is, *One Quarter of Humanity* could have been somewhat shorter. Lee and Wang repeat and summarize their main argument many times, and I felt that a better organized text leading up to a conclusion (rather than the same conclusion presented many times) would have made the argument more convincing. The authors are also fairly opinionated at times to an extent which lessened their objective authority as historians. They go from almost deriding the 20th century Communist family planning system as the result of false social theoretic assumptions to praising its ultimate effects, without, as Angie notes, worrying overly about the manner in which it was carried out. A strong pro-China bias is also evident, as in one long passage (135) strenuously arguing for the equality of Western and Chinese population control on some objective scale. Such overt biases and opinions add little to the argument. Also, compared to Pomeranz' book, Lee and Wang's takes a fairly teleological approach at times. The ways in which Western individualism and Chinese collectivism have acted to control population over the last two centuries is sometimes painted almost as the result of millenia of tradition, despite some credos to the contrary. Lee and Wang pay much more attention in general to long-term factors than Pomeranz, and in doing so project a sense of inevitability for the Western and Chinese cases that Pomeranz' argument avoids (and indeed aims to defeat). In general, Lee and Wang follow other practitioners of New Economic History in focusing on certain major statistics and long-term trends, possibly missing facts that other historians would find in smaller, short term frames of analysis.