

Student: (Jennifer Yum):

Confucianism was and is right for China. Through their demographic study, Lee and Wang suggest that Malthus's theories may not have been so universal after all. The attribution of human agency is crucial to their case study of China. They made an important point: cultural and historical mastery of a region is a prerequisite for even the most noted social scientists. Lee and Wang accuse Malthusian scholars of a "lack of geographical specificity," which, when coupled with a "paucity of empirical quantitative studies," make China one of the "largest but least understood" populations in the world (29).

The authors tease out the real impetuses driving population fluctuations in China; there were multiple. Further, they debunk the longstanding assumption that the Chinese population had succumbed to positive checks. Take infanticide, for example. Most significant is that parents killed more females than males. That female infanticide was prevalent among lower Qing nobles, not only the poorest peasants, strengthens their case that marriage and social customs were plausible causes for the killings (128). Another useful point in challenging the Malthusian paradigm is that infanticide occurred in the first millennium B.C., too, when the population was significantly smaller (105). Lastly, while introducing a "peculiar cultural attitude toward life" where human life began at age 1, the authors shed new light on this conscious, albeit strange, practice (60-61).

"Controlled," "planned," "adjusted," "relaxed," are all verbs the authors use to add agency to the study of Chinese demographics. Several times the authors suggest that Chinese parents carefully controlled their fertility according to the existing circumstances (98). Fertility rates were a response to economic opportunities that presented themselves through rural migration or "socialist reconstruction" (118). In short, nature did not act upon them. The Chinese never lost control. The graph on p.106 sums up their point nicely.

The part of that book that I found most interesting was the authors' defense of the one-child policy. After reading this section, I grew aware of the conspicuously pro-western, pro-democratic bent that dominates comparative politics courses at Wellesley and elsewhere. Reading assignments of essays by the Nobel laureate economist Amartya Sen exemplify my point. In his discussion of fertility rates in third world countries, Sen often compares authoritarian China to democratic Kerala, highlighting the inefficiency in the former. The key for Sen lies in educating females so that they can decide for themselves that fewer children = better. Naturally, students are disgusted by a political system that would be so repressive as to limit the number of offspring to one child per family. Lee and Wang put forth a powerful rebuttal, however. In China, demographic decisions [were] never individual" (10). Rather, "Chinese individuals constantly adjusted their demographic behavior according to collective circumstances to maximize collective utility" (9).

In effect, students should ask how the people of China feel about the program before drawing major conclusions. According to the authors, “the need for some kind of family planning is widely accepted” (133). In fact, current argument is based on details (one versus two), not on the principle of regulation itself.

Perhaps the future of China isn’t so bleak after all. There are Chinese anomalies that Western schools of thought simply cannot rationalize. For example, “the juxtaposition of heightened collectivity and rapid economic growth” (122). In China, human obligation, not human rights, took precedence, prioritizing a “collective consciousness,” not “individual decision-making” (122). Could it be that an increased stress on resources demands a revival of Confucian values? Given today’s circumstances, the continuation of a powerful state system is essential: “much like the Chinese family, the Chinese state based its legitimacy on the premise that it also served a collective interest” (129).

Indeed, with one-quarter of historical humanity, the Chinese must have done something right. Yet in the end, I am not too impressed with population studies as a field. To make their points, the authors continuously lump “the Chinese” into a single, amorphous category. While they are extremely precise with their figures, they fail to convey an in-depth historical knowledge of any of the periods discussed. However revolutionary, is the Chinese “culture” argument but a convenient tool used to simplify more complex processes that have developed over the long-duree?