

Student A:

Of all the books we have read, “One Quarter of Humanity” seems to me to be the least like history. First there is its style: Lee and Wang use tables, graphs, and flowcharts to convey their points, and they write far too concisely to be historians. Then there is the fact that, rather than engaging with the arguments of other professional historians, they take Malthus, a social theorist who wrote about contemporary population issues, as their main sparring partner. Finally, while Pomeranz, for instance, seemed to be using a field outside of history (economics) to answer a historical question (why the West industrialized first), Lee and Wang seem to be going in the opposite direction: they use a particular historical question (how China’s population has grown) to illuminate a field outside of history (demographics). As Lee and Wang themselves write, “The study of Chinese demography ... is not just a window on comparative population dynamics but also on comparative social structure and social behavior” (135). No mention of history! Perhaps this is why the American Sociological Association was willing to give them an award. Of course, their book is based on historical data and its conclusions are important for history; but the same could be said of research on climate change. The main difference, I think, is that Lee and Wang are writing about humans. To the extent that relevant data were available, a methodologically very similar book could be written about population dynamics in animals, but I doubt anyone would call it history.

Regarding the substance of Lee and Wang’s argument, I thought their description of the Chinese demographic transition as a progression from tight control over demographic decision-making by local collectives (families) to a period of explosive growth when that authority collapsed and then to the reassertion of collective control by the state in the 1960s and 1970s was quite convincing. It has the appeal of putting the current population policy into its cultural and historical context; it normalizes it, which to me is an impressive achievement. At the same time, I wonder whether it is an oversimplification. As I read Lee and Wang, they are arguing that China’s demographic transition is essentially the result of fluctuation in a single variable, the strength of collective authority over fertility (with economic opportunity playing a facilitative role). Disentangling this variable from the other changes that have occurred in Chinese society in the past 30 years--some of which, as my extremely limited knowledge of China leads me to understand, have made Chinese society more like Western societies (e.g., urbanization, industrialization)--seems like a difficult challenge, one that Lee and Wang put aside. Unfortunately there is no control case, no alternative China sans authoritarian population control policies. Until I reached the last chapter, I was also concerned that they were abandoning Malthus’s stereotype of China for a 21st-century version in which China continues to play the role of the archetypal “other,” only this time as the paradigm of the successful authoritarian collective. I was happy to see them question and complicate the Western-individualist/Eastern-collectivist dichotomy.

I was curious to see what Malthus himself had written about China, so I picked up a copy of his book (5th edition, originally published 1817) and read the section, “Of the checks to population in China and Japan” (99-110). Having never read Malthus before, I was happily surprised to find something neither morally objectionable, despite some probably inevitable China-bashing, nor simple-minded. As far as I can tell, the major difference between Malthus’s and Lee and Wang’s accounts, aside from the fact that the latter

provide a much more detailed and nuanced view, is that Malthus thought that famine and disease played important roles in limiting China's population growth (but sexual restraint didn't), whereas Lee and Wang think that sexual restraint within marriage played an important role (but famine and disease didn't). They both see infanticide as a major factor, though Malthus describes it primarily as a response to resource shortages, whereas Lee and Wang emphasize its use for gender selection. The only radical shift is that Lee and Wang see Chinese population control as always having been under the control of human agency, whereas Malthus believed it was controlled primarily by nonhuman factors (disease, famine, etc.). In the big picture, Lee and Wang's work seems not so much a refutation of Malthus's work as a refinement of it, one that corrects his errors about China while supporting his overall approach and some of his specific conclusions.