

BOOK REVIEW

Governing China's Population: from Leninist to Neoliberal Biopolitics

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*Susan Greenhalgh and Edwin A. Winckler, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, USA, 2005, 394 pages.
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When it comes to familiarity with primary sources in Chinese on population issues since 1949, Greenhalgh and Winckler are unsurpassed and are most likely unsurpassable. They seem to have gotten their hands on every government regulation, policy directive and conference in Beijing and in the provinces. (Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan are not included.) The 500 or 600 English articles and books listed in the back provide encyclopedic references to Chinese and foreign authors. The book is almost free of errors. On p. 171, twice omitting a zero, “80,000 and 120,000” instead of 800,000 and 1,200,000, is the only typo that I noticed.

There are several tables of data, and the numbers are mind-boggling: 39 million men and 112 million women sterilized from 1970-2001; plus 246 million abortions in those 32 years, an average of 8.25 million per year, with the peak numbers in the early 1980s. (pp. 257 and 260) The fact that 90% of abortions were done without painkillers (p. 261, fn. 10) deserves more than a footnote. What kind of system teaches women a lesson like that for getting pregnant without official permission?

The focus is not number crunching, but rather how the various leaders responded to the census numbers, and how individuals, families and local cadres accepted, resisted or tried to evade policy from the top. "The result of rolling the PRC regime apparatus over China's social landscape was to largely destroy the traditional Chinese family system." (p. 97) Birth planning was at its most brutal in the early 1980s and it was repeatedly adjusted and fine-tuned. At great expense, the program has succeeded in reducing the birth rate, preventing the population from rising as high as it could have, and dissuading couples from having large families. Country people now do not want to be burdened by several children, but most still have two. In the cities, upwardly mobile couples have now bought the message of a single quality child, which was first promoted by the government. Advertising in the global consumer society urges parents to lavish brand-name gifts on their single child. (pp. 280-285)

Statistics was not Chairman Mao's strong point, and the PRC had a strong ideological bias against population control. But in 1979, Song Jian, a computer programmer on loan from China's space program, (p. 105) ran projections to 2080. The leadership panicked at the tabulated data. They slammed on the brakes and announced the One Child Policy. Normally we do not think of making a baby as rocket science.

I remember skimming the Chinese book which contained Song's analysis. It was thin, a hundred some pages, only a little larger than the palm of one's hand, and printed on cheap paper that would turn brown after a few years. Any surviving copy belongs to a museum. It contained a Fortran program, from the days before any computer could handle Chinese characters. What would happen decade by decade if every Chinese woman had 1.0, 1.5, 2.0, 2.3 or 3.0 children? The highest fertility gave 3.7 billion people in the year 2080, but China's carrying capacity was allegedly only 700 million. The publication data indicated that 7000 (8000?) copies were printed in 1979 at such and such an address in Beijing. How could those 80 or 90 kilos of paper

change the lives of every family in China? Greenhalgh and Winckler answer that question by studying the key actors who formulated and implemented population policy.

An early slogan of Planned Parenthood was "Every child a wanted child." Wanted by whom? When Chinese parents wanted several children, the government wanted only one child. Especially in the countryside, parents wanted a son, not a daughter, and the sex ratio at birth is still hugely skewed in favor of boys. The damage has been done; 30 million men will never find a wife, and women's equality will be a long time coming. In November 2006, reports from Guangzhou indicated that officials would encourage young couples where both the husband and wife are only children to have two children, or else the percentage of elderly will climb too high in another 20 years. But, judging from the experience of Taiwan and Hong Kong, once two- or even one-child families become trendy, it is an uphill battle to raise the birth rate even slightly with government subsidies. The irony is that now, when the planners want more children, middle-class young adults are not interested.

In the years since 1979, no country has tried to imitate China in drastically cutting its birth rate. This book narrates how much brute force and relentless propaganda the Chinese government had to use in the process. So it seems that luckily no other nation on earth will imitate China. China's share of the human race is on a course to decline from 21% now to 16% in 2050 and only 11% in 2100.

Underground Catholics complain about the One Child Policy. In the registered churches, priests have to tell people to obey the laws of the country. We hear that there is some low-key education in Natural Family Planning, and that Catholics, Protestants and Muslims are more likely to accept either a boy or a girl as a gift from God.