

REVIEW

Population Theory in China, edited by

H. Yuan Tien; London: Croom Helm, 1980, £12.95.

"Of all things in the world,
people are the most precious."
Chairman Mao, 1961.

For centuries China's population practised anarchy in human reproduction. This was not approved of by Mao, any more than anarchy in material production. As with many aspects of life in post-revolution China, population growth has been planned, and is seen as an integral part of the economic and social development of the country. Family planning in China is a public concern and population planning is the collective expression of that concern.

These sentiments are expressed in Tien's edited volume which contains a translation of three chapters of Renkou Lilun (Population Theory), a publication of the Office of Population (Theory) Research at the Chinese People's University in Beijing (Peking). This book makes interesting reading for anyone interested in population, development or planned economics, or in Marxism in general. It describes how Marxist population theory is put into practice in China, and contrasts this with the capitalist, Malthusian and fascist approaches to population policy.

Planned population growth in China in the late 1970's encouraged a gradual decline in the rate of population increase. This was to accelerate the development of their socialist society. For the Han majority, late marriage and birth intervals of at least four years are encouraged with the aim of increasing the average generational age difference to 30 years. For the minority populations, no such measures are envisaged and indeed factors such as the prevalence of venereal disease which severely check population growth have been largely eliminated. Members of minority populations seeking birth control may, however, use it. The advent of smaller families has liberated millions of women from the daily drudgery of childcare and repeated pregnancy, and allowed them to enter into the labour market and become equal members of society. The plan is not borne out of a concern with having enough to eat, but out of a want to enable the people to "live still better, even more beautifully and still more meaningfully" (p.42).

Population planning is carefully balanced with other aspects of the Chinese economy. It is closely linked with improvements in health, and with the future labour force. In this the detailed age and sex structure effects are taken into account, and efforts are made to smooth out 'bulges' to avoid their detrimental effects on the economic and social systems. On the other hand, an unusual female age structure of a commune is taken into account when birth quotas are determined.

Efforts are also made to dispel the ideology of the old ruling classes. Fatalism and predestination in life are dismissed, as are the ideologies that "males are exalted, females are demeaned", "begetting a son early" and "the more sons the more blessings". Changing such customs is part of the plan.

Finally the book deals with the damage wrought by the "gang of four". They opposed late marriage and family planning and considered that the correct place for women was in the home carrying out their traditional role. This "confused people's thinking" and "disrupted the revolutionary order" (p.80).

Though peppered with political rhetoric (eg, against "Khrushchev and his traitorous clique" and Jiang Qing's "typical aggressive design of a wolfeine") the book is well worth a read!

Heather Booth

