

CHANGING CHINA

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by

MICHAEL SHAPIRO

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PREFACE

“WHEN millions sigh, there is a great wind.” This old Chinese saying has a quality of wisdom that helps to explain much of China’s transformation and the events since. For China is a land of hundreds of millions, and only by winning conviction in the minds of the people and responding to their hearts’ desire can lasting changes be made.

“To serve the people”—*wei jenmin fuwu*—became the watchword in the bitter, heroic years before the liberation of the country in 1949. Many books have been written of those days and all, friendly or hostile, have borne witness to the closeness of the new leaders to the lives of the peasants and workers from whom they stemmed. How has this principle, and the methods of work built up in those days, been carried forward since the victory of the revolution?

Victory found the country facing great problems. “I wouldn’t be surprised if they make some mistakes. Look at the size of the job,” was the very natural reaction of a British trade unionist on visiting China in the early years after 1949.

In the eight crowded years that have passed since the liberation, descriptive impressions by writers of various political colouring have recorded that China’s millions are working with a will to erase their legacy of poverty, illiteracy and backwardness. Their sighs are now few and smiles are frequent. But so far little has been written to explain the changes.

In attempting to explain rather than describe, this book has selected just a few aspects of the expanding, fast-moving life of the new society.

M. S.

Peking, October 1957.

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Part One

INTRODUCTORY

CHAPTER I

POPULATION PARADOXES

TODAY in China, Rev. Thomas Malthus is as unpopular as he was in Britain when, over a century and a half ago, he preached low wages and the need to keep down the population.

William Cobbett, that champion of the oppressed, showed him up as a fraud and, later, Karl Marx described his ideas as a "libel on the human race." Yet his doctrines are constantly revived and, in this generation, are being refuted afresh, both in theory and in practice.

All the same, though he did it in the wrong way, Malthus did draw attention to the problem of population growth in relation to food supplies. And in China today, this is a matter that is claiming consideration.

Malthus' "law" that population, if unchecked, automatically runs ahead of food production, and his conclusion that this is behind all poverty, vice and war, is not only nonsense. It has been and still is used cynically by apologists for war and brutal and deliberate acts of colonialism. It has already been disproved in China, even though the country is only just at the threshold of exploiting all its resources scientifically.

Food output has kept comfortably ahead of the increase of population—5% as against 2% a year—and industrial output has averaged a 17.4% increase a year.

China's population problem, then, is not just a worry about keeping the people alive and fed. It is a problem of how to raise living standards steadily at a time of unusually rapid increase of population, when the country has only just begun to straighten out the results of centuries of backwardness.

China is full of paradoxes. It has a quarter of the world's population crowded into a fifteenth of the earth's surface; yet it contains

great provinces, double and treble the size of France, with large fertile stretches where you may travel for days without meeting a single habitation.

Industry is going ahead rapidly, yet the present trend of population in many places is to the countryside rather than the cities. One part of Chekiang Province alone has asked for 100,000 able-bodied workers from Shanghai, and Kiangsi Province as a whole is ready to take half a million workers from the cities.

Population is rising at the rate of over 12 million a year mainly in the countryside, yet concern about the rapid growth is as yet confined to small circles in the major cities.

In a village in Shantung, one of the most overcrowded provinces in China, where the average density is well over 400 people to the square mile, I raised the population question as I sat and discussed things with a group of peasants. Forty-five babies had been born there in 1956, they told me, and in all 21 people had died. This gave a net increase of 24 in a population of 1,300. But no one seemed in the least worried. On the contrary, they were very happy about it.

There had been not a single case of maternal mortality in the year, they told me proudly. Most of the eligible young men had found wives, where in the old days many would have had to wait till middle age before they could afford to marry.

"How will you manage with so many more mouths to feed?" I asked.

"We are organised in co-operatives now," they answered. Carefully, they explained to me the higher yields they were getting. They brought over the co-op secretary who quoted the detailed figures from his books, showing that output of wheat, maize and peanuts had in most cases more than doubled over the years since liberation. They gave me examples to show that they had nowhere near reached the maximum of what they could get from the land. They were also organising other work to add to their income.

I came away with the feeling that the campaign to keep down the birth rate, which doctors and other leading people in the cities are keen on, will take a long time before it reaches and makes any noticeable impact in the villages.

Besides, in a country of China's size, birth control raises questions of raw materials and production, quite apart from the spread of knowledge and readiness to change deep-rooted, traditional ways.

Perhaps the Confucian tradition is stronger in Shantung, the birthplace of the great sage, than elsewhere, yet most other provinces show a similar trend.

First among the eight precepts laid down about 2,000 years ago was a son's duty to his parents. And the highest token of this duty was to have children, especially sons, who would in time show their duty to their parents by having children, and so on *ad infinitum*. . . . "No offspring is the greatest offence against filial duty," said Confucius. It is neither a difficult nor particularly unpleasant duty to fulfil and it is not surprising that it became popular.

If anyone doubts the continued influence of Confucianism, particularly among the peasants, a trip across country should be convincing. In the middle of fertile fields, even on collective farms, are mound after mound of family graves, occupying a sizeable part of crowded arable land. Experts vary in their estimates, but all agree that a considerable crop area would be added if the graves could be removed.¹

In Shansi, the people are gradually cutting down the space occupied by their ancestors to give more room for the present and coming generations. They have agreed to level the mounds going back earlier than their great grandfathers. A leading member of the Chinese Communist Party, a Shansi man, confessed to me the pang of regret he felt when the big grave devoted to his first forebear who settled in that province 700 years ago was recently levelled. "There must be some Confucianism in me, too," he joked.

Yet poverty drove many people to kill their children at birth in the old days, especially in the countryside, and particularly baby girls. The new Marriage Law, passed soon after the liberation, in May 1950, included a special clause prohibiting "infanticide by drowning and similar criminal acts." The mother of Chu Teh, famous commander of the people's liberation forces, could keep alive only the first eight of her fifteen children.

Partly in reaction to the bitter past, partly because of peaceful and settled conditions of life such as China has not had for several generations, babies are welcomed and coddled in China today as perhaps nowhere else in the world.

Babies are now arriving at the rate of 50,000 a day, 20 million a year. Since the census four years ago startled the world with the figure of

¹ Professor J. L. Buck's pre-war estimate was 2,552,000 acres in China's major agricultural areas, enough to support 400,000 farm families. *Land Utilisation in China*, p. 179.

over 600 million, another 50 million have been added to the population (the net increase of births over deaths), the equivalent of the whole population of the United Kingdom.¹

When the public debate on birth control took place early in 1957 in the National Consultative Conference, many very young people rushed to the marriage registry offices in the mistaken belief that the debate might be followed by legislation raising the minimum legal age for marriage.

Yet the biggest factor in the rapid growth of population is not a rise in the birth rate. On the contrary, there are signs that the birth rate is falling. But fewer people are dying. They are living longer. The following table shows the position in general for the whole country.²

	1955	1954	1952-3	Pre-liberation
Births, per 1,000 population	32.79	38	37	35
Deaths, per 1,000 population	12.36	13	17	25
Natural increase (balance of births over deaths) per 1,000 population	20.43	25	20	10

Above all, fewer babies are dying. Infant mortality in Peking—deaths of babies under one year calculated per 1,000 live births—dropped from 117.6 in 1949 to 44.5 in 1955, and 35.1 in 1956. Even more dramatic is the fall in the rural areas with the spread of modern midwifery.

This drop reflects the same degree of progress as took place in

¹ Since China's first accurate census in 1953, someone has been made responsible in every village to register all births and deaths. These figures are collected annually for the whole country. Over 2 million census-takers, with the help of a large number of volunteer assistants, visited almost every home during the 1953 count, including the tents of many nomadic tribes. Careful checking showed a remarkably small margin of statistical error. There were and still are, however, fringe areas where estimate has to replace accurate counting. There is still no precise figure, for example, of Tibet's population.

² The 1955 figures are for the whole country, less one province, though this is not expected to make an appreciable difference to the totals.

The 1954 figures are for the whole country.

The 1952-3 figures, worked out before countrywide returns were organised, are estimates based on sample counties and provinces.

The pre-liberation figures are estimates, put together from all available data, most of it going back before the anti-Japanese war. There was no national system of registration at that time. Different ministries, organisations and sometimes private individuals made more or less accurate counts of particular areas; though taken all together and over a number of years, these cover a considerable part of the country.

Britain over a much longer period, roughly from 1905 to 1945. At the beginning of the century, 142 babies died in the United Kingdom out of every 1,000 born alive, though Britain by then had 150 years of industrial civilisation behind it. In 1945, the number had fallen to 49·8 per 1,000, and by 1949 to 34·1 per 1,000, just above Peking's present level.

As medical services are extended and health standards rise, there is reason to believe that China's infant mortality will gradually fall to the level of Britain's, which at 23·8 per 1,000 is now one of the lowest in the world. For, taking the death rate as a whole, China has already almost overtaken Britain (12·36 deaths per 1,000 population compared with 11·0 per 1,000 for Britain in 1955). In fact, Liaoning Province, in North-east China, which is more industrialised and probably has a younger age composition, has already reached a death rate of only 9·38 per thousand.

It is a youthful population, too, as the census revealed. As many as 61 out of every 100 people are under 30, compared with 42 out of every 100 in Britain.

Taken as a whole, and adding in the rising marriage rate, the figures reflect not only improved health but confidence in the future. At the same time, it means that millions are being added to the population annually before the country has built up its industrial potential.

Size, growth and distribution of the population all present problems—of education and employment, feeding and clothing, though they are healthy problems of expansion and rising living and cultural standards.

There are 30 million school-age children for whom places cannot yet be found at school. Yet the number of children attending school has reached the record total of over 63 million. Peking alone has provided 953 new schools since 1949, but this is far from enough.

All the way up the education scale, there are now more students than available teachers or schools, partly because of the large numbers in the lower age groups. About 4 out of the 5 million children of those who have just finished primary school have no middle school places ready for them. Of course, it is not reasonable to expect secondary education to be provided for all primary school students; but China would like to provide it for many more than as yet it is able to do. Senior middle schools are short of 800,000 places to receive all those coming up from the junior middle schools. And despite the enormous

need for university graduates, between 80,000 and 90,000 of those ready to enter university from the senior middle schools must be diverted to industry or other occupations. Yet universities have been greatly expanded and have already quadrupled their intake.

The very nature of the problems indicates a régime capable of, and concerned with, solving them. But they cannot be solved overnight.

Part of the whole difficulty is the pattern of population distribution. In the broad lowlands to the east where most people are concentrated, high density often slows down the introduction of machinery in agriculture. Yet millions cannot be suddenly transferred to the sparser outlying regions.

In these regions live many of the national minorities. Until liberation, their numbers were declining. They were victims of endemic diseases, including venereal disease, which the People's Government is now steadily eradicating. Though they number in all about 6% of China's population, they inhabit 60% of the total area of the country, including parts containing great mineral wealth and forest lands.

If great size of population and area of territory present problems, they also provide opportunities. Even a small surplus multiplied by vast numbers comes to very considerable accumulation. As funds speed the growth of industry, the means are provided to increase that surplus and also to open up the underpopulated areas to the north and west.

Strangely enough, as already indicated, a shortage of labour is being felt in the countryside. Socialist co-operation is changing the pattern of village life and, while mechanisation is still simple, there is room for more people in agriculture, forestry, livestock breeding, fishing and the expanding village industries and there is a great demand, too, for more teachers, doctors, nurses and specialists in all forms of cultural work.

Though 165,000 people went back to the villages during land reform, there was a strong drift to the cities later, especially during 1954, the year of heavy floods. Now the trend is the other way. Nearly one million people turned to farming in the nine months ending March 1956, in the height of the co-operative movement.

In time, no doubt, the trend will once again be reversed, as industry grows and as bigger-scale machinery replaces labour on the farms. But it is unlikely to come in a sudden, spectacular rush. Rather will

it come in steady, step-by-step expansion of not only national, but also local, industry in thousands of centres all over the country.

A beginning has already been made, too, to build up Sinkiang, Chinghai, Kansu and Heilungkiang and other under-populated areas, where the density is now often no more than two or three people to the square mile. Tractors, industrial machinery, and of course, people have begun to move there. Even now, without any great publicity, tens of thousands of families are making their way there every year from Shantung and other coastal provinces. No less than 200,000 people moved to Heilungkiang Province alone during 1956. China's wide, open spaces are attracting the young and adventurous.

China's great size, its contrasting climate, its diversified conditions yield not only remarkably varied products but also opportunities for experiment, for testing out methods of work and new techniques on a large scale, before popularising and spreading the results nationally. A good part of North-east China, for example, was six months to a year ahead of the rest of the country in the movement for agricultural co-operation and provided lessons and experience which were indispensable when it came to spreading the movement universally.

Only now are the Chinese people finding out what their country contains. Already more commercially exploitable oil has been discovered in the North-west than the known oil resources of Iran. Coal deposits are enough for 1,000 years at the rate of 400 million tons a year, and the water-power potential is second only to the Soviet Union's.¹ There is manganese, antimony, tungsten, vanadium, molybdenum, tin, copper and also many other metals that are today eagerly sought for. Each year sees new discoveries. Bauxite mines have been found larger than any in the world. And most mineral deposits are located conveniently for industrial exploitation.

China's big population and its immense resources, though as yet largely untapped, are among its greatest assets. It has plenty of room for all the new arrivals that are likely to come for any number of years ahead. Plenty of work and opportunity await its millions of young men and women.

The present effort to slow down the growth of population, which will undoubtedly gain ground year by year (so far, production of

¹ The latest figures, based on a survey of 1,500 rivers, shows a hydro-electrical power potential estimated at 540 million kW, greater than that of the U.S., Britain, France, Japan, Italy and Canada combined.

birth control appliances is on a rather small scale), has nothing Malthusian about it. It is a recognition that the present rate of growth for the time being affects the pace of industrialisation by turning resources to what is often technically described as unproductive investment. It is also a recognition that family planning is better for women's health and gives young people more time for training. It arises not from any gloomy helplessness in face of big natural or social forces but a healthy confidence in tackling them and helping forward the pace of China's progress.