

BOOK REVIEW

Aya Homei, *Science of Governing Japan's Population*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. 298 pp.

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The interplay between population statistics and politics in Japan dates back to the Meiji period (1867-1912). Meiji politicians thought knowledge presented in numbers was indispensable to building a modern nation-state and empire. It was a prerequisite to know how many and what kind of people lived and traveled within the country to smoothly implement wide-ranging reforms such as the prefectural administrative system, military conscription, and land tax reform.

The notion of population census, which emerged in Japan's transition from a federation of feudal domains to a centralized nation-state and empire, led to the enactment of the Population Census Law in 1902. However, it was not until almost 20 years later that the first national population census took place in "Japan Proper" due to geopolitical confusion. Meanwhile, a population census was conducted in Taiwan as scheduled since it was recognized as a more efficient colonial management tool. This experience provided a critical background for the modernization of the statistical survey system in Japan.

There was a growing consensus that modern medicine and public health would be a decisive foundation for making Japan into a civilized and modern nation-state and empire. Given that people's health and physical constitutions directly determine the nation's power, the Japanese government tried to identify personal factors that could lead to the "decline of nation" and work on countermeasures to bring about "nation's prosperity" by using vital statistics, in which the patterns of people's life events and bodily experiences were presented in numbers. Midwives directly involved in pregnancy and childbirth were mobilized to collect data for vital statistics.

In the 1920s, the "population problem" discourse, which insists that the population itself could become a problem threatening economic, social, and political stability, emerged with population growth. Under the circumstances, overseas migration and birth control were considered as options for maintaining social order. The Japanese government actively promoted overseas migration to solve the labor, social, and population problems within the metropole and assert geopolitical standing in world politics via colonialism. On the contrary, birth control was not implemented as a

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national policy for the following reasons: firstly, it had a close affinity with a socialist network that regarded it as a tool for liberating the working class from the chain of capitalist exploitation and poverty; secondly, it was pervasive mainly among biologically “superior” upper class, which possibly results in deterioration of the quality of the Japanese race due to “reverse selection” of “inferior” traits of the fecund lower class.

As Japan entered total war, the population was redefined as “human resource” subject to general mobilization. The Japanese government faced a lack of military force and workforce as the “problem of unemployment” was replaced by the “problem of labor shortage” with the rising demand for labor in the war industry and mass conscription. In this context, the Ministry of Health and Welfare was newly established, and it set out policies to tackle the problem of declining fertility. Policies on population were focused on not just “quantity” but “quality” and thus instituted along with the eugenic and social policies to increase a “high-quality” population.

The aspiration for imperial expansion and total war accelerated the development of population studies in Japan. The Japanese government tried to construct and develop the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere through the population distribution of the “high-quality” *Yamato* (Japanese) race based on demographic knowledge. For this reason, population distribution accounted for a large share of “national land planning” to build a “new order” in East Asia. Given the circumstances, demographic subjects were treated in a gendered and racialized manner: (Japanese) women, for example, to maintain racial purity by giving birth to the next generation of pure-bred Japanese and Koreans to be a nuisance with inferior traits but fecund.

Japan could not sustain its growing population after losing all its colonies due to defeat in WWII. However, overseas migration was no longer an option to solve the population problem as its association with fascism and militarism tainted it. Arguments for birth control again emerged as plausible policy measures. Moreover, population control via birth control was recognized as a critical condition for postwar reconstruction. In this context, birth control surveys, partly supported by media organizations, contributed to postwar reconstruction by providing knowledge for the government to better understand and manage the newly repackaged post-WWII “Japanese population.”

In addition to “overpopulation,” the “decline in the population’s quality” was also a concern for the Japanese government and population experts. For this reason, a *guided* birth control program targeting lower socioeconomic classes was enforced with great help from local governments, women’s groups, and midwives. With fertility decline in the 1960s, the Japanese population experts with knowledge of public health demography and confidence derived from successful experience in birth control programs started collaborating with international colleagues to contain the growth in the world population, which was financially supported by the United States seeking greater hegemony in the middle of the Cold War.

Although the Japanese government had already been concerned in the 1960s that low fertility would slow economic growth due to a decrease in the working-age population, this phenomenon is still ongoing except for temporary recovery around 2005. By the way, is low fertility really a “problem?” What is the ideal fertility rate that is not too high or too low? This book implies that “population” is a “political” matter, thoroughly describing how population dynamics have been interpreted and how different policy measures have been promoted depending on the political context for over a century. Also, it shows how population studies played a critical role by providing knowledge about population as a governable entity and technical support to the governmental efforts to control the quantity and quality of the population.