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Tyrene White, *China's Longest Campaign: Birth Planning in the People's Republic, 1949-2005*

Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 297 p.

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Traducteur : Michael Black



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- 1 This fascinating book recounts the evolution of population control policies applied from the foundation of the People's Republic in 1949 up to the present. The author bases her research on the political origins of birth control as well as its crucial role in China's quest for modernity. In contrast with the wealth of existing literature on the subject, White's main emphasis is not on the sociological, demographic,¹ or anthropological² aspects, but on the political dimension: how and why was the Communist Party of China (CPC) led to impose birth control? To what extent was it applied and what were the results? And why does the Party persist in maintaining it?
- 2 White draws on a wealth of diverse data from the political literature relating to internal reforms (principally rural economic reforms), and to the mass campaigns from the beginning of the 1950s to the end of the 1990s. She brings together numerous local regulations, official circulars, and articles drawn from the Chinese press as well as from journals specialising in questions relating to family planning. Moreover, field notes and observation, and interviews with political leaders, local cadres, and individual citizens provide a finely shaded picture of the application of birth control. Drawing on extracts from interviews and specific cases recounted throughout the book, White draws a picture of the tensions and contradictions of the campaigns launched in the country and the city to restrict the number of births.
- 3 In the first and second chapters, White explains the situation in which the Chinese government found itself when it decided to impose population control. She thus brings out the economic imperative that gave rise to this family planning policy: the Communist Party feared that population growth would hinder or slow the economic reforms underway. The necessity of reducing population growth was asserted as the

primary condition for reaching and maintaining a satisfactory rate of economic growth. The single child policy launched at the end of the 1970s encouraged late marriage, the spacing out of children (if permission for a second child was given), and the general limitation of one child per couple. The difficulty of implementing birth control was particularly acute in the countryside, where local cadres were mobilised to change the family demographic (Chapter 4). White makes a shrewd presentation of the dilemmas encountered by government officials, who were entrusted with managing birth control, while also being called upon to serve as exemplary models of compliance with the regulations involved. Specific cases illustrate the lack of a clear boundary between society and the state. White then observes the shortcomings in the Chinese system of bureaucracy, which perceives two forms of production that must be rationed: cereals and births (Chapter 5).

- 4 Rich studies and analyses of mass sterilisation campaigns are then presented (Chapter 6). The human cost of forced sterilisation and abortion is revealed in detail: White's argumentation is full of statistics covering the whole country, enriched by interviews carried out mainly in the provinces of Anhui and Hebei. She also shows how implementation of birth control has been limited when provoking serious rebellion in the population. Chapter 7, entitled "Strategies of Resistance," observes and classifies the various attitudes of the population towards birth control: evasion, collusion, cover-up, confrontation, and accommodation. These forms of resistance show clearly the interaction between the population and local cadres: mediation between society and the state, where each individual chooses his means of survival, resorting to corruption, temporary exile, non-registration, or direct confrontation with the authorities. The author emphasises the importance of a vital instrument: regular massive propaganda campaigns, without which no population control would have been possible. Yet the tragic repercussions of these campaigns are numerous: problems of infanticide, abandonment, and adoption are mentioned,³ as well as the alarming imbalance in the sex ratio (Chapter 8). White reminds us of the dilemma of abortion practices, in which selective abortion plays a large part. Moreover, the large numbers of unregistered births has increased the ranks of a floating population that more or less evades all forms of control and causes the government anxiety over the future of the country.
- 5 White refers to Kay Ann Johnson, *Wanting a Daughter, Needing a Son: Abandonment, Adoption, and Orphanage Care in China*. St. Paul (Minn.), Yeung and Yeung, 2004. Criticisms from within the CCP, as well as those made on the international level — where the population control policy of the People's Republic has been and is still strongly criticised — are more briefly set out in the last chapter. The author seeks to evaluate the success of population control: she states clearly that changes in family planning — whether in terms of reinforcement or of flexibility — never come from below, but always from the political and intellectual elite. Although she believes the population cannot question the laws, she recognises the room to manoeuvre, the "negotiating space," of which families take advantage. According to White's conclusions, changes in family planning depend partly on international influence, but more on economic success (which reassures the government), and even more on division or cohesion within the CCP.
- 6 As an examination of the political history of birth control, this excellent book is essential for the range of topics it examines: corruption, the ethics of the CCP, discipline in the Chinese bureaucracy, and the difficult relations between the CCP and

the rural masses, all of which seem to be in urgent need of improvement. It thus offers a panoramic analysis of the dominant issues in today's China.

NOTES

1. Cf: Thomas Scharping, *Birth Control in China, 1949-1999: Population Policy and Demographic Development* Richmond, Curzon, 1999.
2. Cf: James Z. Lee and Wang Feng, *One Quarter of Humanity: Malthusian Mythology and Chinese Realities, 1700-2000*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1999.
3. White refers to Kay Ann Johnson, *Wanting a Daughter, Needing a Son: Abandonment, Adoption, and Orphanage Care in China*. St. Paul (Minn.), Yeung and Yeung, 2004.