

## Review of Ma Yinchu on Chinese Population Mohammad Mainul Islam<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*In the history of population studies in China a noted scholar named Ma Yinchu (1882-1982) is a remarkable figure who first advocated for population control more scientifically just after the establishment of the P. R. China in 1950s. He realized the problem of Chinese population and provided his outstanding views to solve the problem in a more scientific manner looking at the bright future. He made the accurate assessment of the development of China's population in the 1950s on which his 'New Population Theory' was founded. The central thesis of his population theory was to control the size of population and to improve the quality of the people. Although his views were different from the British political economist Robert Thomas Malthus (1776-1834) but he was criticized treating as the 'Malthus of China'. Later his significant thoughts on population got high importance which played a major role to form the population policy in China. As a result today late Ma Yinchu is well accepted as an extra ordinary population scientist in China. Currently the Chinese Government is advocating successfully to form the appropriate size of the population as well as to ensure the quality of population under existing situation where population characteristics are posing new shapes in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. In this respect present paper aims to explore the views of this great Chinese scholar on population and development more critically based on the present population regulation in modern China.*

**Keywords:** Chinese Population, MaYinchu, Population Policy, Population Thoughts

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## **Introduction**

There is a saying in China, "*We lost one Ma Yinchu but we gained an extra 300 million people.*" In the 1950s, the president of Peking University, a noted economist Ma Yinchu (1882-1982) saw the necessity of family planning and provided a theory of population viewing quality of population and scientific advancement. His views on the subject were not well considered but criticized for the insightful vision treating as the follower of the doctrine of British political economist Robert Thomas Malthus (1776-1834). No doubt China lost its opportunity to have a more reasonable population growth. But it's good to note that later the government rightly acknowledged his views as China already had too many people to make burden for the state where the economic growth was suffered by the rapid population growth. Moreover the unemployment pressure, the demand for improved living standard and many other factors enforced the government to adopt the current population policy (family planning policy) which is widely known as 'One-Child Policy' starting in 1979. It can be noted that the policy poses variations under certain social settings and circumstances. At present the government is very much committed to ensure the quality of population where emphasis is given not only on numbers but also aims to face the long term consequences seeking for neither high nor low fertility. In China's present context Ma Yinchu's thoughts are significantly reflected as well as well accepted which he viewed before, when China was in a state of national recovery. His views and Malthus's views were not the same even both of them advocated for population control. In this regard here this paper briefly seeks to conceptualize the views of this great Chinese scholar on population with compare to Malthus where the similarities and the distinct differences are critically explored in a descriptive manner from the historical perspective. Moreover, this paper also aims to seek the relevance of the existing population policy and Ma Yinchu's thoughts with broader applications.

## **Ma Yinchu and His Works**

China's population visionary Ma Yinchu (1882-1982) who is also known as Yuanshan in China, was born in Shengxian (now Shengzhou) of Zhejiang province. He is one of the most renowned personnel as an educationist as well as an economist in the Chinese ideologist history. In his early years, he studied in Shanghai, Tianjin and then the United States (Yale University and then Columbia University) and got doctoral degree in the field of economics. In 1916 he returned China and became professor in the department of economics, later Chairman of the stated department and Dean of Peking University. Besides he also taught in Zhongshan University and the University of Communications. At the

time of the War against the Japanese Aggression, he exposed and attacked the dark and decadent rule of the Kuomintang reactionaries. In 1940 he was arrested for that, and got free in 1942. After the victory of the Anti-Japanese War, he took an active part in the Anti-Civil War and Anti-dictatorship movement and the patriotic and democratic movement. He became legislator of the Nanjing Government and joined China Democratic League. In 1948, he went to the Liberated Areas via Hong Kong. After the founding of New China, he held many important positions, including Vice Chairman of North China Military and Administrative Commission, Vice Chairman of Financial Commission of the Government Administration Council, President of Zhejiang University, President of Peking University and member of the Department of the Chinese Academy of Science. In the early 1950s, he put forward his 'New Population Theories' advocating family planning and birth control, and for that he was incorrectly criticized and treated unfairly. In 1979, he revived finally and he became the Honorary President of Beijing University, member of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC) and of the National People's Political Consultative Conference (NPPCC). His major works include *'China's Exchange Abroad'*, *'Problems of the Chinese Banks'*, *'Problems of China's Custom'*, *'The Essays on Economics by Ma Yinchu'*, *'Economic Reform in China'*, *'New Theories on Currency'*, *'Finance and Finance in China: Theory and Practice'*, *'My Economic Theory, Philosophy and Political Standard'*, *'New Theories on Population'* (Xueyuan, 1997:2-12; Zhejiang online).

### **Ma Yinchu's Views on Population: Before the Emergence of the 'New Population Theory'**

It was found that Ma Yinchu paid the attention to the population issues quite near the beginning of the past century. In 1920 he wrote an article on 'Mathematics for Calculating Population' where he discussed the application of mathematics in population studies. In 1928 he delivered a speech on 'Modern Economic Policies' where he expressed his worry at the rapid growth of population and advocated controlling births to reduce population growth. In 1955 he wrote many articles and talked on various occasions about the balance between the population growth and the development of national economy. In the same year he also wrote a drafted speech on the 'Control of Population Growth and Scientific Study' which was submitted to Zhejiang Group of the National People's Congress (NPC) for further discussion. But it's matter of sorrow that he had to withdraw his draft from the discussion as the most of the people paid little attention to population issue at that time. Moreover, some of

the people branded his views as the Malthusian Doctrine. In 1957 he stated at an interview of *Wenhuibao* about the miserable life of the people in the past where starvation and famines were predominant. At that time people could hardly find to eat anything and beggars were common everywhere. But since the liberation that means after 1949 people's living standard had been limited improved because of the large size of population and fast population growth. He also argued for studying population issues and advocating the control of population growth. In the month of February, 1957 he expressed his views again at the 'Supreme State Council Meeting' and aroused the attention of Chairman Mao Zedong, Premier Zhou Enlai and other leaders. Then in the month of June he explained his views systematically at the Fourth session of the 'First National People's Congress'. The full text of his speech was published in *The People's Daily* in 5 July 1957, which was regarded as the 'New Population Theory' (Xueyuan, 1997:5-6).

### **Ma Yinchu's New Population Theory: Major Views and Ideas**

Ma Yinchu's 'New Population Theory' was the most representative work on population issues where his analysis was based on the paradoxical relationship between the rapid population growth and the development of national economy. The central aspects of his new population theory were to control the size of the population; and to improve the quality of the people. His idea was based on the objective requirements of the planned and proportionate development of the national economy and social reproduction. He analyzed the major contradiction between China's rapid population growth and the development of the national economy which includes- population growth and the acceleration of capital accumulation; rapid population growth and increase in the labor productivity; rapid population growth and the improvement of people's living standards; the rapid population growth and the development of sciences (Zheng, Jian and others, 1981:61). Here he made the linkage between population size and population quality together by explaining the control of population growth and the improvement of population quality which are closely related and mutually promoted. In this regard he proposed to raise the standard of education and to raise the quality of population. He argued to organize the large population of China and turn them into resources. In his views more population means great resource but at the same time also an enormous burden. He advocated for controlling the growth of population and improving the quality to keep this great resource and to get rid of the burden. In the 1950s Ma Yinchu made the correct assessment of the development of China's population, which was based on his first hand survey data where he demonstrated the imbalance development between population growth on the one hand and on the

other hand capital accumulation, consumption patterns and scientific development. Referring the census in 1953 he found some possible errors in the population estimation as the population growth might have been accelerated. He was very right when statistical data collected later indicated the rate of natural increase was almost quite close. He argued seven reasons for that- (i) an increase in the number of marriages, which would lead to an increase in births; (ii) the decline of the infant mortality rate resulting from the improvement of medical, health, and all kinds of social welfare services; (iii) drop in the old age deaths; (iv) it was stable and orderly society, few died unnatural deaths; (v) Most nuns and nuns returned to a secular life, and the problem of prostitution which could not be solved in the capitalist society basically solved; (vi) The feudalistic thinking of 'more sons bring more happiness and a longer life, 'prosperity in five continuous generations were basically rooted in the minds of the people; and (vii) the government rewarded those women giving multiple births. (Xueyuan, 1997:7-8). So these were the major causes contributed to increase in birth rate and the decrease in the death rate. Therefore Ma Yinchu's analysis of the growth rate and natural increase were scientific and true in nature. His analysis of China's 1953 census showed that China's population had reached 583 million. He warned that China's development could be threatened by continued large population increases and proposing various birth control strategies (sans abortion) (Shapiro, 2001). On his view for effective control of population growth he referred the three steps- (i) to publicize the control of population to break the traditional concept; (ii) to revise the Marriage Law in order to promote late marriages where for male 25 and 23 for female; (iii) to introduce more powerful and effective administrative measures, if population control is not working well after revision of marriage law (Xueyuan, 1997:10). Specifically he recommended among other things, that: '*Fertility limitation and population control are imperative. First of all, we must rely on extensive propaganda in order that the peasant masses all clearly understand the importance of fertility limitation and actually make use of contraceptive methods. At the same time, energetically publicize the harms of early marriage and benefits of late marriage. The more appropriate age for marriage probably is 25 for male and 23 for women*' (quoted from Tien, 1991:28). Further he recommended, '*It would not be late to amend the Marriage Law until after propaganda work has achieved a certain result. At that time after the Marriage Law has been amended, if the power remains insufficient to control the control the population, it should be supplemented by more stern and more effective administrative measures*' (quoted from Tien, 1991:28).

Ma Yinchu proposed couples having two children will be rewarded, 3 will be taxed and 4 will be heavily taxed. The collected taxed will be used as rewarded money and the national budgets would not be affected by such program. He always thought that birth and the economy must be planned. He also opposed inducing abortion (Xueyuan, 1997:174, 177). In his view, abortion kill the fetus which is the crime and also harmful to the health of the mothers. It also might weaken the significant of the contraception. If abortion is encouraged then hospitals should have special group of doctors and have the other related facilities. Encouragement of abortion also may weaken the publicity efforts of differed marriages. He also thinks about the gender inequality in that context. He was the pioneer for quality of population and scientific development. Scientific development means increase in the means of subsistence which depends on scientific development. He advocates family planning referring the example of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR). In his view-USSR has the large territory but small population size, more cultivable land that was two times than China. Therefore they encouraged 3 (three) children but Chin should do 2 (two) (Xueyuan, 1997:57). According to him, population problem is not only a qualitative one, but also a quantitative one. The goal of controlling population will only be resorting to political power as China is backward in science, but have to promote scientific development. So these are the basic views and positions of Ma Yinchu's New Population theory.

### **Ma Yinchu's New Population Theory: Criticisms**

Both Ma Yinchu and Malthus stressed importance on population growth and economic development but there are quite different statuses to their assertions. In Malthus' *The Essay on Population*, there is no explanation why "the production of the necessaries of subsistence should not grow geometrically". Modern population theorists dispute Malthus' population theory on this point. Because of disparity between the two rates of growth (arithmetic and geometric), Malthus gave the conclusion that the actual rate of growth of population cannot exceed the rate of growth of the supply of the necessities of subsistence. But Ma Yinchu opposed this view. Ma was more optimistic and more critic to Malthus by saying that the improvement in production and in the standard of living of the people since the founding of the new China were enough to destroy the fallacy of the arithmetic progression in food production. He mentioned that Malthus theory was failed in case of Germany too. The notion of increasing grain that is arithmetic progression is wrong where grain also increases in geometric progression. Though the production is fast but in the long run china has to face the problems as the cultivable land is limited. In his view, although natural conditions might impose certain restrictions, but in

the scientific advances are boundless, and Malthus principles had been bankrupted before (Xueyuan, 1997:164-165). But it's true that his theory was appropriate which was realized after decades of time.

Malthus advocated two kinds of checks: "preventive" and "positive", affecting the birth and death rates respectively. Malthus normative classification of checks on population is considered as vice and misery. He first accepted only war, famine, and disease as "positive checks" on population growth; in his latter revised work he added the category of "moral restraint". Malthus thought that there is a correlation between vice and preventive checks both include prostitution, abortion and contraception. Another correlation between misery and positive checks, both include war, disease and famine. Moral restraint is an instance of preventive checks, which is not vicious. (Malthus, 1798:80). Although Ma Yinchu also opposed inducing abortion (Xueyuan, 1997:174,177) but he is favor of contraception. In his viewed that abortion kill the fetus which is the crime and also harmful to the health of the mothers which can be treated as similar to Malthus. Malthus argued that moral restraint is to postpone or to refrain altogether from marriage. Both of these would lower the birth rate and they were the only non-vicious method of doing so. *"Malthus theorizes that the ratio of the number of married people in society compared to the total population would be an adequate measure of a fluctuating or stationary population."* but Malthus noticed there is contradiction between his theory and Adam Smith's idea. In the *Essay*, he said *"the early marriages very generally prevail through all the ranks of the Chinese, yet Adam Smith supposes that population in China is stationary"* (Malthus, 1826 reprint: 117). Malthus explained the contradiction in his book; he concluded that marriages would be a useful measure in determining the rate of population increasing only in countries whose populations are not checked by famines and exposing of children. (Malthus, 1798:23) .In case Ma Yinchu it is found that he advocated for late marriage, contraception and involving political or administrative measures to control the growth of population. In fact his theory is much more different from Malthus where Malthus advocates population control by means of wars, plagues and hungers-which are definitely reactionary to Ma Yinchu (Xueyuan, 1997:11).

It can be noted that Ma Yinchu's 'New Population Theory' was contradictory to the doctrine of Soviet socialism where rapid population growth was the population law of socialism and good in nature. At that time his ideas opposed to the visions of Communist party, socialism and

Marxism. Since Both Karl Marx (Ma Kesi) and Thoms Malthus's (Ma Er Sa si) translated Chinese names are surnamed Ma, just as with Ma Yinchu, some people questioned Ma Yinchu as to which "Ma" camp he belonged to. Now in current Chinese population policy Ma Yinchu and Malthus's insights are clearly evident. Malthus argued that marriage is a major determinant of the birth and the delayed marriage will lower family size and decrease the birth rate. His "moral restraint" method has been applied to modern China's population policy. The new marriage law mandates a minimum age at marriage and a maximum number of children. Article 6 of Chapter Two of the Chinese Marriage Law states, "*In order to get married, the man shall not be younger than 22 years old and the woman shall not be younger than 20. Late marriage and late child birth shall be encouraged*" (China, 2001). The traditional concepts of 'early marriage, early childbirth', the more sons, the more happiness' and 'men are superior to women' has been gradually replaced by the scientific and advanced concepts of 'late marriage, later childbearing, fewer and healthier births' and boys and girls are equal'(China,2000:7). The first marriage age for women of childbearing age averaged 23.57 years in 1998, as against 20.8 years in 1970 (China,2000:7). The average family size (person/per household) sharply declined. In 1964 the average family size was 4.43 where as in 2004 is 3.36 (China, 2005:21,252). The one-child family planning policy carried out from 1979 aims to limit total population to 1.2 billion by 2000 but this policy becomes more flexible, especially for rural Chinese whose first child was girl (Donald and Benewick, 2005:29). Although the policy is strict at urban level but later one child boys and girls if they marry each other they are allowed to take more where as minority nationalities have generally been allowed more flexibility in family size. Currently China is facing the gender imbalances, lower fertility and the problem of ageing. Reshaping the population problem as a human resource power house China's first Population and Development Strategy Research Report released on recently, January 11,2007 where it has been addressed that China has now made a feature of having a low birthrate, a low mortality rate and high growth rate. How China can transform itself from a country with a large population to a human resources power is now a tough but pertinent question (People's Daily, 2007). The report indicates that China will not suffer for a lack of labor in the long term but there will be quality and skill gaps in the labor force, causing long term structural shortages. Manpower quality worrisome, accelerated ageing population, imbalanced gender ratio and rebounding birth rate are highly addressed as important issues in this



report. In this respect population development strategy refers to control total population and to improve population quality where three steps population strategy will be maintained by 2010, 2020 and 2050. Here it can be argued that China's current population policy might be an application of the Ma Yinchu and Malthus' theory regarding population control where the intervention effectively lowers the fertility rate in China. "For Malthus, China is one of the richest of human societies, was also one of the poorest." Malthus concluded that "*Chinese population was overwhelmingly dominated by the positive, rather than the preventive check. Indeed he wrote that famines are perhaps the most powerful of all the positive checks to the Chinese population. Population processes inexorably doomed China to poverty and worse*" (adopted from Lee and Wang, 1999). Maybe Malthus was very right in the previous situation of China. But after 1950s Ma Yinchu was very right to population growth. In fact, both Malthus and Ma Yinchu did not include all the factors that affect the growth of population. Although Malthus recognized, "*death and birth rates, migration and the age structure of populations are in large part a product of the general physical well-being of the people; an equilibrium will be established between food and people*", he neglected another important term—culture—in the equation. The development of science and technology has not only increased the rate of yield from natural resources, but also prolong the people's life. But Ma Yinchu paid the importance on it.

### **Conclusion**

Noted economist Ma Yinchu is also a great figure in Chinese population studies. Although some content of his theory needs to be revised for new situations, his population theory basically has been accepted by modern scholars and has wide influences in modern China. No doubt Ma Yinchu's theory was very appropriate in the context of Chinese population in early 1950s. His theory was much more strategic, practical and workable. Therefore, in order to make 'wan, xi, shao (later, longer and fewer)' operative, the plan to solve China's population problem draws on specific strategies mentioned in the new population theory of Ma YinChu. The core of his theory was that the State should have the power to arbitrate in reproduction and to control population. His recommendations included the uses of extensive propaganda to make people more sensitive to the harmful effects of early marriage and to the importance of the fertility control in the context of economic

development. He also argued that people should be educated to use the methods of birth limitation, and more important that more stern and more effective administrative measures' be adopted to supplement these approaches if population growth was not effectively curved (Tien, 1980:65). Now the people can easily realize that Ma Yinchu's theory and his vision was the fundamental solution to China's population problem in a positive manner. Even he was criticized by some people as branded as the Malthus in China but in fact his theory was different from Malthus's Population Theory. Here it can be added that even his theory was arbitrarily equated with Malthusianism and his criticism of Malthus was purposely distorted. That means 'true dissemination under the disguise of criticism (Xueyuan, 1997:11). Ma Yinchu's superb scholastic vision on population and development is reflected on one of his comments: '*China has little financial resources and a big population. It is not bad to organize the people, and make them as a resource. But do not forget that big population is also a large burden. My new population theory holds that we retain its advantage and get rid of its disadvantage, save the large resource and remove the large burden. The method is to improve the quality and control the quantity of population*' (quoted from Cangping and Guangzong, 2004:28). Thus finally, it can be said that his population theory was almost acceptable and this is not only a big event to Ma YinChu, but also of great importance to the theoretical study of China's population.

### **Acknowledgment**

Authors would like to acknowledge Tian Xueyuan for his edited work (1997) - *Ma Yinchu's Collected Papers On Population*.

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