

From the Law of Value Debate to the One-Child Policy in China: On Accounting and Biopolitics

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价值规律是一个伟大的学校
The law of value is a mighty school.
—Dong Fureng, 1983

In a previous article in this journal (Thompson 2018), I argued that the emergence of “the Chinese population” in the early decades of the twentieth century is inseparable from the development of specifically capitalist governmental techniques, and that these techniques impart to it the features of a *commodity*. For the disciplines that are connected to these practices at every point (economics, sociology, demography, etc.), a “population” is composed at once of a qualitative aspect—a given set of material properties, a diverse composition of elements, a “use-value”—and a quantitative aspect that expresses this material diversity as a definite quantity of abstract units, in terms of a *general equivalent*. In the same way that capital must be expressed

at once as a diversity of material elements (x amount of land, y amount of raw materials, z amount of purchased labor-power, and so on) and as a quantity of abstract units (\$12,000, \$5,000, \$4,000 . . .) so too does a population in this period come to be expressible at once as a set of diverse material particulars (x number of males aged five to fourteen, y number of women in their childbearing years, z number of elderly or disabled people who are unable to work, and so on) and as a given quantity of a general equivalent into which these particulars could be “converted” by various calculations. Various attempts were made to give this general equivalent a name: V for “vitality” (Xu S. 1930: 82–84) or MWU for “Man-Work Units” (Buck 1937: 289), for instance. But the underlying problematic in all of these attempts was that of *the value of the labor-power* that inhered in the Chinese population or in any given segment of it.¹

I will argue here that the one-child policy launched in September 1980—officially referred to as the “birth planning policy” (*jihua shengyu zhengce*)—and the really quite stupendous bureaucratic apparatus of “comprehensive management” (*zonghe zhili*) of the Chinese population, of which it has been a central element,² should be interpreted not as an artifact of any “socialist governmentality” (such a thing may not, after all, exist) or socialist state project, but rather in terms of a return, *mutatis mutandis*, to the capitalist governmentality that was associated with national economics in the Republican period.³ Thus, I address certain interpretive questions that remain unresolved concerning the relation of the one-child policy, first, to what is called population management in the socialist developmentalist period (1955–ca. 1980) and, second, to other major reforms that were launched in the same brief period, between 1979 and 1981, including enterprise management reforms and the correlated recommodification of labor-power, along with the household responsibility system in the agricultural sector.

On the first question, some scholars have argued that biopolitics was a constant feature of the socialist project in China, and that the one-child policy represents a relative shift of position within a field of options, a technocratic hardening, certainly, but one that was nonetheless consistent with the longer trajectory of population management in the PRC. On the second question, the general understanding has been that the one-child policy is anomalous or paradoxical in relation to the general trend toward economic

liberalization embodied in the other reforms. Certainly, it was “excessive.” But there is another way to approach the matter, which turns on the function of value in socialist planning, how value becomes a category in terms of which the population is managed. Rather than assessing policies according to how well or poorly they manage the “conflicting requirements” of state policy in terms of a schematic opposition between, say, necessity and justice, we can ask how they are reciprocally organized and how they engender a common field of governability. Here I wish to show two things: first, that the one-child policy is discontinuous with population management between 1953—when the first Five-Year Plan was launched and the household registration (*hukou*) system began to be implemented⁴—and 1979; and, second, that it is absolutely continuous, at the level of the logic of governing, with the other major early reform period policies.

The politics and realignments within the central Party-state apparatus between Mao’s death in September 1976 and Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CPC in December 1978, which directed the Party-state system toward the achievement of the Four Modernizations and placed Deng Xiaoping and Chen Yun in positions of Party leadership, have been well covered. For all their importance to the reemergence of biopolitical governing in China, they are not my principal interest here. My relatively narrow interest lies in how a provisional resolution of a debate supposedly “internal” to Marxism—the “law of value debate” (*jiazhi guilü de lunzheng*) in 1979—produced the *entrée* for the reinstallation of properly capitalist forms of governing in China, a reinstallation of which the one-child policy was an integral part. The principal venue for this debate was the journal *Economic Research* (*Jingji yanjiu*), which was the forum for most high-level theoretical debate regarding the economy and planning in China. *Red Flag* (*Hongqi*) and *Planned Economy* (*Jihua jingji*) were also important media for the debate, but the critical importance of *Economic Research* (not just its content but its institutional position and function as well) in coordinating the shifts in question here will become clear.

Some scholars have noted (quite correctly, on one level) that precursors to the one-child policy can be found as early as 1971, with the “later, longer, fewer” (*wan, xi, shao*) campaign launched in that year, and Zhou Enlai’s injunctions from the mid-1970s to “grasp together [under socialist planning]

the two kinds of production” (*liang zhong shengchan yiqi zhua*)—that is, economic production and the reproduction of the population (White 2006: 111–33). While the Gang of Four, Kang Sheng, and their associates were still in control of much of the Party-state apparatus through the mid-1970s, preparations for the shift in question were nonetheless underway in several places well in advance of 1980. Starting in the mid-1970s, the gathering of institutional capacity to the institutions from which the policy would be issued proceeded rapidly.

In 1974, for example, an Office of Population Theory Research (*Renkou lilun yanjiu bangongshi*, OPTR) was established at the Beijing College of Economics. The journal *Population Research* (*Renkou yanjiu*) commenced publication in January 1977. The principal staff of the OPTR—Liu Zheng (1930–93), Wu Cangping (1922–2017), and Zha Ruichuan (1925–2001)—was subsequently transferred in 1978 to the People’s University to establish the Institute for Population Research (*Renkou yanjiu suo*, IPR) under the directorship of Liu Zheng. In May 1979, a symposium on population theory was convened that included representatives of the Institute for Economic Research (*Jingji yanjiu suo*) under the State Planning Commission (SPC), the editorial board of *Economic Research*, the State Statistical Bureau (SSB), the Family Planning Office (*Jihua shengyu bangongshi*) under the State Council, the Commission on National Development (*Guojia fazhan weiyuanhui*), and Liu Zheng and Wu Cangping from the IPR (*Renmin ribao* 1979).

It was proposed at this meeting that, given the successes attained in lowering the birth rate since the beginning of the “later, longer, fewer” campaign in 1971, research in population theory should be placed on a permanent institutional foundation, which led to a rapid expansion in the number of university and state centers devoted to the study of the Chinese population (Tien 1981; Greenhalgh 1990: 362). In this period, the information and missile systems theorist Song Jian (b. 1931) and his team at the Seventh Ministry of Machine Building (*Di qi jixie gongye bu*) were developing the population projections that would lead eventually to the “hard” approach of the one-child policy, through their presentation to and sponsorship by leading economic planners such as Xu Dixin (1906–88), to whom I will return below (Greenhalgh 2008: 125–68).⁵ The Chinese Demographic Association (*Zhongguo renkouxue hui*) was reconstituted in 1981; Ma Yin-

chu (1882–1982), ninety-eight years old at this point, was rehabilitated after languishing in obscurity since 1961 for angering Mao with his essay *Xin renkou lun* (*New Population Theory*, 1957, republished in 1979), and became its honorary president. (In 1935, as it happens, Ma [1935: 435] articulated the principle that, as I will show, underlies everything here: “The sole and proper object of economics is *value*.”) These developments are all important, but they are not, I suggest, where the really crucial transformation occurs.

One of the longest-standing theoretical issues faced by those who govern “actually existing socialisms” is the correct management of existing contradictions between the forces and the relations of production, and how to determine correct policies for moving through the stages of transition from socialism to communism, at which point the contradictions in their respective development would be resolved. If, under capitalism, the forces of production (which include the population as the bearer of the force “labor-power”) develop to the point where capitalist relations of production—in a word, private property—act as a fetter to their further development, the situation is, in a sense, reversed under a system of state socialism in an economically relatively underdeveloped country or set of countries. Here, the undeveloped state of the forces of production act as a fetter to the further development of the relations of production, which are now the “advanced” term. The forces of production must catch up, so that the contradiction can be resolved. This line of argument ultimately derives from Stalin’s 1938 essay “Dialectical and Historical Materialism” (1945: 587), where he argues that, given the achievement of socialism in terms of class relations, the task facing the Party was to promote the progress of industry and agriculture in order to “continue to improve the material and cultural standards of the workers, peasants, and intellectuals.” This is exactly the position taken (again) in the late 1970s in China. The same formulation structured arguments made at the Population Theory Symposium: “If population growth is too rapid . . . it will act as a fetter to the improvement of the material and spiritual-cultural life of the people” (“*renmin wuzhi shenghuo he jingshen wenhua shenghuo de gaishan*”) (*Renmin ribao* 1979).

But how should planning occur such that this reconciliation of the forces and relations of production can happen? If one was supposed to be steering the ship of state toward communism, how could one know what stages

lay along the way, and whether and when one was reaching and surpassing them? Two possibilities existed: the stages were defined either by the primacy of different sets of class relations or by levels of development of the forces of production. In “On the Draft Constitution of the U.S.S.R.,” written in 1936, Stalin (1945) announced that, in terms of class relations, socialism had been “basically achieved” and that further progress through the stages to communism would be marked by the attainment of determinate levels of development of the forces of production. This defines the position of the developmentalists within the CCP, who felt that China had entered a similar situation after “socialist transformation” in the mid-1950s.

My concern here is not to determine whether any of these positions are “correct” from a Marxist perspective or whether they advance our understanding of economic processes in a socialist system. Rather, it is the way in which what is basically a relative realignment of positions within an “internal” socialist debate opens the door to an absolute or qualitative shift in the nature of governing in China. This is possible because socialist theory has not heretofore been able to account for the positive reality of technologies of governing, their direct and productive rather than indirect and reflective role in the organization of social life, seeing them rather as instrumental to the project of enacting a socialist program or derivative of “deeper” realities like economic laws or class struggle, which are the true site of operations. Vis-à-vis the population, in particular, there is certainly some sanction to be found for this view in the socialist tradition’s canonical texts, the exegesis of which it has almost always preferred to the concrete analysis of mere “techniques.”

In the *Grundrisse*, for instance, Marx (1973: 100) writes: “The population is an abstraction if I leave out, for example, the classes of which it is composed. These classes in turn are an empty phrase if I am not familiar with the elements on which they rest. E.g., wage labor, capital, etc.”⁶ Thus, for socialist reflection, the forms of knowledge that organize themselves around a population refer essentially to a second-order reality, precisely an “ideological” reality that bourgeois knowledge would use to hide the class struggle. Certainly, this is correct in one sense. But the putative epiphenomenality of the population as an epistemological figure caused the socialist tradition of reflection on governing to miss the ways in which the deployment of such

a figure in the accounting apparatus of a developmental state, as in China, could have an impact on the real configuration of class relations there and remake it from top to bottom. I will return to this below. And herein may lie the truly fatal flaw of the “base-superstructure” model in orthodox Marxism: the socialist tradition has never seriously inquired into the positive reality of governmental techniques, seeing them, again, either as merely instrumental or as derivative of, ideological reflections of, the class struggle.⁷ On the other hand, the tradition of socialist reflection on governing never produced a figuration of “the people” that could render it the kind of object, a population, that is necessary for a form of knowledge like demography to gain any traction in the field of social life. Mao’s own determinations of the concept of “the people” (*renmin*) as an alliance of classes formed in a revolutionary struggle (see, for instance, “On New Democracy,” 1940), rather than as an abstraction capturing “human beings as such,” human beings in their simple existence as human beings in a particular place, have nothing to do with demography.

Clearly, some kind of national and enterprise accounting system was required in China to allocate economic resources on a regular and constant basis according to the goals set by economic planning. But how was it to be organized? The debate concerned the operation of the law of value in a capitalist economy (for all the differences in the Marxist tradition concerning the interpretation of this law, most Marxists will accept a definition of it in these terms: the law that the value of a commodity is determined by the amount of socially necessary labor time expended in its production, which is intrinsically linked to the problem of labor productivity), and the possible utility and function of this law in socialist planning. That is, in a context in which commodity production is, or is at least supposed to be, dying out as a result of the transformation of relations of production and structures of ownership, and in which labor-power has been, should be, or is being subtracted from the set of things whose value enters into economic calculations.⁸

The basic problem was something like this: Under a capitalist system of generalized commodity production and in the absence of central planning, the law of value operated automatically to distribute social capital in such a way as to maximize the development of the productive forces. But according to one reading, a socialist economy was supposed to be precisely

a noncommodity economy, where distribution occurred according to social needs rather than the mechanism of value and productivity. Or at least a socialist system was supposed to negate progressively the social relations that correspond to a commodity (capitalist) economy. So what could the function of the law of value be within a system of socialist planning? Did a socialist economy have its “own” laws of economic development, or was the law of value an “objective economic law” (*kèguān jīngjì guīlǜ*) pertaining to all productive activity as such? The basic reference points for the debate were Stalin’s *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR*, published in 1952 and translated into Chinese in 1953, especially chapter 3, “The Law of Value under Socialism”; Marx’s *Capital I*; and Engels’s *Anti-Dühring* of 1877, especially part 3, “Socialism.” In fact, the questions of whether objective economic laws existed and whether the law of value was one of these laws constituted a single question, since everybody who argued that there were such laws also argued that the law of value was one of them—indeed, that it was the most important one, and that planning for national economic development could do nothing but subordinate itself to it.⁹

The debate in the PRC went back to the mid-1950s, after the period of initial postwar reconstruction, when planners in the process of evaluating the first Five-Year Plan were trying to determine the developmental path China should take (Xu D. 1955; Zhu 1955; Wang Y. 1956; Sun 1956; Nan and Suo 1957; Gu 1957, etc.—all in *Economic Research*—in addition to “literally hundreds” of articles that circulated around the planning apparatus on this question [Perkins 1966: 31]). That is, the choice was whether they should emulate the model of the Soviet Union or come up with a solution more closely related to the realities of China’s situation at the time. The former option was chosen, and I will return to it below. The issue arose again in the period spanning the formation of the Agricultural People’s Communes—that is, just as the universe of commodities had significantly contracted—and the Great Leap Forward and its collapse (again, from *Economic Research*, Xu D. 1959; Xue 1959; Zhu 1959; Jiang 1959; Wang X. 1959a; Wang, X. 1959b).

From the beginning, the central advocates of the position that the law of value *was* an objective economic law, and thus of making value the basis of national accounting and planning, were Xue Muqiao, who became a senior

economic planner in the early 1950s under Chen Yun, serving as deputy director of the SPC and director of the SSB, among other positions (he was purged during the Cultural Revolution for his advocacy of market economics and close association with Deng Xiaoping); Sun Yefang, who served as vice-director of the SSB and director of the Institute for Economic Research (*Jingji yanjiusuo*) at the Chinese Academy of Sciences;¹⁰ and Xu Dixin, who served in the early 1950s as director of the Institute for Economic Research at Fudan University in Shanghai and then as director of the Central Private Enterprise Bureau (*Zhongyang siying qiyeju*) in Beijing.

All of these economists had known and worked with one another as early as the 1930s, in connection with the development of sociology and rural economics associated with the Rural Reconstruction Movement (*nongcun jianshe yundong*). Xue Muqiao, for instance, produced some of China's earliest studies of the problem of "rural surplus labor-power" (*nongcun guosheng laodongli*) in China (Xue 1937) while associated with the Chinese Rural Economics Research Association (*Zhongguo nongcun jingji yanjiuyuan*, better known as the Rural Studies Institute), established in 1933 in Shanghai by Chen Hansheng. Another founding member of the Institute was Sun Yefang, who worked closely with Xue. Xu Dixin was a graduate of the National Labor University, also in Shanghai, founded by, among others, Feng Hefa, who in turn worked closely with Chen Hansheng at the time.¹¹ It was this training that brought them into the planning apparatus together in the 1950s.

After 1963, the law of value disappeared from academic discussions for quite a while. For all that the system of national accounting (the nature of which I discuss below) continued to fluctuate within certain limits until the late 1970s, the renewed emphasis on class struggle from 1962, the emergence of the problem of the "capitalist road" (*zibenzhuyi daolu*), and then the Cultural Revolution made it difficult to raise an issue so thoroughly associated with the developmentalist emphasis. In 1977, though, these same economists were reassigned to pivotal positions of theory and policy formation. Xue Muqiao was appointed secretary of the Center for Economic Research (*Jingji yanjiu zhongxin*) under the State Council and director of the Institute for Economic Research under the SPC; he was also put on the Financial and Economic Commission (*Caizheng jingji weiyuanhui*) of the National People's

Congress. Xu Dixin was appointed vice chair of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) and director of the Institute for Economic Research under it. Shortly afterward, in early 1978, Sun Yefang was appointed as an adviser to the Center for Economic Research and CASS as well as honorary chair of the Institute for Economic Research. The group also took control of the editorial board of *Economic Research*.

They argued, again, that because China's forces of production, including the population in its demographic determination, were undeveloped relative to the relations of production, the main task facing planners was the development of these forces of production, or total social capital. Such development could not be coordinated if the bulk of the country's productive forces were not subjected to any form of economic accounting. Having been authorized to develop the policies they had been severely criticized for during the Cultural Revolution, they spent the next year working out how to make the law of value the basis of national economic accounting. In the process, they oversaw the rapid dismantling of university programs in political economy and their replacement by departments of economics (Lin 1981; Brugger and Kelly 1990: 97). Eight months prior to the symposium on population theory discussed above, and at a higher level in the hierarchy of state offices, Xue Muqiao and Sun Yefang organized and presided over an ongoing symposium in Beijing that gathered together "economic theory workers" (*jingji lilun gongzuozhe*) from all of these organizations for theoretical and policy discussions (N.A. 1978). This work culminated in a special supplementary issue of *Economic Research* devoted entirely to the law of value (Xue 1979b; Sun 1979a)—in a marvelous rhetorical sleight of hand, considering the institutional rearrangements and purges noted above, Sun Yefang (1979a: 5) stated in this issue that, despite all the controversies in the past, "at present opinions on the matter basically tend toward unanimity"—and, rather more importantly, the shift in accounting policies that created the *entrée* for the reimplantation of the population at the core of Chinese governing.¹² To understand this, some familiarity with the economic accounting system used from the 1950s to the 1970s is necessary.

The Material Product System (MPS) of national accounting, which would correspond to a "product economy" (rather than a commodity economy) operating under the "law of planned and proportionate development," had

been devised in the Soviet Union in the 1930s and adopted in China in the 1950s (Kornai 1992: 110–30; Naughton 1996: 38–46; see especially Xu X. 2009: 443–47). In this system, the measure of national income is the “net material product” (NMP). Within the class relations established under socialist national ownership, it made little sense to speak of “exchanges” between the owners of different goods, so a different way of calculating surplus production (“profit”) had to be developed than existed within capitalist enterprises based on such exchanges. Under the MPS, most enterprise and national accounting—the basis on which remissions of profit to the state were calculated—was conducted on the basis of what was called the “cost profit rate” (*chengben lirun lü*). In this system, the rate of profit produced by an enterprise was calculated by dividing the accounting value of the surplus product (s) by the cost of the materials used in production and depreciation (c) and the cost of labor or “variable capital” (v), which here does not mean wages and does not represent “(v)alue” but rather the cost of the goods distributed to members of the enterprise through a combination of wages, work points, and services:

$$\frac{s}{(c+v)}$$

Here, then, the reproduction of an enterprise’s labor-power is accounted for as a cost to the enterprise rather than as a value exchanged against the enterprise’s total capital, since members of an enterprise were, according to statute, the “owners” of that enterprise. Certainly, they were not owners in the “bourgeois” sense of the term: they could not make any use of their capital they wished, and there was a plan for production to be stuck to, after all (compulsory purchase and so on). But distribution of enterprise revenue proceeded according to various systems based on a combination of contribution and need, which is not the same thing as a wage in a capitalist economy. A socialist economy, after all, could hardly be organized by that most fundamental social relation of capitalism, the one that is the basic problem.

But this meant that there was no effective or “objective” way to analyze the productivity of labor relative to capital across different kinds of production and different enterprises within branches of production (see Sun 1980: 28–33). Furthermore, under this system, the bulk of the means of

production held by a given enterprise (that is, any assets not utilized in a given production cycle) were simply not submitted to economic accounting. This has the effect precisely of making *non*commodities of a good deal of productive material, since being a commodity is a function of the doubled existence defined by having both use-value and value. As far as national accounting was concerned, by being subtracted from the set of things on the basis of which transfers of value were calculated, they effectively *did not have value* (though they were still “products”). They did not have that feature that allows them to enter into the relationship of general exchangeability because, under a “whole people ownership economy” (*quanmin suoyou zhi jingji*), they could not be commodities. They were not alienable, and they were not subjected to the discipline of market competition in the capitalist sense, two conditions that most Marxist analyses agree are necessary for the law of value to function.

To organize the economy once again according to the circulation of commodities (at first in limited spheres, but then in ever-widening spheres) required a transformation of the way in which profits—which would be transformed at a higher level of accounting into national economic growth—were calculated. The crucial shift in accounting practices at the beginning of the reform period produced by the proponents of the law of value was supposed to solve exactly the problem of the impossibility of calculating, and hence improving, productivity (that is, efficiency). This is the shift to accounting on the basis of “capital profit rate” (*zijin lirun lü*), calculated by dividing the accounting value of the surplus product by the value of the enterprise’s *capital* (*C*) and the cost of labor (Sun 1979b: 362–66; Fung 1982: xvii–xviii):

$$\frac{s}{(C+v)}$$

With this shift, labor-power—and the population as its bearer—reenters into a relationship with the means of production as *capital* that is mediated by value. First, the total value of the enterprise’s productive capacity, its “total capital,” is now the denominator in the calculation of rates; second, means of production and labor-power are once again “composed” of the same substance: they are exchanged against each other as quantities of the

same *materia*, as units that differ only quantitatively in the manner that materially different things on the balance sheet of a capitalist enterprise differ only quantitatively in terms of their money-values.

The UN System of National Accounts (SNA), in which the measure of national income is GDP, corresponds to a commodity economy.¹³ For anything to count toward GDP, it has to be exchanged, that is, it has to exist principally *as a commodity*. As the mechanism of circulation and distribution came increasingly to be the market, then, China's system of national accounts was changed to match this. What GDP measures is a quantity of exchanges rather than a set of material products; it is the measure of the economy that corresponds to the universe of value and the commodity. At first, GDP was used only in those limited spheres of production that had been turned over to the market, while the MPS continued to be used for the bulk of the economy. But through the period 1985–1993 (there was some delay as the institutional capacity to operate it was put together), the two systems coexisted, the SNA's sphere being progressively widened until, in that last year, the MPS was abandoned in favor of the SNA system.¹⁴

And thus the entire social field of China, and its population, had again been given over to the commodity form, to the material particularity–general equivalent dyad, and to the set of class relations to which that form corresponds. A transformation that began its life as the inscription of a virtuality into the systems of planning at the center had thereby ramified itself into the entirety of social life. The population that in 1979 had been *virtually* given over to the commodity form and value now *really* was. Certainly, this transformation did not occur without resistance—the social movement of 1989 stands out as a stark instance of resistance—but I think it is possible to read the period 1978–93 as a single process of working out the implications, in terms of the organization of class relations in China, of a transformation of the logic of governing at work in the economic planning system.

In this period, various systems were devised to fit different contexts for the circulation of value through the economy, that is, its distribution between the state, enterprises, and workers, just as a number of different “responsibility systems” were experimented with. In the rural sector, for instance—which is where the coercive excesses of the early years of the one-child policy were largely concentrated—the mechanism that was supposed to generate this

constantly improving productivity was the family, through the household contract responsibility system (*jiating lianchan chengbao zerenzhi*). As director of the Economic Research Office of the SPC, Xue Muqiao was instrumental in the extension of this system throughout the rural sector after a period of experimenting with a variety of systems (Fewsmith 1994: 32). By 1983, 98 percent of communes had adopted it (Dalsimer and Nisonoff 1987: 587). Under this system, land and means of production were provided to families in connection with a quota of products that had to be sold to the state at state-determined prices. Anything produced in excess of the quota could be sold on the market, and “the family” (actually the head of the family) was given more decision-making power in terms of the allocation of its (his) labor-power. Given that more and more of the products of the agricultural sector were thereby being distributed through the market rather than through state channels, value would come to regulate the distribution of capital and the improvement of productivity to an ever-greater degree, and the rural family—now officially inscribed in the economy as a unit of accounting—was determined to be the most efficacious means of accomplishing this (Xue and China Development Research Foundation 2011: 67). Here, creating a situation in which families are *absolutely compelled* to increase productivity because of the discipline of marketization appears as freeing them to do so, as a relaxation of control. (And this is, after all, the basic trick of neoclassical economics.) A massive intervention thus appears as an end to intervention, which is how the impositions connected to the other policy that was to be accomplished through the family—the one-child policy—can *appear* to be paradoxical in relation to it.

Other techniques were deployed in other sectors to the same end, most importantly the “factory director responsibility system” (*changzhang zerenzhi*) in industry and the “economic responsibility system in industrial enterprises” (*gongye qiye jingji zerenzhi*) in the Special Economic Zones, and a variety of experimental profit retention systems calculated in a variety of ways were tried. (The household responsibility system should probably have been called the household director responsibility system [*jiazhang zerenzhi*]; this would make the parallelism clearer, and nobody could reasonably have imagined that families as productive units were workplace democracies.) But by 1983, the chief mechanism for distributing revenue to the state in

particular had become simply taxation of enterprise profits, where before it had been a combination of taxation in money, taxation in kind, and compulsory purchasing (Jackson 1984: 109).

It should be noted that both the household (director) responsibility system in agriculture and the factory director responsibility system in industry start from the presumption of a surplus of labor-power, the idea of which had had its first iteration in China in the 1930s through the work of *precisely the same economists* (though not only them) who made it the basis of planning in the 1980s (see, again, Xue 1937). Then, it had pertained specifically to the agricultural sector, “rural surplus labor-power,” because the industrial sector, undeveloped as it was (speaking of the sector as a whole rather than of any particular part of it), had not been organized in such a way that there could be “urban surplus labor-power.” It was (“ironically,” perhaps) precisely socialist transformation that produced the possibility of this idea. In fact, the greater discretionary powers granted to managers over the allocation of labor in the enterprise management reforms of the early 1980s were designed to address specifically “urban industrial surplus labor-power,” a situation apparently resulting from the fact that workers had claims on the revenues of enterprises beyond what their labor contributions necessarily corresponded to, and in which managers were not free to calibrate labor remuneration to production according to the sole criterion of efficiency.

But the variations in the implementation of this shift of accounting practices are secondary, for our purposes, to the fundamental shift according to which labor-power was inscribed in enterprise accounting according to its surplus or scarcity and productivity, the measure of which is its value. With regard to the criterion of efficiency, labor-power would have to be distributed according to its real value against an enterprise’s capital, which would be impossible to calculate unless prices—the fixing of which was considered an essential element of accumulation in the distribution of goods and products in a system not based on commodity exchange—could be made to converge with values. The social and political consequences of price reforms in the years surrounding 1989 have been ably described in several sources (Wang 2009: 19–66, Chuang 2019: 148–49, Weber 2021: 225–28,¹⁵ and others). Those reforms were, within the theoretical framework of Chinese development economics, efforts to conform prices to values, to “correct”

prices, and to do so by submitting production to the value mechanism via the market system.¹⁶

Of course, economists will (and did) argue that the population and means of production “really” did have and obviously must have had value all along, by virtue of the fact that they could come to have value simply by being accounted for, by a simple shift from one method of accounting to another. But for our purposes, that shift makes all the difference, since the object here is less a true description of economic phenomena “in themselves,” whatever that means, than it is to grasp how governing is oriented and structured by the ways in which phenomena are related to one another. It is not a shift from “having value but that value not being recognized” to “having recognized value.” It is a shift from not having value to having it, a shift that is affected not by any change whatsoever in the materials themselves, but rather by their inscription in a system of general exchangeability. If they are not accounted for, then as far as the governmental practices that proceed from their values are concerned, they are simply null.

A good deal of the question about the possibility of biopolitics thus depends on the seemingly unrelated and obscure problem of what is “on the books.” Henceforth in China, the population would once again be governed *as if it were a commodity*, even if existing forms of enterprise management and relations of production meant that it was not yet *effectively* a commodity. The reforms gave enterprise managers and “families” more power over the allocation of labor-power based on calculations of productivity that were made possible by the shift to capital profit rate accounting. The problem of surplus labor-power relative to capital (which is not the same thing as “surplus labor”) thereby suddenly reemerged as a central problem that governing had to solve. But this introduced into Chinese governing a contradiction between how the population was grasped by the apparatus of planning (as labor-power) and how it had been positioned in relation to the means of production by the transformations of the 1950s. The eventual resolution of this contradiction—decisively in favor of the population as the labor-power of a national enterprise—is what is referred to as dismantling the “iron rice bowl” (*ie fanwan*) (Xue, 1980: 25).¹⁷ The return to calculating profit relative to capital entails a return to the wage, at first virtually (for accounting and distribution purposes), but eventually really, as management and labor as

functions gradually ramify themselves into owners and wage laborers. The articulation of this process throughout the economic management apparatus in China could thus, in a sense, only result in the concrete separation of the population as the bearers of labor-power from the means of production as capital.

Throughout this period, wages in many sectors certainly increased. This was precisely a function of a shift toward development through the market rather than through planned distribution, which entails a greater and greater approximation of wages to the value of labor-power. As the wage form of the distribution of the social product expands in importance, distribution through other means diminishes. Thus, all the time that wages were increasing, and in exactly the same measure that they converged with the value of the labor-power they represented, the radical separation of the people whose wages they were from the capital their labor-power was exchanged against was being prepared. The massive waves of privatization in the early 1990s—just as the MPS was being decisively replaced by the SNA—are only the most extreme example of this (Andreas 2010: 69–70).

The one-child policy, enterprise management reforms, and the household contract responsibility system, then, belong to the same governmental logic. What links them together as part of a single transformation at the level of a logic of governing is the reinscription of the value matrix in the field of governmental calculation. The interface of the population, production, and the state, here, is value. The shift from cost-profit to capital-profit accounting dramatically expanded the universe of value in China, the universe in which the concrete is governed by means of the abstract, the universe of the *quantitative*, and thereby of the objective. And it was precisely as a quantitative and objective analysis that the kind of populationism represented by the one-child policy was inserted into a socialist governmental project (Song and Li 1980). Thus, the true matrix of intelligibility of the one-child policy is not the logic of authoritarianism or of an expansive state, or the prestige of technoscience, but the resubsumption of the population into the category of value. The one-child policy made sense because it was again possible to grasp and govern the population in *exactly* the same way that one grasps and governs an economy, because the objects of practices of governing in both areas were formally identical.

This is not to suggest that economic policy in the Maoist period was unconcerned with accumulation. But what did not exist during the Maoist period was the notion of an imminent relationship by way of an isomorphism between the population as capital and capital proper. Herein, strictly speaking, lies the socialist developmentalist regime's "anti-Malthusianism." For all the population management that obviously took place in the socialist developmentalist period, this aspect was missing, since the *hukou* system was essentially a police apparatus, not a demographic apparatus in any technical sense. Using population registration to keep track of where people are, to determine their entitlements to state benefits, and to prevent them from moving is not the same as using it to determine fluctuations in a natural-scientific field, or being able to induce effects at the level of an economy by means of adjustments to the *materia*, the abstract "substance," of the population. As far as planning and accounting were concerned, the universe of the commodity, the market, and value—the universe of things subjected to the logic of economization (reducing inputs to expand outputs and so on)—was composed of far fewer things than it would be under the reforms, and hence the form of governing defined by the operation of value could get a hold on far less of Chinese social life.

The function of the state in distributing this governmental logic is clearly very different here than it was in the Republican period, when this logic was first articulated. In the Chinese case, as in others, the successful implantation of biopolitical forms of governing required a strong state—or at least a state without internal and external competitors—but that does not mean that what was being implanted has a "statist" logic. Neither does it mean that the title or name of the state determines the nature of what is installed: just because a "socialist" state does it does not mean it is socialist. The starting point for the reform period, then, is the combination of a return to forms of governing and governmental imperatives whose first iteration in China occurred in the 1920s and 1930s, on the one hand, and the accumulation of state capacity that occurred during the first decades of the PRC, on the other. The one-child policy is *absolutely continuous* with the economic reforms of the industrial and agricultural sectors. It is a function of a capitalist governmentality, one to which a socialist state apparatus is *suborned* in the process of all the campaigns that carried it out. Furthermore, there

is no discontinuity, at the level of the logic of governing, between the early, “bad” phases of population management in the early reform period and their later development into a relative emphasis on “quality” and “comprehensive management.”

In certain phases of the socialist developmentalist period, at least, it was determined that accumulation had to occur in the context of the ongoing development or maintenance of socialist relations of production. Believing, apparently, that socialist relations of production had been achieved, and could not be undone—it is not necessary to the present argument to question their sincerity in “capitalist roader” terms—the framers of the reform period policies implemented a series of measures and a field of governability that, precisely, undid them in the name of a national-economic project framed along neoclassical lines. After 1978, as a result of the changes discussed here, and regardless of the intentions of the people involved and the Marxian form of their discourse, the Chinese state, now conceived as a means to accomplish a *nationalist* project (rather than an internationalist one), did not “deploy” capital in an instrumental way to shore up or expand its own power. It was itself transformed into a machinery of economic optimization, an instrument of the capitalization of Chinese society, and of the regulated unleashing of the logic of capital into Chinese life. And with this change comes the Chinese population again, in a form that it did not and could not have possessed under a socialist developmentalist strategy.

The apparently obscure shift in accounting practices described above—which entails the production of the market system as its condition of intelligibility—is, in fact, the starting point for *two* profound transformations in Chinese society: on the one hand, the transformation of the system of class relations and, on the other hand, the development of the “comprehensive management” of the population whose first primitive form was the one-child policy that is a major part of the apparatus by which the Chinese state seeks to manage the transformation of class relations issuing from the same source and its manifold consequences.

Notes

- 1 Such mathematical operations were scale-independent and could be performed on any population whatever, from a family to a village to a province to a country to the entire world.
- 2 The most comprehensive treatments of this are Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005; White 2006; Greenhalgh 2010.
- 3 A similar claim is made in regard to other areas of political and governmental practice in Karl 2017.
- 4 The system was extended nationwide in 1958. On the origins, development, and complex vicissitudes of the *hukou* system in the period we are concerned with here, the various and important ways in which it structures and organizes Chinese society, and its function in terms of economic planning, see, among other works, Cheng and Selden 1994; Chan and Li 1999; Han 1999.
- 5 In the same period, Xu Dixin, together with Wu Chengming (1917–2011), began compiling the massive and influential *Zhongguo zibenzhuyi fazhanshi* (*History of Capitalist Development in China*) (Xu and Wu [1985] 2007), which was the occasion of a great deal of historiographic debate in a number of subfields in Chinese history. The “sprouts of capitalism” thesis advanced therein still influences debates in Chinese economic history.
- 6 Much (but not all) of Marx’s and Engels’s critique of the category of population was, naturally enough, directed at Malthus. See especially *Capital I*, chap. 25 (“The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation”) and *Theories of Surplus Value*, chap. 19 (“Thomas Robert Malthus”). Engels called Malthus’s theory “an open declaration of war . . . upon the proletariat” ([1845] 1892: 284).
- 7 On this absence of a specifically socialist governmentality, see Foucault 2008: 93–94.
- 8 Material useful for an understanding of this process can be found in Perkins 1966; Nolan 1988; and especially Chuang 2016.
- 9 See, for instance, Dong 1983.
- 10 For a good deal more on the work and careers of these two figures, see Ghosh 2020.
- 11 For Chen’s work produced in connection with this Institute, see Chen Hansheng 1934; see also Chen Da 1935. For Feng Hefa, see Feng 1931, 1936.
- 12 Soon afterward, one also finds reevaluations of Malthus in the journal. See Zhang 1979.
- 13 The current complete manual of this system, devised by the European Commission, the IMF, the OECD, the World Bank, and the UN, is available at unstats.un.org/unsd/nationalaccount/docs/SNA2008.pdf. See European Commission et al. 2008. For its adoption in China, see Xu X. 2009: 447–50.
- 14 “The establishment of GDP estimation [starting in 1985] marks the start of the transition of CSNA [China’s System of National Accounts] from the MPS to the SNA. The transition progressed gradually. In the early years of transition, NMP (i.e., national income in the MPS) was still the core indicator, while the GDP played a supplementary role and was used

- mainly to show the production outcomes of the nonmaterial services. Toward the end of this period, GDP had evolved into a core indicator in CSNA, while NMP became an indicator that was used mainly to compare with the historical data. In 1993, the abandonment of the MPS marked the end of the CSNA transition from the MPS to the SNA" (Xu X. 2009: 447).
- 15 Weber 2021 provides an excellent history of the dual-track price system that operated in the 1980s as the institutional framework of the price reform process.
 - 16 Price reform was stated to be a key element of "setting up the work of the Plan on the basis of commodity exchange and the law of value" by the CPC Thirteenth Central Committee in 1984. See Xue and China Development Research Foundation 2011: 131; "Communiqué" 1984.
 - 17 On labor and enterprise reforms in the urban industrial sector, see, among other works, Rofel, 1989; Naughton, 1995; Yee, 2006.

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