

Malthusian Nightmares



“Since the time of Commodore Perry,” wrote Shidzue Ishimoto, “no American has created a greater sensation in the land of the Mikado than Margaret Sanger.” The author was quite serious. When Perry aroused Japan from its timeless isolation, he catapulted a feudal, slow-paced society, devoted to cherry blossoms and tea ceremonies, into the twentieth century. Huge smokestacks were soon belching soot into clear skies, factory whistles shattered the peace and even the benign gifts of the West, such as modern sanitation and a more humane outlook, had increased the nation’s foremost problem.

In 1853 when Perry first called, the empire counted some 26 million people, but in the next seventy years the once stable population had more than doubled. True to the laws of Malthus, the figures increased in terrifying geometric ratio. By the early twenties a country smaller than California had half as many people as the whole United States. Furthermore, since only a sixth of the area could be cultivated, the lowlands reached a density of 2,000 persons a square mile, four times higher than that of the other industrial island, Great Britain.

Every inch of soil was used, with hillsides laboriously terraced for rice paddies. There was no space for lawns, parks, or playgrounds and, to the terror of motorists, youngsters played all day in the streets. Children were everywhere. Fathers carried babies in their arms, mothers and the older boys and girls had them strapped to their backs. Sometimes small children carried smaller

ones It was a land of one-story houses, Margaret observed, but two-story children Even in baseball, boys played with infants on their backs

Small farmers could scarcely feed their own families, and the once self-sufficient nation was importing vast amounts of food This had to be paid for by manufactured exports, produced in large part by cheap female labor At least parents might profit from their daughters by contracting them out for several years at a time Margaret visited some of the cotton mills, including the largest which compared favorably in most ways with Western ones However, during the First World War, protective legislation had been suspended and these mills still required twelve hour shifts In a silk factory she saw seven hundred girls from ten years up twirling the threads from cocoons and catching them on spindles Stunted little creatures, they worked from dawn to dusk in a building without any ventilation so that the air would remain suitably hot and moist for the silk It was no idle threat when parents talked of selling their daughters to the mills

Conditions in the mines, Shidzue said, were worse Babies were born without love and brought up without care Half-naked men, women, and children worked together underground, competing with the forced labor prisoners Throughout the country man was waging a bitter race to keep his productive forces equal to his reproductive ones

Thoughtful Japanese knew that there were only three alternatives They could let living standards drop still further, although for millions this would be disastrous They could ship the excess people elsewhere, although this would be hard without colonies and with the United States and Australia barring them by exclusion acts Nevertheless, for the military, territorial expansion was the only honorable solution Finally, they could adopt a program to curtail the birth rate

If Perry's coming had triggered the events causing the population explosion, Shidzue believed that Margaret Sanger might launch the peaceful solution When Shidzue wrote her book a dozen years later, the visit still seemed like the passage of a brilliant comet, leaving a luminous trail of incalculable value No

woman, foreign or native, had ever been so well received. Margaret's modest manner had disarmed her listeners as she presented facts never before discussed in Japan.

Besides her thirteen lectures, Margaret gave an almost incredible number of interviews (estimated as five hundred), most of them attended by more than one reporter. In addition to her enormous daily press coverage, 81 of the 101 monthly magazines carried featured articles on birth control.

The Kaizo set up a permanent birth control committee, with its first project the publication of a Japanese edition of *Family Limitation*. Margaret also stimulated a committee among the graduates of the Imperial University Medical College. This group sent a member to Europe to investigate contraceptive practices. In the next years the general movement, under the steady guidance of Shudzue, continued to grow.

The Japanese interlude was delightful for Grant, now a tall young male, always the center of attention. Before he landed, he was expert with chopsticks and soon outdid his hosts in courtesies, in fact, he always bowed three times before answering his mother. The latter also found her reception wonderful, but so exhausting that she briefly succumbed to pneumonia. Finally, the two Sangers, accompanied by Noah Slee, sailed off together in April through the beautiful Sea of Japan. Margaret had to be in London by July, but in the intervening weeks she would often tell her story, and all three were to visit other parts of the Orient, starting with Korea.

Margaret wrote extensively about this trip in her *Autobiography*, a vivid record of what she saw and felt. The origin of the American Indian was still disputed, but the travelers were struck by the familiar look of the coolies. Their reddish skin, ragged black hair, the long pipes that they smoked, and the way they carried burdens on their backs should have fortified the theory of the Bering Straits crossing to Alaska.

At Seoul, Margaret spoke to an audience of missionaries, doctors, bankers, and businessmen to whom her cause came as a "sparkling new theory," unmarred by any prejudice. Korea reinforced her chief impression of Asia—the cheapness of life. In a silk factory, little girls, "almost like babies," crouched over large pots

to lift the cocoons out of boiling water. The Japanese superintendent explained that an adult's fingers were not sufficiently sensitive, but he denied that the children's tender fingers could be hurt.

In China, all of their senses were assailed by the dust, the mingling odors of garlic, opium, incense, and sewage, the constant beat of drums and chanting from Buddhist temples, and the groans and pleas of beggars. Not until they saw China's beggars did they know how filthy human beings could be. But their hearts went out to the rickshaw boys. In Japan, they had disliked man-powered transportation, although the runners had been sturdy. Here they were half-starved, half-naked youngsters with varicose veins and other ailments. When one of their regular boys returned after a few days absence, Margaret recognized his unhealed smallpox scabs and sent him home. Against this background, however, she could not concentrate on the beauties of the Temple of Heaven and the Ming tombs. The oldest civilization was indifferent to its children.

Margaret contrasted Marco Polo's description of fifteenth-century Cathay, "a pleasant haven of silks, spices and fine manners." Yet China had always been unique among the great nations in putting a permanent mark of subjection on its privileged ladies. As she watched three women holding each other up as they tottered along together, she surmised that a bound foot kept a wife from running away. The binding, she learned, began when the child was three, and the torture continued for two years. Sometimes the bones were broken and the mother slept with a switch beside her to beat the little girl when her cries disturbed the family. In the big cities, happily, the custom was dying out.

In Shanghai, once more escorted by a missionary and no doubt with Noah, whom she never mentions on the tour, Margaret visited another red-light district. In open doorways stood the vividly dressed entertainers, like colorful posters against a drab background. Margaret talked to some of the singsong girls, of whom Shanghai boasted a hundred thousand. Sold as infants and brought up in the trade, many belonged completely to their buyers. Some were only ten years old. If they tried to run away, they might have a leg broken. Occasionally they were rented out for a month or so

to foreigners Margaret's gloom deepened as she watched American sailors bargaining for the bodies of these children

On the whole, she did not like the American image in China She saw her countrymen living in the pampered international settlements with more luxuries than they ever had at home and yet boasting of how little they paid their servants In the United States they might have been humane citizens, here they were oblivious to native hardships The infinite misery of China eroded one's conscience

The missionaries of course were exceptions, but some of their efforts seemed misguided Because of the slim margin of subsistence, even success in cutting infanticide raised new problems When parents spared an infant girl, they often sold another to a brothel, and, indeed, the recent increase in singsong girls exactly paralleled the decrease in infanticide

Americans gave generously to Chinese flood and famine relief, but these calamities were nature's way of bringing the population into balance with the food supply Only a widespread birth control program would correct the basic problem Indeed, China was the terrible example of the struggle that Malthus had described Surrounded by bestial conditions, this ancient cradle of wisdom and the arts was spawning its worst elements In her *Autobiography*, Margaret describes a scene of ultimate degradation

"Once while a missionary was guiding me through the Chinese City [Shanghai], we noted a crowd, children included, gathered in curiosity about a leper woman She was on the ground, sighing and breathing heavily Nobody offered to help her 'Maybe she's dying,' said my companion Just then the woman gave a fearful groan and took a baby from under her rags She knew what to do, manipulated her thighs and abdomen, got the afterbirth, bit the cord with her teeth, put the baby aside, turned over and rested No trace of emotion showed on the faces of the watchers "

If this had been all she saw, it would have been unbearable, but Margaret also experienced the best of China Dr Hu Shih, still young, but home from Cornell and Harvard and already recognized as an intellectual leader, as well as a delightful human being, arranged her happiest hours These included a banquet given in

her honor by the chancellor of Peking University and a lecture to two thousand students. This talk created such excitement that within twenty-four hours *Family Limitation* had been translated into Chinese. Five thousand printed copies were distributed. A year later she was still hearing aftereffects of the meeting.

From Hong Kong the travelers started their long journey through the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, and up the Red Sea. By the time they reached Shepherd's Hotel in Cairo, Grant had come down with a bad case of dysentery and fever. For three nights a Western-trained doctor stayed with him, but could not reduce the temperature.

Meanwhile, a fortune teller announced an imminent death at Shepherd's. This inspired a group of natives to keep vigil on their prayer rugs outside of Grant's door. His mother, always susceptible to portents and in this case feeling guilty for having brought Grant with her over the protests of his headmaster, was terribly shaken. Watching her son grow weaker, as she had once watched Peggy, she thought that she was losing another child.

On the fourth morning, when the doctor left for his office, the thermometer was still at 104. Then Margaret took over. She called for a dishpan of ice and bathed her son in frosty water. At once the temperature dropped. In two hours the fever was gone and Grant was sleeping peacefully.

Grant's improvement was steady, but the time came for his mother to be in London, which was not a good place to convalesce. Noah then performed his finest service, taking the boy to Switzerland and a rapid recovery.

Grant, however, was through with sightseeing. He had been a cheerful, interested young traveler, but he had seen more than he could assimilate. As he later said, he felt as though he had been dragged around the world at the tail of a typhoon. Now all he wanted was to be home with his contemporaries. Understanding, his mother shipped him back to friends at a boys' camp in the Pocomos. Nevertheless, neither regretted the trip. Grant managed to keep abreast of his class, with a mind enriched by world travel.