

Zhongwei Zhao and Adrian C. Hayes (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Asian Demography*. (London: Routledge, 2018). 550 p. ISBN 9780415659901.

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Asia is the largest and most populous continent, home to a great diversity of populations living in a variety of social, economic and cultural contexts. This handbook is the first of its kind to provide a comprehensive study of population change across the whole of Asia on subjects such as mortality, fertility, marriage, migration, population ageing, son preference, human capital and family and household composition. The large number of chapters (28 in total) makes it impossible to discuss all the contributions this volume makes to the field, but it is evident that there are many. First of all, it provides a detailed analysis on the causes and consequences of the population changes underway in Asia. Secondly, because the chapters are written by leading experts in the field, the latest findings are included, thereby providing a true up-to-date overview for the years to come. Lastly, the introduction and conclusion of the volume sum up what can be learned from all the contributions and offer advice on what the future of Asian populations might look like. Such an overview – which situates each individual chapter within a broader picture – is often missing in volumes of this kind with such a variety of authors, and makes this volume feel truly complete and accessible for a wide audience.

Historians will not be disappointed by this volume, since many authors have an eye for developments over time and describe population change in Asia since the mid-twentieth century. For example, in chapter 5, Gietel-Basten discusses the heterogeneous fertility decline in Asia by dividing the group into ‘demographic forerunners’, ‘slow fallers’ and ‘rapid fallers still in transition’ in the twentieth century. By using this alternative approach, he tries to do justice to the heterogeneity of fertility declines that can also be found within regions. Yet some chapters cover a shorter time period, when taking a longer time period would be preferable in order to truly understand specific demographic transitions. For example, chapter 10 by You, Hug and Hill on child mortality focuses on the period after 1970, with most emphasis given to the period after 1990. Taking a longer view would help the reader to understand these kinds of long term demographic processes better, as well as the causes underlying them. Nevertheless, the gaps left by some authors are filled in by others. For instance, when Choe discusses Asia’s demographic transition during the period 1950-2010 in chapter 21, she takes a longer time period and discusses how mortality and fertility transitions varied considerably across regions and why this is so. In particular, the examples of mortality and fertility transitions given are enlightening as it demonstrates how certain factors interact, causing some to become stronger or weaker in a specific historical context.

Two chapters are of special interest to historians, one dedicated specifically to the historical development of population research in Asia and one on Asian historical demographic research. McDonald describes in chapter 3 how population research and training centres emerged and received funding from governmental and philanthropic organizations in the twentieth century. Especially interesting to note are the role and involvement of Western and international agencies in setting up or developing institutions for the study of populations in Asia. In chapter 4, Campbell and Kurosu describe the most important developments and results of demographic studies that are investigating the period before the 1950s. It offers a good overview of the most important topics and sources in the field of Asian historical demography. For instance, the debate over why Chinese fertility is relatively low is explained clearly by describing the two competing theories: that Chinese couples deliberately limited fertility, or that it is an unintended by-product of other factors such as malnutrition. Moreover, this chapter also provides some reflection on what historical demographers should study in the future: 'to emphasize comparisons within the continent, and move away from the monographic studies of single countries or regions and broad comparisons between Asia and the West that have dominated work so far' (p. 46). By doing so, specific demographic behaviour can be more easily linked to particular features of economic, social and cultural contexts.

The disadvantage of trying to analyse such a great variety of topics in a large and diverse set of contexts is that many contributions cannot really investigate in depth the developments they describe. In other words, most chapters are in essence very descriptive and are only able to provide broad explanations for the trends observed. Despite this disadvantage, it is clear that the authors are aware of this problem and try to be as specific as possible in the limited number of pages available. For example, data quality and the unit of analysis being local, regional or national are often discussed and problematized. Moreover, many chapters include excellent references and notes which allow the reader to continue reading on subjects they are interested in. All in all, this volume is an excellent starting point for anyone interested in Asian demography for two reasons. On the one hand, the volume provides a clear overview and points to many relevant questions that still remain to be investigated further. On the other, the volume demonstrates that understanding Asian demography is important for everyone, since, despite not being one of the seventeen *Sustainable Developmental Goals*, Asian demography is clearly connected to all of these goals.

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