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Tales of Fertility: Reproductive Narratives in Late Imperial Medical Cases

In *The Woman Beneath the Skin*, widely considered a conceptual milestone in the history of medicine, Barbara Duden complained that the techniques of historical demography “silence the body”:

“To social historians of my generation historical demography has become a primary source of statements about body-mediated phenomena [in which] the characteristics of the body within a statistical population are [...] perceived as *probable attributes of an object*: as rates of birth, morbidity, reproduction, and mortality.”¹

In recent years demographic historians of China have been striving to recapture the *demographic mentalities* of the people whose individual births and marriages, pregnancies and deaths coalesced into the grand ebbs and flows of population change that they seek to trace and to explain. “Eventually we will understand not just how frequently individuals marry and give birth, but why.”² Is this optimism justified?

The new demographic history of China is part of a broader revisionist project. Earlier Malthusian interpretations held that in contrast to early modern Europe, where families operated deliberate preventive checks (such as late marriage) to reduce the number of children women bore, thus increasing the resources available to individual offspring in an increasingly competitive society, in imperial China population growth was limited only by the positive check of death. There was a cultural explanation, a rationality, underlying this statistical pattern, but it was distinctly non-modern: namely, families were driven by the imperatives of patrilineal descent to have as many sons as possible.³ However,

1 Barbara Duden, *The Woman Beneath the Skin: A Doctor's Patients in Eighteenth Century Germany* (Cambridge, MA, 1991), p. 192, emphasis added.

2 William Lavelly, James Lee, and Wang Feng, Chinese demography. *Journal of Asian Studies* 49 (1990): 807–834, here p. 818.

3 This view is still current among leading demographers in China; see James Lee, Cameron Camp-