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## Wombs of Empire

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# Wombs of Empire: Population Discourses and Biopolitics in Modern Japan

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*Wombs of Empire: Population Discourses and Biopolitics in Modern Japan*

Sujin Lee

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*Wombs of Empire* presents a comprehensive exploration of the biopolitics and governmentality of Japanese population discourses surrounding *jinkō mondai* (population problem). It reveals complicated connections to Japan's reconstruction of modernity and the remodelling of motherhood. Adopting the concept of population discourses, Sujin Lee contends that population transcends its role as merely an object of policies and, instead, becomes a focal point for politics aimed at reshaping modernity by reorganising society on a biological basis. Lee traces the concept of a 'biopolitical state' by underscoring the state's focus on enhancing the population's size and health by incorporating population discourses into state practices. Such practices highlight the significant role of eugenics and racial hygiene in defining racial concepts and normalising state interventions on populations. Most intriguingly, Lee reveals the intertwined nature of welfare and warfare, highlighting the crucial influence of population discourses on societal and political structures during the twentieth century. Lee's analysis identifies a critical shift in governance and societal organisation. Employing feminist and Foucauldian lenses, Lee challenges traditional views of motherhood and population governance. She illustrates how societal norms, governmental actions and modern scientific understandings have collectively sought to control and utilise women's reproductive capabilities, both quantitatively and qualitatively, for the advancement of a biopolitical state.

Chapter One explores the origins and development of discourses surrounding population in the context of interwar Japan and its colonial empire. Situating discussions about reproduction, capitalism and the population problem within a broad historiography of Japanese neo-Malthusianism and Marxist socialism, Lee identifies the two groups' divergent approaches towards birth control as a utopian remedy. But what happens when feminism ventures into the terrain of utopian dreams conjured up by neo-Malthusians and leftists? The answer lies in Chapter Two, which focuses on two prominent feminists of the interwar period. Lee examines Ishimoto Shizue and Yamakawa Kikue's varied interpretations of the concept of 'voluntary motherhood'. Ishimoto framed motherhood through ethno-nationalist and eugenic feminist lenses, narrowing women's roles to merely maternal ones for political gains while offering a form of limited citizenship characterised by racial and gender roles. In contrast, Yamakawa saw 'voluntary motherhood' as a means to resist and navigate the oppression of capitalism and patriarchy.

Shifting focus, Chapter Three explores the crucial role that the intelligentsia played in formulating population policies grounded in social science. The expansive reach of this 'population science' (72) not only introduced a new approach to the rational governance of the population but also sparked 'an epistemological turn' (73) that significantly contributed to the governmentalisation of the state and the institutionalisation of population governance. The following chapter examines the development of a biopolitical state in Japan, focusing on its navigation through the temporal divides between the interwar and wartime periods. This analysis uncovers Japan's efforts to establish a state apparatus that engaged simultaneously in warfare and welfare promotion. Lee refers to this dual-functioning entity as 'a biopolitical state'. Building upon the discussion of the biopolitical state, Chapter Five revisits the entrenched ideology of women's reproductive roles encapsulated in the 'good wife, wise mother' concept and links it to wartime actions that aimed to protect women biologically and eugenically. This discussion focuses on the interaction between a masculine, misogynistic empire and women's bodies—an interaction that typically manifests in the delineation of women's bodies into two distinct categories: 'fertile wombs' (140) and 'exploitable vaginas' (154) designated for reproduction and sexual exploitation, respectively. In the end, Lee argues that women were instrumentalised to serve masculine, misogynistic purposes in the interest of a 'nation-empire'.

Michel Foucault's theories of biopolitics and governmentality are fundamental to Lee's analysis of Japanese population policies during the interwar and wartime periods. Ann Laura Stoler, however, has critiqued Foucault for neglecting empire and colonialism in his framework, highlighting his oversight of the colonial other due to a lack of specialisation. While the application of Foucault's concepts to the Japanese Empire is not unprecedented, Lee's work distinguishes itself through a rigorous, robust and careful engagement with Foucault's theories. In doing so, the limitations identified in Foucault's theorisation are effectively addressed. Indeed, Lee is a thoughtful and meticulous writer in many respects. This reader, in particular, appreciates her succinct and careful recapitulation of themes, which serve as helpful reminders in each new chapter. While these recaps are as helpful, some readers may find that they obstruct the flow of new information.

This minor critique aside, *Wombs of Empire* is a compelling and insightful examination of Japan's biopolitical and biological endeavours, weaving together theoretical rigour with historical depth. It both nests within, and expands upon, existing scholarship, such as the work of Aya Homei and Sidney Xu Lu. Its long-term contribution to understanding the complex interplay of gender, race, class, imperialism, colonialism and the biopolitical state in the Japanese Empire will be profound. Lee not only enriches our understanding of Japan's past but also invites readers to reflect on the broader implications of biopolitical governance and governmentality, and their enduring relevance in contemporary discussions about population and statehood. *Wombs of Empire* is, beyond question, a welcome addition to the fields of empire studies and population policies studies at large.

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