

Response to “China’s population is shrinking and its economy is losing ground” (“Double dip” in the print edition)

From *The Economist*

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The article extensively quotes Li Qiang, the Prime Minister of China and former head of the Chinese Communist Party in Shanghai. Given his political position and audience, in this case the World Economic Forum in Davos, it is unsurprising to discover his use of numbers and statistics in a manner described in Joel Best’s excerpt from “Damned Lies and Statistics.” In particular, Qiang has strong incentives to show economic data and COVID death rates as better than they likely are. Qiang and the government of China treat those who are interested in their economic data as innumerate even in the instance that they are not. Numbers provided by China as social statistics are likely biased toward or even fraudulently supportive of the Chinese government.

According to Best, social statistics have two purposes. First, the public has a genuine interest in accurate descriptions of society. In the case of this *Economist* article, the magazine writers and editors are likely more numerate than the general population. Additionally, they have a stronger incentive to publish accurate summaries of society through statistical models than does Li Qiang. This claim is reasonable, if unproven here, based on the long history of *The Economist* magazine and its reputation. The article compares the official Chinese figures with the magazine’s economic models and provides a plausible explanation for excess deaths in China by showing that official COVID death statistics very likely underreported the real toll. *The Economist’s* article thereby uses social statistics in accordance with our causal theory that social statistics can be published to provide an objective and accurate description of society. The second purpose of statistics, according to Best, is to supply ammunition for political struggles. Qiang appears, according to *The Economist*, to be engaged in this second, hidden purpose. Qiang, and by extension the Chinese government, has a strong interest in showing the world that China’s COVID and economic policies have been effective. By appearing competent in the face of a global pandemic and economic difficulties, the Chinese government is able to project strength to its own people and the world.

Assuming innumeracy, while often useful, has its limits. When numerate people are willing to examine statistics closely, they shine a light on the hidden purpose of social statistics and uncover previously undisclosed biases. Qiang likely knows that numerate people will reject his statistics, but part of the political process, in Britain and the US as well as China, is to simply repeat incorrect or biased information to a large enough innumerate audience so accurate descriptions appear as noise rather than signal. This political tactic, while unsubtle, is often effective enough to change minds and sway elections.

One final thought is that I have engaged in an amount of innumeracy in responding to this article. I have formed an opinion based on social statistics provided by two parties. I believe one

party to be the experts at *The Economist* and that they are both competent and interested in providing an accurate description of Chinese society's economic and physical health. I've also supposed that the Chinese government is reporting inaccurate numbers based on their incentives to project strength. Critically, however, I have not developed my own economic models or even checked the data and methods used by *The Economist*. While I believe numeracy to be important, I also believe that, in this case, rational ignorance is acceptable given *The Economist's* reputation. However, a more numerate world might rebuke my position and encourage me to dig deeper. In that vein, *The Economist* should link to its model, data, and conclusions from the article in the interest of transparency.