

FLORIAN COULMAS, HARALD CONRAD, ANNETTE SCHAD-SEIFERT, AND
GABRIELE VOGT (EDS.)

The Demographic Challenge: A Handbook about Japan

Leiden: Brill, 2008. xix + 1199 p. €199.00.

This thick handbook, its editors declare, “provides an exhaustive description of Japan’s demographic change and its implications in a way that reveals both the commonalities Japan shares with other advanced industrialised countries and the differences that set it apart.” The change in question—the demographic challenge of the title—is rapid population aging, resulting from low fertility (1.25 in 2005) and low and still-declining old-age mortality. By 2050, Japan’s median age is forecast to reach 57 years, with 40 percent of the population aged 65 or over. The exhaustiveness of the description is displayed in 63 chapters, covering five areas: demographic fundamentals, and social, cultural, political, and economic aspects of population aging. The rich content beyond straightforward demography can be illustrated by the section on cultural factors, where chapters explore the effects of aging on ancestor veneration, language change, images and themes of age in literature, transmission of traditional skills, tourism for the aged, and changing leisure pursuits, among other topics. The economic section covers the microeconomics of aging—effects on household savings, labor participation, consumer behavior, and fertility—and the pressing macroeconomic issues of social security and intergenerational equity. The political section treats various areas of public policy. Surfacing from time to time in the volume is the question of immigration. Unlike Europe with a similarly aging population, Japan has permitted only a trickle of immigrants. As of 2005 there were about 2 million registered foreigners in the country (1.6 percent of the population), with another 200,000 or so undocumented. Even these modest numbers include many persons born in Japan but denied citizenship under the *ius sanguinis* principle. Without a substantial (and implausible) immigration offset to natural decrease, the country thus faces a dramatic drop in numbers. The situation is neatly illustrated by an *Asahi Shimbun* chart showing the population in 1900, 2000, and, under present trends, 2100: 44 million, 127 million, 41 million. An illuminating chapter on “transcultural society,” however, suggests the likelihood of a somewhat more immigrant-friendly future, finding emerging signs of acceptance of ethnic diversity—“a de-emphasis on homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness in Japanese society today.” About half the handbook’s contributors are Japanese; many of the others live in Japan. The editors are German scholars in the field of Japanese studies. Author and detailed subject indexes.—G.McN.