第3種郵便物認可

The challenges of an aging society

POPULATION DECLINE AND AGEING IN JAPAN: THE SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES by Florian Coulmas. Routledge: London, 2007, 167 pp., $150 (cloth)

Reviewed by

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Florian Coulmas, a longtime contributor to the Japan Times and director of the German Institute for Japanese Studies in Tokyo, packs a lot of information and insights into this slim and pricey volume. He describes Japan's post-WWI population dynamics and the relentless march toward a "hyper-aged society." He argues that social aging stems from urbanization, industrialization and modernization, and that it augurs tectonic social consequences.

Demographic pressures are forcing the government to, "face challenges concerning intergenerational fairness and social cohesion, a shrinking labor force and economic growth, pension funds and public fiscal sustainability, and a new relationship between the state and non-state organizations and their involvement in education, care-giving and other social services. "Japanese, with good reason, are worried about how to maintain their standard of living in a hyper-aged society while also striking a balance on social security that does not overly burden the young, stifle the economy or incur too much hardship on the elderly."

A MAN helps his 93-year-old mother put on a cardigan at their Tokyo home. This kind of familial cohabitation and family support is declining in Japan as younger generations see individualism as more important than social tradition. REUTERS PHOTO

Coulmas stresses that Japan is not just getting older, but rather that an aging population is causing fundamental social transformations. Nowhere is this more evident than in intergenerational relations. Coulmas writes, "As the economic rationality of intergenerational co-residence becomes less compelling, a shift in emphasis from vertical inter-generational to horizontal intra-generational relations becomes apparent, the conjugal family making inroads at the expense of the traditional stem family."

Individualism, according to the author, is steadily gaining importance in Japan while mutual support among family members is declining. He writes, "It is a paradox of Japanese society in the early 21st century that ligatures inside and outside the family are weakening just as their importance is increasing for the only growing population group, the elderly. This paradox generates pressure for the professionalization of care for the frail and elderly."

Healthy senior citizens also face growing isolation as social networks erode with friends and neighbors dying or moving away. Senior citizens clubs are partially filling the void, but Coulmas sees more hope in age-integrated facilities — combining senior citizen centers with nursery schools — to create more opportunities for seniors to interact with children. Volunteerism also provides an opportunity for healthy elderly to forge new social networks. Remarkably, social networks have rapidly evolved from a private matter to a socialized concern involving initiatives from government, business and NPOs, a trend that seems likely to gain momentum.

Population aging also takes a toll at the other end of the spectrum as more families rear only one child. Coulmas points out that reducing family size is not just about the economic costs of child-rearing, but rather reflects changing lifestyle attitudes. The growing numbers of lonely children of contemporary Japan are consequence of these changes and in turn are creating new patterns of socialization and interaction. He writes, "Both the *otaku* and *hikkikomori* are children of this society." The only child syndrome means that more Japanese are growing up in pampered conditions with limited social skills. He adds, "Their face-to-face communication skills are often underdeveloped. Headphones clamped to their heads, they prefer to communicate with others by means of electronic devices."

The author holds out little hope for population decline countermeasures. He notes the connection between changing patterns of women's labor force participation and fertility, pointing out that as more women entered the paid formal sector it became more difficult to harmonize the demands of work and family. Consequently, women are choosing to avoid or postpone marriage and limit childbearing due to the opportunity costs. However, it is worth noting that some countries are experiencing a fertility recovery despite increases in women's labor force participation rates. In these countries, more family-friendly policies by the state and employers help women better balance work and family, and have helped to stem the fertility decline.

There does seem great scope in Japan to adopt more family-friendly policies and institutional arrangements. These must be comprehensive because, as Coulmas observes, "the combination of long working hours, increased job insecurity, anxiety about their own retirement benefits in future and care for elderly parents makes them opt against children." Unfortunately, current policy prescriptions are often contradictory and inconsistent, reflecting prevailing ambivalence.

Do immigrants hold the key to defusing Japan's demographic time-bomb? Coulmas limns the public discourse about immigration, noting widespread reluctance to open the gates despite rising needs. Rather than mass immigration, he sees more hope in a, "human resource development and circulation model" that would spare Japan the social costs and cultural clashes that have plagued other developed countries while addressing Japan's labor and skill shortages. However, he notes that immigration policy is not high on the government's agenda.

This is a timely and thoughtful examination of population aging in Japan, a nation already grappling with complex policy challenges that will eventually confront other developed nations. It may seem expensive at nearly $1 a page, but it is a rewarding investment and valuable barometer.

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