

POPULATION DECLINE AND AGEING IN JAPAN: The Social Consequences. By Florian Coulmas. London, New York: Routledge, 2007. viii, 168 pp. (Figures, tables.) US\$135.00, cloth. ISBN 0-415-40125-9.

Hardly a week goes by without a news story on “Japan’s demographic challenge,” whether it’s the aging society, the all-time low birth rate, or the era of depopulation. This challenge is certainly recognized in Japan but also in the US, as illustrated by the February 3, 2008 *Washington Post* article by Blaine Harden, “For Japan a Long, Slow Slide.” Harden cites a Japan Center of Economic Research report that by “2050 economic growth will be reduced to zero and seventy percent of the country’s labor force will have disappeared.” Reaction to this article by the *Washington Post*’s readers was interesting. Many applauded Japan for not adding to the population while remaining relatively prosperous and comfortable. Most readers did not seem to agree with the dire picture presented.

The timing, then, is perfect for Florian Coulmas’ comprehensive and clearly written account of Japanese population decline. It comes as the calm amidst the storm. (A long list of newspaper headlines preceding the first chapter underscores this pervading sense of crisis in the media.) Coulmas writes that the book’s purpose is not to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the various arguments on such topics as increasing longevity and declining birth rates but to present the public debate and media attention as “expressions of a super-ordinate discourse about Japanese society and how it changes. . . . What we are witnessing is not the same society gradually increasing its median age, but a social transformation on a large scale. Population ageing means social change. This is the theme of this book” (16).

Florian Coulmas, a sociolinguist, is the director of the German Institute of Japanese Studies in Tokyo. His first chapter lays out the topics to be discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters: “Chôkôrei shakai,” (Hyper-aged society

with more than 21 percent of the population over age 65); the birth-rate decline; the trend of late marriage; equal gender participation, the pension burden; and the widening economic gap in society. Examining these issues brings up a host of questions about Japan's future that also apply to other aging societies: Will it be possible to maintain the current high standard of living? How can social security payments continue without hurting the economy or the well-being of the elderly?

Chapter 2 makes the point that Japan is still a highly age-stratified society, with companies continuing to hire once a year and "sempai" and "kohai" relationships still important. However, relationships within the family continue to change. An interesting example of how economic and cultural norms interact is intergenerational co-residence, still considerably higher in Japan than in Western countries, but steadily declining. As more choices become available, co-residence becomes less compelling, not just for the young but for the elderly as well. While it was once accepted as natural that the middle aged would provide for the elderly, birthrate decline and increasing longevity is leading to a redefinition of family responsibility and a larger generation gap.

These social changes are most striking in chapters 4 and 5, which discuss gender-related issues in causes of fertility decline and women and men at work. By 2003, 48 percent of women and 43 percent of men were in favour of a family model based on conjugal cooperation as opposed to gender-specific task division, more than double what it was in 1973. Coulmas also notes that there is strong support for economic assistance to boost the birth rate but that patchwork measures don't work and a more comprehensive reconstruction of Japanese society is inevitable. Women are now competing with men in the work force in greater numbers, but career patterns and wage disparity underline a strong gender bias.

Other chapters examine the important issues of pensions, end of life measures, and government expenditures. The fact that expenditure on health care for the elderly is 12 times the amount allotted to family allowance is attributed not to the efforts of interest groups but to politicians focusing on the next election. The pros and cons of immigration policy, often seen as the solution to the aging work force, are well covered in chapter 11.

The final chapter is particularly worthwhile as it sums up the major transformations. We are reminded that widespread aging is a very recent phenomenon. In 1935 one out of three Japanese survived to complete work at 65; now it's 88 percent. What is clear from reading this book is that there is now more choice in Japanese society along with all the challenges. And I find more support for my belief that a longevity society, where members not only live long but in relatively good health, is a great achievement rather than a dire calamity.

University of Tokyo, Tokyo, Japan

RUTH CAMPBELL