

reactions to the discredit it appears to have thrown on US-led no-holds-barred capitalism in a globalized world. Would it, one wonders, have significantly shifted the balance of their arguments away from their gaze across the Pacific towards the Asian region, and also to 'Japanese' ways of doing things, whether fondly looking backwards or focusing inventively on the future?

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F. Coulmas, H. Conrad, A. Schad-Seifert and G. Vogt (eds), *The Demographic Challenge: A Handbook about Japan*, Brill, Leiden, 2008. xix + 1199pp.

Demography can be both a satisfyingly straightforward and yet a frustratingly complex affair. In the case of Japan, simply speaking, current debates revolve around two, possibly three concerns: population ageing – the result of increasing longevity in society; demographic ageing, caused by chronically low fertility; and the question of whether to increase immigration to counterbalance some of the effects of the former two issues. The outcome of the first need not be a shrinking population, but it does pose many challenges. However, the outcome of the second is, barring massive immigration flows, inevitably a shrinking population. Few would argue that increasing longevity is anything but a good thing, and some even argue that low fertility is also a 'good' in that the world could do with fewer people. Immigration is, on the other hand, a more difficult question in Japan, politically speaking. Nevertheless, these phenomena are being played out across the developed world and are

at the base of what has come to be termed the 'Second Great Demographic Transition', whereby worldwide population growth does not, as previously expected, achieve an equilibrium between births and deaths, but in developed societies enters a post-growth disequilibrium which is characterized by ageing and shrinkage.

The twentieth century was unique in that it was the only period in human history in which the world's labour force outnumbered those groups – children, older people and adults unable to work – which depend on it for their survival and prosperity. These fortunate circumstances have provided a foundation on which to raise millions out of poverty worldwide and for the establishment of generous health care and other state entitlements in developed countries, which themselves have contributed to long, healthy and productive lives. Ominously, however, in the twenty-first century not only will the world return to a situation in which dependents outnumber workers, but this time the majority of those dependents will not be children but older people. The consequences of this for world incomes are far from clear and come at an especially difficult time, when considerable resources will be required to develop ways of managing and reversing the negative feedback effects arising out of human impacts on the natural environment. Japan, with the highest life expectancy and one of the lowest fertility rates in the world, and being one of the world's most technologically advanced societies, is in the vanguard of these developments and is therefore a 'pioneer' in both experiencing and dealing with the consequences of an ageing and shrinking society. As such, therefore, Japan deserves special treatment by academics in view of what we might

anticipate for other countries, but especially those in Asia that are already on the cusp of a shrinking population, such as South Korea, Thailand, Singapore and, before too long, China.

The editors, authors and publishers of this handsome tome have provided the most comprehensive assemblage of knowledge on the subject of Japan's demography that it is possible to do at the present time, and for that they deserve our warm appreciation. Divided into five parts (on fundamentals and social, cultural, political and economic and social security aspects), the book brings together sixty-three chapters on issues related to Japan's demography: from theory, through numerical and qualitative description and analysis, to the search for and identification of policy solutions to the myriad issues that societal ageing and shrinkage are beginning to reveal. One might wish to quibble with the publisher's decision to bind these together into one volume, but one cannot but admire the ambition, scale and quality of the project. Having been involved in editing myself I am mightily impressed by the work that has gone into this volume, in particular in managing to produce such a clean and readable set of texts.

The book begins with a by now familiar graphic reproduced from the *Asahi Shinbun* of 3 January 2006, this time set into a colour background of the Japanese national flag. It is a graph showing that, under current circumstances and projections, Japan's population will wither to approximately 75,000 by 2500, and that by 3200 the Japanese nation will be composed of but one, presumably lonely, individual. Although this graphic is intended as a somewhat tongue-in-cheek call to action, similar though less dramatic scenarios are already being

taken seriously. Nevertheless, and as Kaneko (chapter 3, p. 58) implies, these forecasts are also simulations that are prone to a degree of inaccuracy. Such inaccuracy is partially due to the fact that once projections enter the public domain they attain social significance and alter the context from which they have been derived. Despite this, the Japanese government projects that by 2055 approximately 40 per cent of the Japanese population is expected to be 65 and over, and the population may shrink by 30 per cent to around 90 million persons (Kaneko, chapter 3, p. 41).

My own field of interest, and what prompted me to wish to review this book, is in the problems surrounding the depopulation of remote rural areas in Japan and, in addition, what this can tell us about how shrinkage will play out in more densely populated locales as the national depopulation deepens and broadens. Since this volume is a 'handbook' and not designed for readers to plough through all sixty-three chapters consecutively, in addition to some other chapters, I looked at Lützel's 'Regional demographics' (chapter 4), Thompson's work on municipal amalgamations (chapter 19), Traphagan on ancestors and burial rites (chapter 20), Funck on tourism (chapter 31) and Elis on regional economies (chapter 47), all of which were, as a handbook should be, rich in descriptive and factual detail as well as lucid and complex in their analytical depth.

Despite the future-oriented nature of population projections and some of the scenarios being painted for Japanese society in the mid to late twenty-first century, as the authors in this volume stress, Japanese society is already experiencing the effects of ageing and depopulation. The total fertility rate fell below

the replacement level in 1973 and has remained stubbornly low since that time; in 2005 the national population began to shrink for the first time in Japan's modern (peacetime) history, and it did so two years ahead of the government's predicted schedule; regional inequalities due to age-profile differentials are widening (Elis, chapter 47); gendered employment and informal care arrangements are impacting negatively on women's expectations of equality and freedom in society (Shire, chapter 53; Ikegami, chapter 58); the drop in the number of younger people has already drastically impacted upon educational provision (Goodman, chapter 28); Japanese companies are having to reappraise their human resource management systems (Conrad, chapter 54); and the changing dependency ratio is placing severe pressures on Japan's already precarious public finances (Kawase and Ogura, chapter 46; Takayama, chapter 62). In short, the demographic challenge for Japan is immense. Fortunately, the book is not a long series of doom-laden scenarios, with the authors calmly working through the issues in a rational and even-handed manner and making sensible suggestions

for policy adjustment and reform. It even has within it some optimistic and touching aspects, such as older people's growing enjoyment of leisure time and a graph depicting Japanese people discovering a love of dogs (Sekizawa, chapter 55, p. 546).

This book is a welcome, and substantial, addition to the world's knowledge on demographic changes in post-industrial society and an impressively detailed exposition of the Japanese case among ageing and shrinking societies. At more than 1000 pages and in excess of USD200 to purchase it is clearly intended for institutional buyers. However, since the volume is a handbook rather than a monograph, it should be understood as something to pick up and dip into when necessary, and as such its size, scope and format complement well the breadth of the subject matter. I am sure that this book will become a valuable and essential addition to any academic and large public library with an interest in the social sciences.

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