

POPULATION DECLINE AND AGEING IN JAPAN—THE SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES

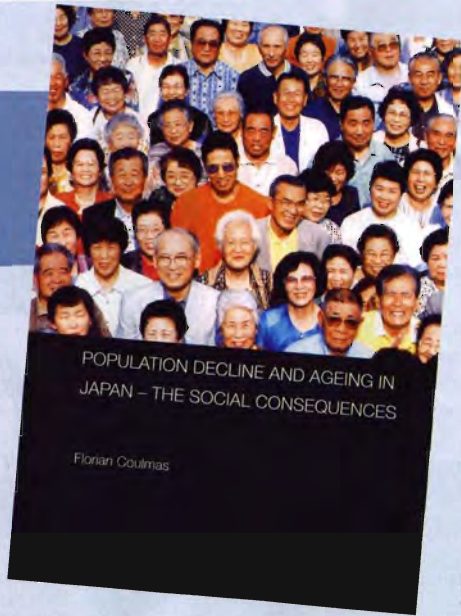
By Florian Coulmas (Routledge, 2008, 176pp, £20)

REVIEWED BY C.B. LIDDELL

YOU COULD SPEND A LOT OF TIME

and effort trying to figure out trends in Japanese politics, economics, and society, and still end up knowing less than when you started. This is because examining things at the detailed "micro" level will often give you plenty of data, but little useful information. Sometimes, to see what the future has in store, it is better to take a step back and view the big picture.

The key to this approach is identifying the main trend that drives all the lesser trends and then extrapolating. In Japan's case, demographic changes give the futurist plenty to ponder, as the country's rapidly aging population is set to play an increasingly influential role in many aspects of life here.



This is the topic explored by *Population Decline and Ageing in Japan*, a useful book for those keen to stay ahead of the curve. Written by Florian Coulmas, the director of the German Institute for Japanese Studies in Tokyo, the book examines the likely effects of an aging population on gender (women live longer), immigration, business and retail trends, and political and economic reform.

Although it is part of Routledge's "Contemporary Japan Series" and, technically, an "academic" book, the work is apparently aimed at the large number of "dumbed down" social science departments in Western universities. This turns out to be an advantage, as the language is straightforward and much of the information presented in easy-to-understand graphs, tables and pie charts.

The book is also well-structured. The author first sets out his facts and makes them comprehensible. For example, he points out that, if Japan's low birthrate of 1.25 children per woman continues unchanged, the last Japanese person will be born in the year 2959.

Having established a firm factual framework, Coulmas next looks at the various aspects of Japan's demographic crisis. Some of these are already part of the nation's news agenda, such as the growing pension burden, increasing political activism among senior citizens, and the need to improve the "dependency ratio"

between workers and retirees. The latter offers two main choices: encouraging a higher birthrate or allowing more immigration. Both solutions raise political challenges that Japan is ill-prepared for. Relying on immigration raises the specter of a split labor market, a two-tier society, and an enlargement of the problem when immigrants reach retirement age; encouraging a higher birthrate raises gender issues and would also impact adversely on the labor pool, at least in the short term.

While the social and political consequences of demographic number-crunching makes fascinating reading, the book's strong point is Coulmas' readiness to discuss the wider ramifications. These include changes in culture and outlook. In a section titled "Honorable and Onerous Elders," he writes: "In Japan's greying society, the elderly are no longer few but many; increasing numbers of them are afflicted with various forms of senility, and their status has changed as a consequence."

Once known as a society where senior citizens were venerated, Japan passed its first laws against "elder abuse" in 2006. While this may have been in response to increasing incidents of mistreatment, another explanation is that it represents the increased political clout of a "silver" voting bloc.

The growing power of older people as voters and consumers is set to change the face of Japan in radical ways. In 2005, the Keio Department Store in Shinjuku reported that 70 percent of its sales were from female customers in the 50 and over range. Based on this kind of bottom-line statistic, it looks like we are moving from a society where trends were once dictated by loose-socked high school girls to one where old ladies with purple hair and incontinence pants will be calling the shots. 📖