

Patching the population pyramid in Japan – an ethnic dilemma



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The ageing of the population is a major concern for several advanced countries. A process called "demographic transition" is underlying this phenomenon where mortality and fertility decline. The latter has been the main reason for the ageing in advanced regions of the world (World Population Ageing 1950-2050), and has caused many countries to look to immigration as a potential solution for the problem. In some countries, like Canada and Australia, immigration is an important part of the population policy. In Canada the federal government introduced the point system for immigration in 1967, and the Immigration Act of 1976 continued the process of liberalization. Canadian legislation then recognized refugees as a distinct class of migrants and identified the creation of a culturally diverse population as a positive outcome of immigration policy. Australia incorporated the points system into the new immigration regulations that went into effect the same year as in Canada (1967) (see Richardson and Lester 2004 for a comparison of the immigration policies). For Europe, the

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situation is different. On the one hand, immigration is to be regulated so that social, ethnic and economic side effects of uncontrolled migration can be minimized and on the other hand, Europe has to solve its problem of insufficient workforce in the near future (Tanner 2003). This article focuses on Japan, but comparisons to other countries are made, especially to Finland. The two countries are distant from one another, but facing similar population ageing challenges. Furthermore, both countries perceive themselves as culturally quite homogenous, and neither have had comprehensive immigration policies. The relative number of foreign population is small in both countries; 2.2 per cent in Finland (Statistics Finland 2006a) and 1.5 in Japan (Japan Statistical Yearbook 2006).

The problem of an aging society

According to the preliminary counts of the 2005 Population Census, Japan's population increased by only around 0.1 % annually between the years 2000 and 2005, the lowest increase rate during the postwar period. Japan is now entering a period of population decrease. In Finland the population increase rate has been

higher; the number for 2005 was 0.4 % (Statistics Finland 2006b). Both are, however, alarmingly low, the population structure is aging too fast. The Japanese age pyramid bulges twice, once for the baby boomers and once for the generation born at the middle of the 1970's. These second baby boomers will somewhat put off the aging crisis, but when they reach retirement age, the situation will be much worse.

The dependency ratio¹ in the population projections for both countries is rising for the population aged 65 and above. Japan faces a worse situation than Finland with a higher dependency rate for the elderly and a low fertility (Japan Statistical Yearbook 2006; Statistics Finland 2004).

As individuals live longer and fertility declines, how is this aging population going to be supported? There are basically only three roads to take: To increase fertility, to change pension benefits (lower pensions, postponed retirement age) or to increase immigration.

Increasing fertility by political means is very difficult, and also connected with ethical problems. This has not been a topic of wider discussion in Finland, but in Japan the issue is sensitive. The Japanese government has defined its policy

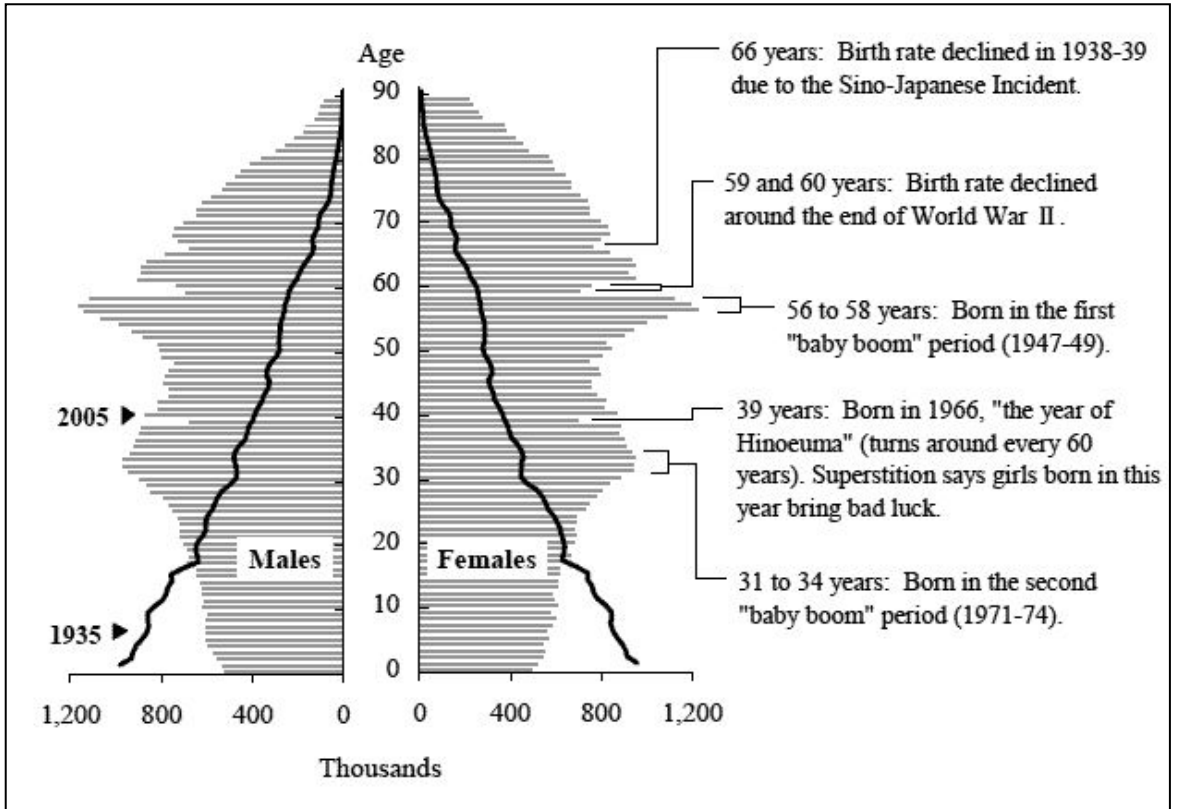


Figure 1. The population pyramid of Japan (Source: Japan Statistical Yearbook 2006)

related to low fertility not as a pro-natal policy but as welfare policy or policy for improving childcare. This can partly be related to taking distance from the pro-natal policy practiced by the military government in prewar years. This official position is identical to such European countries as Italy and Germany (Atoh and Akachi 2003).

Japanese fertility had declined since the 1970's falling below the reproduction level, but it was not until 1990 that the Japanese government responded to this. It was the so-called "1.57 shock" when the fertility rate fell below 1.58, the lowest level ever recorded in the history of Japanese Vital Statistics (1966). The Government established quickly a special coor-

dinating committee dealing with low fertility issues and introduced a series of policies supporting childcare improving them gradually during the whole decade. Fertility has continued to decline though, approaching one of the lowest levels in the world (Atoh and Akachi 2003).

The economic recession of the 1990's hit both Finland and Japan hard, but the family policy took a completely different turn in Finland. The total fertility rate (TFR) had been rising since the 1970's so any concern for the future did not hinder the family policy being object for considerable measures of saving, which continued into the next decade (Mattila 2003). The economic crisis and its conse-

quences affected the material situation of families with children in many respects since the middle of the 1990's, and it was reflected in the TFR which declined from 1.85 in 1992 to 1.72 in ten years. It was back up to 1.8 in 2005 (Sillanpää 2005).

Japan is worse off in terms of TFR, it was only 1.25 in 2005 (Statistical Handbook of Japan 2006). There are many reasons for this. The level of economic support for childcare in Japan is among the lowest in the developed countries and educational cost and housing cost for Japanese parents are extremely high compared with many European counterparts (Atoh and Akachi 2003). Strengthening economic support for childcare will be

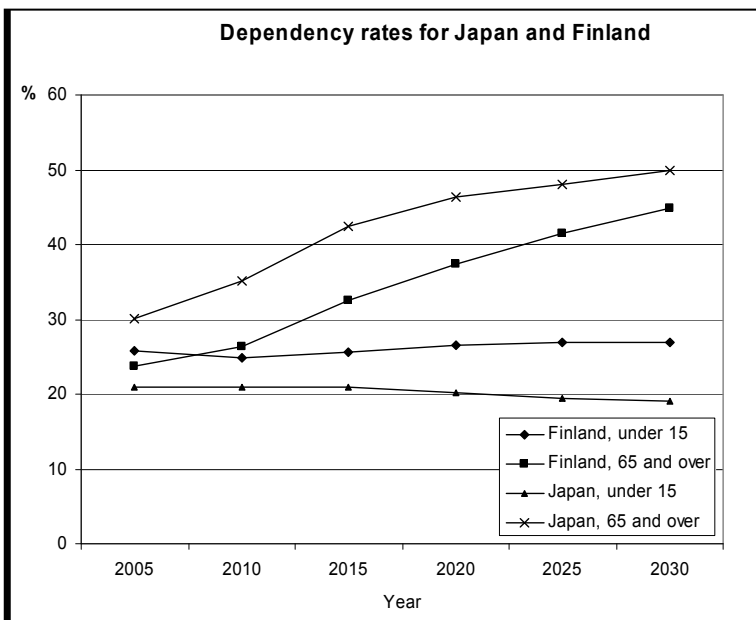


Figure 2. Dependency rates for Japan and Finland (Source: Japan Statistical Yearbook 2006; Statistics Finland 2004)

helpful for reducing the direct cost of childrearing as well as providing day care, but it is not certain that these measures will raise the fertility. The declining marriage rate and the older marrying age in recent years are also important factors behind the downtrend in the live birth rate (Statistical Handbook of Japan 2006).

Both Japan and Finland have reformed the pension system, including measures of postponing retirement. These moderate reforms are not sufficient to ensure the financial basis for the pension system in future years, especially not in Japan, which has relied on government bond issues to make up for falling tax revenues. This has turned the nation into one of the world's most indebted countries. Japan's public debt burden is now over 160 per cent of its GDP, which makes it the highest in the industrialized world (Ministry of

Finance 2006). The debt exceeds the social security expenditure and as the Japanese pension system is financed "pay as you go", the current working generation pays for the current retirees, the development is not sustainable.

Immigration could be a solution, if it brings young active population who will work, consume and pay taxes, which will contribute to financing the social security system. Theoretically, temporary immigration would be a good solution, because it would bring temporary changes to the population pyramid. Temporary immigrants would require little state-funded medical attention and they would leave before being eligible to receive pension benefits. Many countries have practiced this policy in the past, Switzerland is a well-known example (Wicker et al 2003) and Sweden is another (Korkiasaari and Tarkiainen 2000).

The almost rectangular shape of the Swedish population pyramid is due to immigration, without this, it would have the same urn-shape as other developed countries. Gunnar and Alva Myrdal's famous book "Kris i befolkningsfrågan" (The population problem in crisis) was published 1934 when fertility in Sweden was extremely low, and it became one of the cornerstones of the Swedish social policy. Shortly thereafter the wartime baby boom erased the fears of a declining population, and new baby booms occurred in the 1960's and 1990's. This would, however, not be sufficient to keep the shape of the pyramid rectangular. In 1999 TFR was down to 1.5, the lowest ever in Sweden, and without immigrants the country would face the same aging problems as other developed regions (SCB 2006).

Switzerland and Sweden were the only European countries spared from World War II. Their industries needed more labor than their own population could supply to meet the increasing demand from the world recovering from the war. Both imported labor from the neighboring countries, Italy and Finland respectively. In contrast to Switzerland, Sweden did not keep up the "Gastarbeiter" policy, but flung the doors wide open to Nordic citizens in 1954 and over half a million Finns emigrated during five decades and of these almost 300 000 returned later to Finland (Korkiasaari and Tarkiainen 2000). The Finns are still the single biggest immigrant group in Sweden, but amount to only 16 per cent of the total number of immigrants. The Swedish example illustrates the population benefit of

temporary immigration, and also the permanent consequences for the population structure.

Immigration to Japan

The situation in Japan is quite different from the other advanced countries. Traditionally Japan is conceived of as a homogenous society, where immigration policy won't work; assimilation is too difficult, the culture is difficult to understand and the language barrier is too high. The homogeneity of Japan is, however, a myth reinforced by the over 200 year seclusion of the Tokugawa shogunate until 1853. Soon after the Meiji Restoration Japan embarked on an expansionist course, and conquered Chinese territory in the Sino-Japanese war 1894-1895 and colonized Korea in 1910. Until the end of the Second World War, Japan experienced considerable colonial immigration by Taiwanese, Koreans and Chinese, who were nominally given the status of Japanese. During the war Koreans were forcibly brought to Japan as workers. The Korean population in Japan reached approximately two million in 1945. Thereafter, over half a million Koreans and much smaller numbers of the Taiwanese and mainland Chinese eventually remained (Komai 2001; Kashiwazaki 2002).

In the postwar period, the trend toward a multiethnic Japan was broken and a concept of homogenous nation emerged. It was cemented with legislation aimed at controlling foreigners and a system was set up requiring them to carry registration cards and present them to authorities on demand. The Koreans and Taiwanese

in Japan were divested of Japanese nationality. This legal system effectively barred immigrants from Japan until the late 1970's. Immigrants were divided into two categories: "old comers", who have resided in Japan since before 1952, and their descendants, and "new-comers" referring primarily to foreigners who came to Japan in or after the 1980's. In this decade four kinds of immigrants started to enter Japan: Foreign women, mainly Filipinas, who came to work in the sex industry, Indochinese refugees, descendants of Japanese who had been left in China at the end of World War II, and business people from Europe and North America. The influx of low-wage labor power increased dramatically in the later half of the 1980's in response to the shortages accompanying the economic boom. These immigrants came from Latin-America (so-called Nikkeijin, mostly Brazilians of Japanese descent), South Korea, China, the Philippines, and from all over the world. A great part of them worked illegally; visa overstayers and foreigners taking employment outside the scope permitted by their residency status, such as technical trainees and students. The influx of foreign students rose tremendously from former levels (Komai 2001; Kashiwazaki 2002).

In 1989 the Japanese government embarked on reforming the Immigration Control Law in response to this uncontrolled development. The government reorganized visa categories to facilitate the immigration of professional and skilled personnel, while confirming its basic principle of not accepting "unskilled" foreign

labor. Employer sanctions were also introduced to discourage "illegal" employment. Another major effect of the Revised Immigration Control Act, which went into force in 1990, was that it allowed second and third-generation persons of Japanese descent (the so-called Nikkeijin) easier access to residential visas with no employment restrictions. Before the economic bubble burst in the beginning of the 1990's Japanese companies experienced serious labor shortage, and the front door was opened to ethnic repatriates in order to remedy this problem. A side door was kept open for "trainees and technical interns" who could stay for a maximum of three years. This became a system for rotating cheap unskilled workers. Overstay persons still kept coming in through the backdoor. Official estimates placed the number of visa overstayers alone at nearly 300,000 in 1993 (Sellek 2001; Kondo 2002; Kashiwazaki 2002).

The so-called "Nikkeijin" provision in the new law rested on the assumption that ethnic Japanese would fill the demand for unskilled workers without disturbing the ethnic and cultural uniformity of Japan. Nikkeijin up to the third generation could enter the country under a special category "settlers" (teijusha) as the only group of foreigners permitted to reside and work without any restrictions. They were expected to assimilate easily into the society regardless of nationality, the concepts of ethnicity, culture and "blood" were used to legitimate this assumption (Goodman et al. 2003). Most of the Nikkeijin were second- and third generation descendants of Japa-

nese emigrants to South America, especially Brazil and Peru, during the first half of the 20th century. This migration had been encouraged by the Japanese government to prevent a population explosion and solve the employment problem (for a contemporary account see Crocker 1931).

The Nikkeijin population in Brazil was around 1 200 000 in 1988, but the Japanese government had shown little interest in them until the enacting of the new immigration law in 1990. The massive influx of these immigrants into Japan was totally unexpected. They had not kept up contact with relatives in Japan and few had visited the country (Sellek 2001). Only around 2000 such returnees lived in Japan in 1986, but in 2005 their number had risen to around 350 000 (Brody 2002; Japan Statistical Yearbook 2006). In the beginning it was mainly the first generation with a good command of Japanese who came to Japan to work, but soon the second and third generation Nikkeijin formed the majority. The pull factor was economic, private brokers organized the journey, job and

housing. There were also strong push-factors. The Brazilian economy had deteriorated badly in the 1990's and Japanese wages were very high compared to those in Brazil. They got jobs in the 3-K sector - "kitanai, kitsui, kiken"-dirty, difficult, dangerous, replacing temporary illegal workers and trainees. They added confusing new chapters to Japan's ethnohistory. They were of Japanese lineage and looked Japanese, but their language, culture, customs and behaviour derive from South America (Sellek 2001). Many ethnic Brazilians spouses and children also accompanied them, adding to the cultural confusion. It is common to classify the second and third generation Nikkeijin as return migrants, but where is the point of reference, their "home"? Linger (2001, 26) suggest that the situation is one of "dual diaspora" because they shuttle between two homelands, being Japanese in Brazil and Brazilian in Japan.

The Nikkeijin face many difficulties in Japan, especially with regard to language and culture. They stay illiterate for a long time, and they have difficulties adapting to

the Japanese way of living. They tend to stick to other Nikkeijin and form ethnic communities. Komai (2001, 37) writes on the basis of his research that the "Nikkeijin society is going through a process of cleavage from Japanese society".

The other major group of Japanese returnees consists of "Zanryu fujin/koji" the Chinese war orphans, Japanese women and children who were separated from their families and left behind in China during and after World War II. According to incomplete statistics, more than 4000 of the Japanese orphans were adopted by Chinese families (China Daily 6.9.2006). A year after the diplomatic relations between Japan and China were normalized in 1972, they were allowed to move to Japan on state expense. Originally they had to have guarantors in Japan, such as relatives, but 20 years later the Ministry of Welfare decided to repatriate all such individuals at state expense if they wished to return. Until 1993, repatriation did not include those thousands of Japanese women "Zanryu fujin" who married Chinese citizens in order to survive the turmoil created by Japan's 1945 capitulation. The Japanese state interpreted the latter as people who chose to remain in China "of their own will" (Komai 2001; Nishioka 2005). Between 1973 and 1998 well over 5000 people had returned to Japan on state expense (Komai 2001, 61). The war orphans are now elderly and many came with their spouses, children or grandchildren, who sometimes have spouses of their own. These come under the status as second or third generation returnees (Komai

Registered Foreigners in Japan							
[In thousands. As of December 31]							
End of year	Total	Korea 1)	China	Brazil	Philippines	Peru	U.S.A.
1990	1,075	688	150	56	49	10	38
1995	1,362	666	223	176	74	36	43
2000	1,686	635	336	254	145	46	45
2004	1,974	607	488	287	199	56	49
Percent change,							
2003-2004	3.1	-1.0	5.4	4.3	7.6	3.9	2.1

1) Democratic People's Republic of Korea and Republic of Korea.

Table 1. Registered foreigners in Japan (Source: Japan in figures 2006)

2001). Considering that a returnee on the average brings 10 or more relatives and in-laws, the aggregate number of Zanryu fujin/koji must be well over 100 000. These returnees face the same language and culture barrier as the Nikkeijin, and are also in a situation of dual diaspora. They are, however, much more dependent on public assistance benefits and have a lower employment rate.

Even though the returnees are admonished to become model Japanese, they are constantly reminded of their otherness. Their working companions and classmates make fun of them for being different. They experience a kind of double discrimination, because they are not excused as foreigners when they do mistakes, they are expected to follow Japanese customs and speak the language because they have Japanese blood. Coming from developing countries also puts them in an inferior position (see Roth 2002).

The total number of foreigners in Japan was almost two millions in 2004, and it is increasing. The table below shows how the nationality structure is changing with the "new comers" (part of who are already elderly, such as second generation Nikkeijin). The number of "old comers", especially Koreans, is declining, and the number of "new comer" Chinese rising.

There were high hopes for the Nikkeijin to fill the labor shortage in Japan without rocking the ethnic boat. It did alleviate the immediate shortage, and had a positive effect on the population age distribution. Tanimura (2000) has, however, calculated that the total number of Nikkeijin in Brazil and Japan is

too small to fully support the pension system in Japan: "the number required is very large and unrealistic and the length of stay has to be longer than 20 years in order to make a significant impact. Thus the number of Nikkeijin required is not feasible to offset the pension shortfall completely".

The United Nations Population Division has drafted scenarios for which show that increased immigration would be a more effective tool than the current policy to deal with the problem of an aging population. It would be necessary to raise the retirement age to 77 if the ratio of working age population to the retired population is to be kept on the 1995 year level of 4.8. If Japan wants to maintain the present population number of a little over 127 million, this would be achieved with an average net increase of at least 381 000 immigrants per year, a total net increase of 17 million immigrants 2005-2050. Other scenarios count with as much as 30 million to maintain the current level of economic prosperity (World Population Ageing 2001).

The former head of the Tokyo Immigration Bureau Hidenori Sakanaka published an important, but little read book in 2005 "Ny-uukan Senki" (Immigration battle diary). In this he argues that Japan must decide what kind of country it must become by the middle of this century. Being a big country requires roughly 20 million immigrants to keep the wheels turning and being a small country with a population of around 100 million is the consequence when most foreigners are kept out. In the latter case robots must do some of the

work the immigrants would do. Sakanaka favors the big country alternative, not just for economic reasons, but Japan should become the "Canada of Asia", a multicultural and multiethnic salad bowl.

Many advanced countries face the same problem, including Finland. In the 1980's Finland also faced labor shortage and tried to get expatriate Finns to return, especially from Sweden. Some companies also recruited ethnic Finns from Estonia and Russia. When the economic bubble burst in the beginning of the 1990's such efforts were abandoned. Now the discussion about immigration is much following the same tracks as in Japan. Immigration is perceived as a threat to national homogeneity.

The Finnish Government approved the immigration policy programme October 19th 2006. The stated purpose is to actively promote work-related immigration. This programme particularly focuses on immigration to Finland from outside the EU and EEA region. Utilisation of the existing labour force is to be enhanced in conjunction with the development of work-related immigration policy. The integration of immigrants and improving ethnic relations is stressed as to "promote the development of a pluralistic, multicultural and non-discriminatory society. Another target is to promote the immigration of students and researchers." There is a catch, however. The Government wants to retain consideration of labour availability in sectors that have a lot of jobseekers. Persons in the upper or middle company management, various experts, artists,

journalists, athletes, seasonal fruit pickers working for international organisations and workers on short-term postings to Finland are welcome.

It seems that it is not possible to navigate between Scylla and Charybdis, a choice has to be made. Canada and Australia have shown how a bowl of salad is mixed, but there will be competition for the ingredients in the future.

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1 Dependency rate is the relation of the population aged 65 and above or aged 14 and under to the working age population age 15 to 64. Thus the Finnish dependency rate for those 65 and above of 23.8 % in 2005 means that there are 4.2 labor forces supporting one senior, while the corresponding number in 2030 is 44.8 meaning only 2.2 providers for one senior.

Kansain suomalaisten seura tervehtii

Suomalaisia asuu Japanissa viitisensataa. Heillä on seuratoimintaa useassa eri kaupungissa. Osakan alueella Kansaisssa seura kerää suomalaisia yhteen kerran kuussa, jolloin seurustellaan suomalaisten kesken jonkun jäsenen kodissa aamupäiväkahvien merkeissä. Suurin osa jäsenistä on naisia, mutta joitain miehiäkin on mukana. Suomi-Infon postituslistaan kuuluu noin 46 perhettä.

Ulkomailla asuessa oman kulttuurin perinteet nousevat tärkeään asemaan identiteetin ylläpitäjinä. Suomenkielisiä jumalanpalveluksia pidetään jouluna ja pääsiäisenä Nishinomiyan luterilaisella kirkolla. Suomen itsenäisyyspäiväjuhlaa vietetään tavan mukaan perinteisin menoin tänä vuonna 10. joulukuuta.



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