ANNETTE SCHAD-SEIFERT AND SHINGO SHIMADA

Introduction

In 2008 the annual conference of the German Association for Social Science Research on Japan (Vereinigung für sozialwissenschaftliche Japanforschung e.V. (VSJF)) addressed the issue of demographic change in Japan in comparison to the social developments of ageing in Germany and other member states of the European Union. The conference, which was organized by Annette Schad-Seifert and Shingo Shimada (both at Heinrich Heine University of Duesseldorf), was held in Kaiserswerth, an old part of the city of Duesseldorf. Thirteen speakers from Germany, England, Japan and the Netherlands presented their papers in four sessions on the topics “Demographic Trends and Social Analysis”, “Family and Welfare Policies”, “Ageing Society and the Organization of Households” and “Demographic Change and the Economy”. More than 120 participants from different countries attended the conference.

Not all papers presented at the conference are included in this volume. Some authors decided to publish their papers in different publications or have had their papers already published by the time they presented them at the conference. As far as possible we refer in this publication to the topic that was presented at the conference.

The first session “Demographic Trends and Social Analysis – Observations from Japan and the EU” was opened by Uta Meier-Gräwe (University of Giessen, Sociology and Household Economics). She dealt with the question of how to cope with the low fertility in Germany and focused on issues of family policy. She maintained that although the concept of having a family and children is valued very much, young families tend to stay childless and the share of families with more than two children in Germany remains very low. According to Meier-Gräwe this gives evidence to the fact that family and professional career are still difficult to combine and that attitudes and expectations on family and partnership diverge greatly between young women and men. While young women seem to aspire a gender-equal division of labour within the family, young men still tend to see themselves as the breadwinners. Due to this divergence, families stay childless. In her paper Meier-Gräwe tried to answer the question on how policy measures can positively influence families’ decision to have children. She pointed out that a major factor for taking up familial responsibilities is the possibility for both partners to continue a professional career. Furthermore, the so-called “rush hour of life” – that is the accumulation of familial and occupational tasks and responsibilities in a very short period of an individual’s lifetime – has to be decompressed in order to influence birth rates positively. Meier-Gräwe concluded that family policy should focus on the reorganization of family and work by providing gender-equality in career-interruptions and childcare leave.¹

¹ Please refer to the German-language article by Uta Meier-Gräwe (2009): Was ist Familie? Warum es einer begrifflichen Neujustierung bedarf [What is family? Why do we need a new paradigm?].

As the second speaker in the session Sawako Shirahase (University of Tokyo, Sociology) presented on socioeconomic inequality and changes in the demographic structure. Focusing on ageing and income inequalities in different countries, she showed that the socioeconomic situation of people older than 65 years is strongly connected to the household structure in which they are living. The demographic change did not only bring changes in the population structure, but also in household structures, which have started to show a pluralized structure. Societies where the elderly live in various types of households tend to show a larger extent of income inequality. Therefore the socioeconomic situation of old people differs depending on their type of household. Particularly, one-person households run by elderly women face the most serious problems when it comes to economic well-being. Shirahase points out that Japan is no longer an exceptionally equal society and now shows many social problems such as high poverty among the elderly.²

The first session was concluded by keynote speaker Florian Coulmas, director of the German Institute for Japanese Studies in Tokyo. He presented on the ageing of societies and changes in family structures with regard to happiness and individual possibilities to realize a happy life. According to Coulmas the pursuit of happiness discussed in the public dialogue in Japan is a sign for drastic social changes, which result in demographic change. The increasing share of older people and the decreasing potential for young people to find jobs with stable incomes directly influences personal attitudes and individual expectations on prosperity, meaning of life and sense of happiness.

² Please refer to the Japanese-language publication by Sawako Shirahase (2009): *Nihon no fubyōdō o kangaeru. Shōshi kōrei shakai no kokusai hikaku* [Thinking about inequality in Japan. A comparative study of ageing societies].

After being involved in a long term project on demographic change and Japan's ageing society for the last years, the German Institute for Japanese Studies is currently also conducting a project on the changing attitudes towards happiness in rapidly ageing societies and the media-constructed discourse of how to achieve a happy life.³

In the second session "Family and Welfare Policies in Japan and the EU" Christian Tagsold (University of Duesseldorf, Modern Japanese Studies) held a presentation on long-term care insurances in Germany and Japan. The introduction of the long-term care insurance in Japan has lead to controversial debates in regional areas. On the one hand the system was supported as a step towards more independence in regional policy. On the other hand some of the reforms were rejected. Politicians who aimed at ending the controversy tried to improve their understanding of the new system by collecting more expert knowledge on the German system, which has influenced the design of the long-term care insurance in Japan. Tagsold's paper illustrates how the German insurance system was implemented in Japan and identifies this process as an endeavour of contextual translation.

Axel Klein (German Institute for Japanese Studies, Political Science) focused on the question of political responses to low birth rates in Japan. Since 1990, the problem of the declining birth rate is on Japan's political agenda and so far quite a number of countermeasures have been enacted to bring about an effective turn-around in the birth rate development, but to this day they have continued to decrease. Klein tried to answer the question why – despite of the failure of previous countermeasures – political actors have not enacted different, more effective responses to low birth rates. He came to the conclusion

³ Please refer to http://www.dijtokyo.org/research/happiness_in_japan.

that low fertility has had a low political market value and that other policy fields have easily concealed political responses to low birth rates.⁴

Aya Ezawa (Leiden University, Sociology of Modern Japan) ended the second session with a presentation on public assistance programs and single mothers. Public assistance programs in Japan have been subject to significant restructuring in the recent years. Faced with increasing numbers of families in need, policy makers have introduced major reforms in form of welfare-to-work policies which aim to reduce reliance on public assistance by promoting higher levels of employment, particularly among single mothers. Yet, as studies conducted in conjunction with the implementation of these programs have shown, finding employment is not just a matter of will and effort. The majority of single mothers who are receiving public assistance have few qualifications and resources, making it difficult to find full-time employment with a living wage. In her paper, Ezawa explored the challenges single mothers face in finding employment and becoming 'independent' from state assistance as envisioned by policy makers. Based on an examination of the life trajectories of single mothers, who have received public assistance in past and present, as well as surveys and data provided by welfare offices, she examined the potential impact of social origins, formal and informal resources, as well as everyday strategies of single mothers' life trajectories and ability to move beyond public assistance.⁵

⁴ A German-language article by Axel Klein is forthcoming in the VSJF's yearbook: *Niedrige Fertilität als politische Herausforderung. Eine neue Perspektive auf den Kampf mit der Überalterung Japans* [Low fertility as a political challenge. A new perspective on the engagement with the ageing Japan].

⁵ Please refer to Aya Ezawa (2006): *How Japanese single mothers work*.

The third session dealt with the “Ageing Society and the Organization of Households”. Maren Godzik (German Institute for Japanese Studies, Social Sciences) opened the session with a paper on alternative forms of living. The demographic change and the pluralisation of living arrangements lead to a breakdown of the three-generation household and to the establishment of the nuclear family. Therefore, the ageing of the Japanese population raises the question of care for the elderly. Apart from numerous innovations in the mainstream welfare and housing policies which have already been introduced, including the implementation of the public long-term care insurance and sheltered housing or assisted living schemes, private initiatives have started to organize alternative forms of housing. Although their number is limited, some became widely known and serve as examples not only for similar projects but also for public and commercial housing projects giving them a greater importance than the number of alternative projects might suggest. Godzik’s paper introduces alternative housing forms in Japan and categorized different types of alternative housing with regard to their concepts and their target groups. On the basis of some examples, which have been explored by Godzik partly by means of qualitative interviews with organizers of collective houses and co-housing forms of living (*gurūpu ribingu*), she discusses the question whether these forms of living can be a solution for a broader segment of Japan’s ageing society.

Richard Ronald (University of Amsterdam, Geography, Planning and International Development Studies) has examined the role of the housing system in the emerging divide between younger and older generations in Japan. While the extreme nature and impact of demographic change in Japan, with increasing longevity, declining birth rates and a fundamental shift in the ratio between the retired and

working populations has been well documented, the role of housing markets and the property sector, although having significant consequences in the structure of life courses, has not been as central to debates. The contention of Ronald's paper is that, in combination with restructuring in employment conditions and the pension and welfare sector in particular, the housing system in Japan is shaping the demographic change and may be considered a driving force in the decline of family formation and birth rates and a major feature in socioeconomic inequality between younger and older cohorts.

The session was concluded by Akiko Oda (University of Surrey, Sociology) who held a presentation on care dynamics among elderly couples in Japan. Due to the changes and pluralisation of living arrangements, elderly people increasingly have to rely on their own means to take care of each other's needs. This has placed an increased strain on elderly women. In particular on those who have to take care of a disabled partner and are traditionally subjugated by power dynamics where the older Japanese male maintains the dominant household head (*daikoku bashira*) status. In order to ease the care burden, the Japanese Government introduced the Long Term Care Insurance (LTCI) scheme in 2000. However, as Oda discusses in her study, the elderly couples have been reluctant to accept this help and are relying on their own means instead. They are also put off invoking external care by a number of complex factors that relate to socio-economic issues, pragmatism, social stigma, class, and gendered norms.

In the fourth session "Demographic Change and the Economy" Florian Kohlbacher (German Institute for Japanese Studies, Business and Economics) presented on the ageing workforce. According to Kohlbacher, Japan is the country most severely affected by the demo-

graphic shift as its population is not only ageing but also shrinking, which results in a decrease of the country's productive labour force. In this regard, the so-called "year 2007 problem", the year when the Japanese baby-boomer generation entered retirement age, holds particularly severe consequences for the labour market, since the loss of expert knowledge and labour shortage will have a far reaching effect on Japan's economy and business sector. Kohlbacher's presentation provided an overview and evaluation of the "year 2007 problem" and the challenge of an ageing workforce and discussed the implications for businesses in Japan.⁶

Atsuhiko Yamada (Keio University, Economy of labour) discussed the effectiveness of new job security measures for the older employees in Japan. His paper examines the amended Law for the Stabilization of Employment of Older Persons (LSEOP) that was enforced in 2006. The LSEOP requires enterprises to take one of three job security measures for their employees in line with the upward revision of the pensionable age: a) any increase in the mandatory retirement age that exceeds the current pensionable age; b) the introduction of continuing employment systems; or c) the complete abolition of mandatory retirement systems. Yamada's results suggest that a wage reduction after the mandatory retirement age is a key determinant of continued employment in an enterprise. Because the LSEOP does not regulate wage reductions, the effect of it is limited. However, his results also implied that this would be appropriate to avoid the distortion of labour demand, particularly the increase of young recruits.

⁶ Please refer to Florian Kohlbacher together with Wolfgang H. Güttel, Stefan Konlechner and Beate Haltmeyer (2009): Strategies against competency obsolescence. The case of R&D-intensive organizations.

Cosima Wagner's paper (University of Frankfurt, Japanese Studies) discusses the question whether the use of "social robots" could be a means to overcome the hardships of the ageing society, especially the decreasing number of Japan's workforce population. A field of special interest is the "elderly care"-sector where an increasing number of elderly people will need support in accomplishing their daily tasks and to get care in the near future. As numerous studies suggest, very soon the "robotic nurse" or robot technology based care will not only be a solution for the shortage of caregivers but will also become an important business in the future silver market. Based on her dissertation project on Japan's robot culture (to be published soon) Wagner's paper delineates the expectations and measures regarding the use of robot technology in the elderly care sector in Japan.

Cornelia Storz (University of Frankfurt, Business and Economic) presented on the creation of markets using the example of Japan's silver market. Storz concentrated on conditions under which markets are created. She pointed out that processes of market creation are complex and go beyond the simple assumption that markets simply "emerge".⁷

The final discussion brought about that the demographic change of societies is not only a problem in regards to the changing population structure. Rather the growing differentiation and diversification of households, living arrangements and ways of employment are considered to pose a challenge to the future sustainability of societies. Today's industrialized societies are facing a growing polarization of incomes, living conditions and career options that divide people not

⁷ Please refer to Storz, Cornelia and Werner Pascha (2008): How are markets created? The case of Japan's silver market.

only economically. In his book “Race for the Exits” the political scientist Leonard Schoppa has differentiated between “voice” and “exit” as options for individuals, who are dissatisfied with their life options, either to raise their voice (“voice”) or to leave the society (“exit”). The increasing share of individuals who decide for the second option (“exit”) – either by leaving the country or by staying away from family, employment and wealth – is considered problematic. Central to all studies on demographic change is the question of how societies can be reconstructed and be made adaptive to these changes in order to survive as solidarity communities.

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