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The Bitter Fruits of Success

Abstract

Japan's economic and social development since the end of the Pacific War is a story of growth and success. Life improved continuously for the vast majority of all Japanese. Yet, the level of life satisfaction in Japan, measured along the scales of the World Database of Happiness, is low by international comparison. The Japanese are rich, healthy and long-lived, but not as happy as indicators of material wellbeing would predict. While their life-expectancy rose, their readiness to reproduce declined. Over the past half century Japan's total fertility rate (TFR) fell to less than one third of what it was in mid twentieth century. What do these two trends imply about happiness? What does Japan's experience of demographic change teach us about the effects of birth-rate and family size on happiness? Can TFR be used for measuring the "livability of nations"?

Keywords: happiness, low fertility, social change

Introduction

Conventional wisdom says that children are a source of happiness. Economic wisdom says that children are both a cost factor and a basis of social security. These interpretations are not necessarily mutually

exclusive. This paper pursues the question of how they can be combined to explain Japan's low fertility rate. It argues that the TFR decline is a response to and indication of a number of inconsistencies that the ageing society itself has produced. Using data of the Asia-Barometer Survey and Cabinet Office surveys on life-style preferences, it examines the happiness-promoting effects of the family in general and children in particular. It also discusses the question of the general validity of these parameters across cultures. If there are culture-specific routes to happiness, how much do children contribute to happiness in Japan and other industrialized countries?

Success

Japan is a happy country. What better measure to support this claim is there than Japan's population, which in the course of the past 160 years quadrupled from about 33 million in 1850 to 127 million in 2008. Population growth is a clear sign of achievement. As Livi Bacci put it: "Per tutta la storia dell'umanità, popolazione è stato sinonimo di prosperità, stabilità e sicurezza."¹ Surely, prosperity, stability and security are good candidates for composite factors that make for a good life in a happy country. Undeniable progress has been made in various fields. Most impressive, perhaps, is the spectacular reduction in infant mortality in the twentieth century. The Japanese no longer die during the first precarious months after birth. Already low at the time, the infant mortality rate dropped from 60 per 1,000 live births at the end of the Pacific War to 0.32 in 2000. Only Sweden and Singa-

¹ Livi Bacci, Massimo (1998): *Storia minima della popolazione del mondo* [A concise history of world population], 9.

pore have a similarly low rate.² Today, the Japanese don't start dying until they are well into their sixties.

Figure 1: Infant mortality and TFR

Source: Danjo kyōdō sankaku hakusho (2005): *Danjo kyōdō sankaku hakusho* [Whitepaper on equal participation of men and women]. http://www.gender.go.jp/whitepaper/h17/danjyo_hp/danjyo/html/zuhyo/fig01_00_12.html (accessed 10 July 2010).

As a result of these mortality reductions the Japanese population has grown. It doubled from 1912 to 1967, when it reached 100 million. And Japan has over the past half century experienced unprecedented life expectancy gains. At the beginning of the twentieth century, life expectancy at birth was 44.0 years for males and 44.8 years for females, far below levels in Western countries. At the end of the century,

² Cf. UNDP – United Nations Development Program (2000) (Ed.): *Human Development Report 2000*. http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_2000_EN.pdf (accessed 13 July 2010) and Statistics Bureau (2009): *Statistical handbook of Japan*. <http://www.stat.go.jp/English/data/handbook/c02cont.htm> (accessed 13 July 2010).

the Japanese topped the world list of life expectancy at 82.3 years on average (85.6 for women and 78.5 for men, in 2005). Around the middle of the last century, reaching the age of one hundred was a sensation.³

Figure 2: Average life expectancy: 1947–2005

Source: Statistics Bureau (2009): *Statistical handbook of Japan*. <http://www.stat.go.jp/English/data/handbook/c02cont.htm> (accessed 13 July 2010).

³ Cf. Yanagishita, Machiko and Jack M. Guralnik (1988): Changing mortality patterns that led life expectancy in Japan to surpass Sweden's: 1972–1982.

The centenarians counted just a few hundred. In half a century's time their numbers have multiplied a hundredfold. To quote another figure that is indicative of Japan's rapid population development, in 1950 the median age was 22 years, one of the youngest in the world. According to current projections, it will have risen by more 120 per cent to 57 years a century later.⁴ The massive gain in life expectancy is irrefutable evidence of a highly successful society, and a successful state allowing its citizens to flourish. Longevity has traditionally been regarded as an indication of happiness. If this still holds true Japan must be a happier country now by a large measure than it was a century ago.

Figure 3: Centenarians 1963–2008

Source: ILC – International Longevity Center Japan (2010): http://longevity.ilc-japan.org/t_stories/index.html (accessed 20 June 2010).

⁴ Cf. Atoh, Makoto (2008): Japan's population growth during the past 100 years.

Japan is also more prosperous today than it ever has been before. In 1945 Japan's GDP per capita was less than that of the Philippines or Mexico, but was in the top range of all economic indexes by the end of the century. Politically they are living in a peaceful, stable and open environment largely free of coercion. Progress in education has been phenomenal. The Japanese have access to all the information they could possibly want being able to make use of it from an earlier age and up to a higher age than previous generations.

Since the 1980s, Japan has consistently ranked among the top ten countries of all three categories of the United Nations Human Development Index, i.e., health, education and standard of living.⁵ A prosperous, highly educated, healthy population living in a peaceful land without any obvious external threat – that is Japan in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Wouldn't that be sufficient reason to call this a happy country, if countries can properly be called happy or unhappy? And if we want to sidestep the question of happiness, surely, Japan's story of the twentieth century is one of great success.

Table 1: Population change in comparison

Country	Rate of population 65 and over			Number of years
	7%	10%	14%	
	1864	1943	1979	7 – 14%
France	1864	1943	1979	115
Sweden	1887	1948	1972	85
USA	1942	1972	2014	72
Switzerland	1931	1960	1982	51
England	1929	1946	1976	47
Germany	1932	1942	1972	40
Japan	1970	1985	1994	25

⁵ In 2006, Japan ranked 7th of 177 countries on the Human Development Index.

Of course, population growth, economic development and advance in education are achievements not specific to Japan, but Japan underwent a number of developments much faster than other countries. Most noticeably, the velocity of social ageing was much higher in Japan than elsewhere. For example, whereas France took 115 years to double from 7 per cent to 14 per cent the population aged 65 and older, Japan needed just 25 years (see table 1, p. 18).

In sum, Japan's modern history since the Meiji era and especially the second half of the twentieth century is a success story, if success is understood in terms of population growth and national and human development. A deliberate and hardworking labour force, an industrial policy orchestrated by the Japanese government, a strong economy, high educational achievement and a good health care system combined to create a society affording its members a very high level of economic and social wellbeing.

Bitter fruits

Can this success story go on? Was the so-called "lost decade" of the 1990s recession only a cyclical downturn that will soon be forgotten? There are certain indications that this might be too optimistic a view. A very general reason for this is that catching up is easier than staying ahead of the pack. New problems arise that have no precedent calling for original solutions. That is so because Japan's development has fundamentally changed the population structure. Its socioeconomic success has turned it into a hyper-aged society defined as one where the population aged 65 and over exceeds 21 per cent and this hyper-aged society shrinks. In 2005, the number of death exceeded that of live births by a few thousand, marking the onset of population decline. Long-term projections vary by more than ten million. The "high" pro-

jection by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research puts Japan's total population in 2050 at 102 million, while the "low" projection anticipates just 90 million.⁶ However, there is general agreement that Japan's population will decrease for decades.

Figure 4: Total population and projections 1950–2100

Source: National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (2008): Population Statistics of 2008. <http://www.ipss.go.jp/p-info/e/psj2008/PSJ2008.pdf> (accessed 28 July 2010).

Population decline

Is population decline a problem? This question has often been answered in the affirmative for two reasons. (1) Fewer Japanese mean less industrial output and less consumption and hence a shrinking

⁶ Cf. Kaneko, Ryuichi (2008): Statistical foundations of population projections, 50.

economy which no one can desire. (2) Fewer people and more elderly people mean a rising dependency ratio, which again is a burden on the economy threatening national wealth.

I do not think that these are compelling arguments, because over the past several decades Japan's economy has witnessed continuous gains in productivity which have not only offset negative economic developments such as rising labour costs and a rising yen, but produced real economic growth. There is no reason to doubt that further productivity gains are possible. As for the second point, the dependency ratio is certainly a concern, but it is not as dramatic as sometimes assumed, because as the number of dependent elderly has risen, that of dependent minors has fallen. Furthermore, the good health of the population 60 years and older makes it possible and for many desirable to raise the retirement age, thereby softening the impact of the higher dependency ratio.

Figure 5: Changing population structure
Source: Statistics Bureau (2009).

What is more, it can be argued with some justification that population decline has positive consequences, such as, less congestion in urban centres, more living space, cheaper housing, less environmental degrading, specialized high-quality education for fewer students and in general a higher quality of life. These positive aspects may be real. Population developments are complex happenings that are never only good or only bad.

Figure 6: Gross National Income and Total fertility rate

However, population decline is a problem for different reasons. Two related trends come to mind. One is that for decades the actual number of children per family has been lower than the number deemed ideal for a family by women in childbearing age. For example, Ogawa shows that since the mid 1970s the total fertility rate has been consistently lower than the ideal family size.⁷ This means that many

⁷ Cf. Ogawa, Naohiro (2003): Japan's changing fertility mechanisms and its policy responses, 90.

Japanese do not satisfy a fundamental desire. While children are certainly not the only source of satisfaction with one's life, they do occupy a central position in this regard. The demographic paradox is that as the Japanese became richer they grew ever less prone to reproduce. A society that does not satisfy a basic need is suffering.

Related to this is the trend in lifetime singles rates. From 1950 to 2000, the ratio of unmarried men at the age of 50 rose by a factor of 10, that of women by a factor of 5. And the trend continues. Since in Japan there is virtually no childbirth outside wedlock, this trend contributes quite directly to fertility decline, as does the tendency to postpone marriage. In 1950, women were 23 when they first married, men 25.9. By 2006, age at first marriage had risen to 28.2 and 30 years, respectively (see table 2, figure 8 and figure 9 p. 25–26).⁸ There is a clear correlation between marriage postponement and the falling birth rate.

While acceptance of marriage continues to be high in Japan, the attitude towards marriage is changing. The percentage of women who do not intend to marry ever is steadily growing, and the purpose of marriage is shifting, as the traditionally strong connection between married life and children is eroding. In 1998, 47 per cent of the respondents of a nation-wide survey denied that children were necessary for a happy family life, an increase of seven per cent since five years earlier.⁹ Two trends in the results of this survey were particularly noteworthy: (1) Older respondents rated the importance of children higher than younger ones, and (2) men higher than women. Fully 70 per cent of women aged between 16 and 35 did not regard children important for married life. In Japan (as in Italy) women's increased

⁸ Cf. Statistics Bureau (2009).

⁹ Cf. Ölschleger, Hans Dieter (2004): *Family*, 375.

economic independence is apparently working as a disincentive to marriage.¹⁰ The number of women who say that they do not want to have children ever surpasses that of men. 30 per cent of Japanese women aged between 25 and 34 say that they “do not feel it necessary to marry”, and another 29 per cent say they “do not want to lose their freedom and care-freeness” (by marrying).¹¹ Great care must be taken in interpreting these findings, but they would seem to suggest that the proportion of women who will never have children and hence the proportion of childless couples is bound to grow.

Figure 7: Lifetime single rates

Source: National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (2008).

¹⁰ Cf. Raymo, James M. and Miho Iwasawa (2008): Changing family life cycle and partnership transition. Gender roles and marriage patterns.

¹¹ Cf. MHWL – Ministry of Health and Welfare (1997): *Annual report on health and welfare 1995–1996. Families and social security*, 31.

Table 2: Age of first marriage / first child
Source: Statistics Bureau (2009).

Age of first marriage (years)		
	1950	2005
male	25.9	29.8
female	23.0	28.0
Age at first child birth		
	25.6	29.1

Figure 8: Late marriage
Source: Statistics Bureau (2009).

Figure 9: Birth rate and age at first marriage 1955–2001

Source: Statistics Bureau (2009).

Reduced commitment to the future

There is a growing population who never marry and remain childless. During the past fifty years, the total fertility rate fell while the marital fertility rate remained nearly constant.¹² This is indicative of a preference for more than one child for couples who have children. Ogawa has calculated for a female cohort in the year 2000 that 15.9 per cent have one child, 36.0 per cent have two children, 14.5 per cent have three children and 2.8 per cent have four or more children, while 19.3 per cent never marry and 11.5 per cent marry but remain childless. This implies a massive increase of the childless population as compared to previous generations.¹³

¹² Cf. Lützel, Ralph (2002): The “second fertility transition” in comparative perspective. The impact of female employment, care services, and familism, 57.

¹³ Cf. Ogawa (2003), 91.

Table 3: Desired and actual number of children

Source: Kōseisho Jinkō Mondai Kenkyūsho (1977): *Dainanaji shussanryoku chōsa hōkoku* [Report on the seventh survey of the baby-boomer generation]; Statistics Bureau (2009).

Desired number of children		Actual number of children	
	ideal	TFR	Difference
1977	2.61	1.80	.81
2005	2.48	1.29	1.19

On the other hand, there has been for many years a persistent discrepancy between the number of children couples consider desirable and the number of children actually born. This discrepancy has been observed ever since statistics on the desired number of children have been collected, in 1977. In recent years, it has grown, suggesting that the discrepancy not only reflects a difference between an ideal norm and the reality, but that an increasing number of couples feel they cannot fulfil their desire for children fully. In 2005, the desired number of children (2.48) was almost double the fertility rate (1.26).

How should these findings be interpreted? Parents' attitude towards the future differs from that of non-parents. That is common-sense knowledge. A growing percentage of the population, both married and never married, without children have no vested interest in the future of society, with hitherto unknown consequences for its self-image and sense of purpose. Lest this sounds as an overly conservative argument, let me borrow a notion proposed in this connection by Bertrand Russell. He speaks of the "stream of life".

To be happy in this world, especially when youth is past, it is necessary to feel oneself not merely an isolated individual whose day will soon be over, but part of the stream of life flowing on from the first germ to the remote and unknown future. [...] Those who have allowed their procreative impulses to become atrophied have separated themselves from the stream of life.¹⁴

¹⁴ Russell, Bertrand (1930): *The conquest of happiness*, 138.

Russell wrote at a different time, but for a population the notion of the stream of life is still relevant. It must be noted, of course, that not all of those who remain childless in Japan today do so because they “have allowed their procreative impulses to become atrophied.” Many are hard pressed economically as neoliberal policies are taking their toll on a new underclass of unemployed, part-timers and working poor. And many perceive caring for parents and caring for children as an alternative. The fact remains, however, that by virtue of a declining fertility rate and an increasing rate of the population never married and childless, Japanese society is less future-oriented today than it was in the past.

Culturally the growing segment of childless individuals and couples is indicative of an enormous value shift, for until recently family succession and the perpetuation of the “house” (*ie*) were cultural core values. Leaving descendants was a matter of passionate concern which among other things implied that Japan used to be a “universal marriage society”. It no longer is.

Discontents of the hyper-aged society

The hyper-aged society has its specific discontents. Not all of them can be attributed to ageing, but they co-occur with ageing and characterize present-day Japan.

1. The hyper-aged society is a society with a growing population of isolated individuals. From 1975 to 2001 the percentage of one-person households more than doubled from 8.6 per cent to 19.4 per cent and so has the number of households consisting of husband and wife only (rising from 13.1 per cent to 27.8 per cent). Many older persons aged 65 and over are living alone and dying alone.

According to the Tokyo Metropolitan Medical Examiner's Office, the number of people who die alone increased from 3,858 in 2002 to 4,729 in 2005.¹⁵

2. An increasing number of people in the hyper-aged society are in need of help. To mention only one group, patients suffering from senile dementia were estimated at about 1.7 million in 2000. Their numbers will increase as the total population declines to twice that number in the near future. According to the Psychogeriatric Society of Japan, there will be 3 million dementia patients in 2035, while the Nihon University Population Research Institute predicts an increase to 4 million as soon as 2025. More accurate figures are hard to come by because projections of this sort are subject to many variables and different definitions. However, the increasing incidence of dementia clearly is emerging as a major social challenge.
3. Another worrisome characteristic of Japanese society in the 21st century is the growing incidence of clinical depression. According to an estimate by the Ministry of Health and Labour, clinical depression will rise from fourth rank in 2000 to second rank in 2020 of all diseases and thus become a major health care issue. This is of particular concern because depression is a major trigger of suicide. Suicide has many causes, social, economic and medical. No unified explanatory theory exists, and none will be attempted here. For present purposes suffice it to note that the hyper-aged society as it presents itself at present is one with a high incidence of suicide.

¹⁵ Tokyo Metropolitan Medical Examiner's Office (2009): Heisei 21 nenhan jigyou gaiyō [Half year working paper of 2009], 50. <http://www.fukushihoken.metro.tokyo.jp/kansatsu/21jigyougaiyou/files/21-55.pdf> (accessed 31 July 2010).

Table 4: Incidence of suicide 2006

Source: Keisatsuchō (2007): Heisei 19 nen ni okeru jisatsu no gaiyō shiryō [2006 Outline of suicide records]. http://www.npa.go.jp/toukei/chiiki10/h19_zisatsu.pdf (accessed 20 July 2010).

Suicides 2006:	32.155
male:	71 %
over 60:	35 %
without occupation:	48 %

Conclusion

Why life-expectancy gains and fertility decline occur simultaneously is not at all clear. The former is a sign of success, but it also generates its own specific problems. The latter, especially when viewed against the unfulfilled desire for children, but also from a theoretical point of view concerning expanding and contracting populations, is a sign of failure. Success often engenders failure. In economics this seeming paradox is a commonplace that has given rise to a huge literature. If population developments can be understood in a similar vein, it is not just the economy, but also the social and cultural conditions and a changed outlook on life that have to be taken into account. From such a perspective Japan appears rich, old, but not altogether content. Of its discontents the low birth rate (1.34 in 2007) is the strongest indicator. To what extent the social ills that population ageing brings in its wake have contributed to the birth-rate decline and continue to do so is a question that needs further study.

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