

Social Influences of the Decline of Birthrate in Japan*

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I. "1.57 Shock" and Agism

Four years ago, in June 1990, the news on the front page of almost every newspaper in Japan told us that our nation's birthrate dropped to a record 1.57. This number is the Total Fertility Rate of the previous year. The decline of birthrate has had a serious impact on our society. Thus, it was named "1.57 shock" by the massmedia.

Total Fertility Rate is the average number of children a women would have over her reproductive years. And if our nation wants to maintain its stable reproduction, the Total Fertility Rate must be around 2.1. But in Japan, like any other highly industrialized countries, the Total Fertility Rate is continuously dropping down, and already fell below 2.1 after the mid-70's. And , it is now 1.46 (1993).

Before 1990, there were few people who cared about this trend, because it had been relatively neglected by the massmedia. It had not been discussed seriously among us. They would have rather believed that there were already too many people for a small country. Japan was already overcrowded

* This paper is a revised version of one presented at the Symposium on the Comprehensive Regional Study on the Socio-Economic and Cultural Problems, between Kagoshima Prefectural College and University of Padjadjaran, Bandung (Indonesia), 16 September 1994.

with one hundred million of residents. That was our common thought until around 1990.

Then, suddenly our point of view shifted. We began to regard the decline of the birthrate as a bad sign for the future. Why? Why has such a dramatic change occurred?

In the background of this change, there was a very heated political campaign, called the "Aging Society Campaign". Aging society means that the people over 65 years old exceed 7% of whole population. And now in Japan, this number already exceeds 14%. The growth of our aging sector is more rapid than any other country, and it will be accelerated by the decline of the birthrate. So, government planners and the massmedia pointed out the fact that while the older generation is increasing, the younger generation who should take care of them is decreasing. They said that in order to keep our social welfare on the same level, or to improve it, we would have to accept the introduction of a new tax (Consumption Tax). This campaign was carried out successfully. But it left behind a negative image of an "aging society" among us. We began to feel that our future might not be necessarily bright.

Anyway the gloomy image of an "aging society" has spread through the public consciousness. And the news of low birthrate was decisive to make a nationwide consensus that along this trend, we must face a labor shortage and a stagnant economy in the near future. Not only we would not be able to support an aging society (or aged society) with this decrease of taxpayers, but also we would be beaten by the other Asian countries in the international economic competition. This is "1.57 shock".

In former times, we were proud of our long life. Longevity was appreciated in itself, especially in our traditional Confucian atmosphere, where the

old people should be respected unconditionally. It might be superficial, but we thought the age was synonymous with wisdom and experiences. Long life meant happiness. But now that image has been completely changed, and this change is authorized by the government, because the old people are officially characterized as a burden for the younger. This burden aspect is emphasized by the massmedia; which is propagating the negative image of the old who can be mentally weak or physically paralyzed, and always lying on their beds. They say that these persons are a serious burden for their families. Now the old people have become, officially and publicly, a burden, a nuisance, or a trouble. They are regarded as nonproductive and parasitic people. A politician said, "It is no use watering the dead tree."

We can call such an attitude "agism". Agism means a discrimination against the old people. The campaign of the low birthrate crisis has brought this agism outside. In other words, "1.57 shock" has exposed our hidden agism.

II. Changing value of children

Now we will move on to the next point.

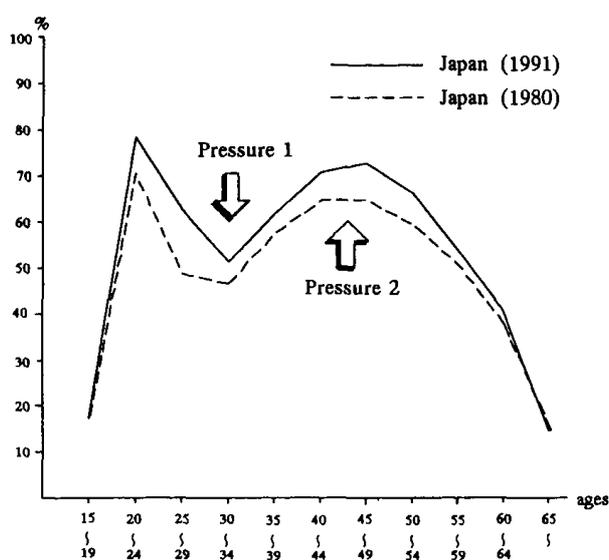
It is a fact that Japanese women do not want to have as many children nowadays. Sociologically, the most interesting and the most important thing in this fact is that this behavior of women is quite a voluntary action. They are not forced to avoid the pregnancy by the government, like in China. Japanese women are intentionally avoiding having more than two children.

There are various reasons to push the women to have less children. For example, the increase of highly educated women is the most popularly accepted reason for the decline of the birthrate. Now the ratio of women who go on to university or college have passed over 40 %. It is generally believed that these highly educated women demand the same opportunities for jobs

as men, and they want to work as long as possible. They are willing to find the meaning of life, not in the family, but in the workplace like the majority of Japanese male workers. So they do not want to marry early, and even after marriage, they want to continue their jobs.

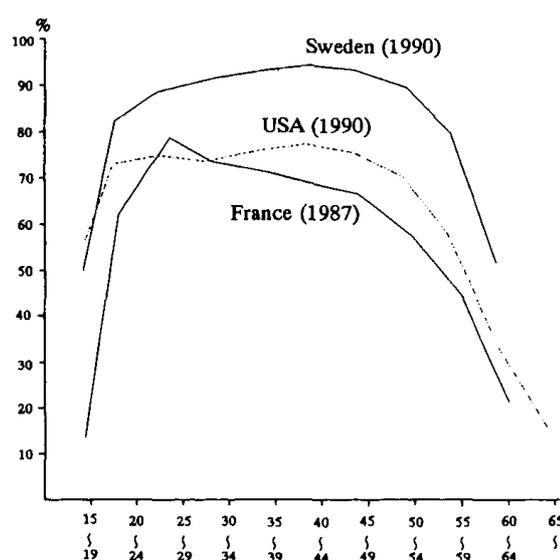
By the way, such an attitude in women is quite contrary to the Japanese custom. Its most characteristic scene is obviously appeared in our labor market. That is, women's working rates in Japan shape the figure of M (Figure 1). We can see in this shape, two mountains and one depression: Pressure 1 makes the depression, Pressure 2 makes the second swell. This depression is the most important thing to be noted. In other countries, we don't find this kind of shape in women's working rates (Figure 2). The depression is caused by the women's voluntary retirements. And their retirements are largely decided on the occasion of their pregnancy.

Figure 1



Source: Sōmu-cho Tōkei-Kyoku,
"Labour Force Statistics"

Figure 2



Source: ILO, "Year Book of
Labour Statistics"

Their retirements are encouraged mainly by three factors:

At first, they keep traditional morals which teach them that a baby nursing is a mother's sacred duty, and the baby needs her total devotion and

self-sacrifice.

Secondly, Japanese women have a particular sense of status. For them, a working mother is synonymous with poverty. They believe that a rich woman doesn't work; she stays at home and enjoys baby nursing; she is responsible for the health of her family and for the education of her children. A poor woman, on the contrary, must work to make a living. Then, at least in our vulgar belief, there exists quite a simple standard by which we could distinguish the rich and the poor. A Japanese woman who doesn't want to be qualified as a member of lower class, must quit her job. Becoming a full-time housewife, it can be a twinkling signal to demonstrate her elevation in social status.

The third factor to let Japanese woman retire from her job, is a decomposition of local community. The industrialization needs in general to minimize the family size in order to facilitate its move on each occasion of structural changes of industries. Nowadays it is getting harder to find warm and intimate relations between neighbors even in the countryside. We cannot expect there the mutual aids and interdependency as much as before. In urban life, it is much harder to find mutual aids. Especially, bringing up children is becoming more and more a private matter for each family, or for each mother. So, if a mother cannot rely upon anybody else, she must do this duty by herself. That is why she must leave her job once she has a baby.

But when her children grow up enough, or they begin to go to junior high school, she wants to work again. Because after primary school, children's educational expenses become much higher. It is necessary for the women to support their children's educational expenses. This is generally pointed out as the main factor to push them into the workplaces again. This is the second Pressure.

What can we read in this M-shape? The depression in the middle and the second swell, both are concerned with children. In our country, children used to be a key factor to pull the women from their working places, and to push them to the working places again.

So, if a woman wants to continue her job without interruption, she cannot have children. Having a child, or at most two children, that is already enough. As I mentioned before, Japanese women are more and more highly educated these days. These women have an inclination to seek their personal meaning of life, not in the family, but outside. For them, to live as a simple housewife is a meaningless way of living. They do not want to be house-slaves.

Let's look at the Figure 1 again, and compare the two M-shapes of 1980 and of 1991. We can see the M-shape of 1991 shifted up as a whole in a decade. It means that the Pressure 1 is weakened and the Pressure 2 is strengthened. In this shift, we find a drastic change of values. Nowadays, children are not family's treasure any more. They become expensive luxuries for their families. They become yokes or chains for their mother's self-realization.

We cannot expect our children to support us in the future, because we ourselves have abandoned our own parents. The younger people cannot be reliable for the elder. It must be vain to teach them a children's duty, because we ourselves have lost such a moral sentiment.

Around 1990, a word imported from the United States was prevailing among us. That is "DINKs" family. DINKs means "Double Income, No Kids". If a husband and his wife work independently without having babies, they can earn a double amount of money, and they can spend it totally for themselves. This DINKs family seems to a part of Japanese women an attractive way of life. It is very symbolic to represent our less children society. Anyway, it is understandable that women do not necessarily want to have

babies.

And it accompanies with other necessary changes in women's moral sentiment. We can recognize a phenomenon among them, which is a fading away of an ancient belief: gradually, they do not think having a baby is women's duty; they begin to think staying at home as a simple housewife is not a good choice to demonstrate their elevation in the social status, because such a way of life means now a complete dependency, and a simple housewife is regarded as a woman who doesn't have any skill, any ability, or any dignity.

This is the trend which can be seen in our society. The decline of birth-rate exposed such radical changes of our morality. An agism and a child-hating. These are necessary results of industrialization. And if the changes of our mentality derive from the transformation of our society, it is very hard to push them back by means of a simple preaching of old morals. Certainly, there still exist many men who naively believe that intensification of moral education could be effective. But, we had better think there is no turning back in this stream, or we might have already passed the point of no return.

III. Positive influences on local communities

Finally, I would like to talk briefly about an influence of low birthrate upon a local society like Kagoshima.

It is well-known in Japan that Kagoshima is one of the poorest Prefectures. Many young people went out of this prefecture after having graduated high school or university, in order to find jobs in megalopolis like Tokyo or Osaka. Therefore, Kagoshima lost its vitality gradually. Our local tradition and local culture were fading, because there was not sufficient number of young people who could take over the traditions and develop our culture.

But if the decline of the birthrate continues, that situation can change. We have a scenario which is positively acceptable.

At first, the decline of the birthrate will bring lower economic growth rate to the nation. With the low economic growth rate, the stagnation will come. The economic stagnation will break the movement of population, because the young workers cannot find better opportunities elsewhere. Kagoshima will be as bad as, or as good as elsewhere. There will be a number of young people who will choose to stay in their native place. They will try to find their own meanings of life in the local communities. Social activities will be vitalized. Local tradition and local culture will find younger supporters.

According to this scenario, the decline of the birthrate is not necessarily a bad sign for our future. But there exists one big and serious problem in front of us.

Our local cultures might have already largely disappeared. We succeeded in economic development, and we have been industrializing and urbanizing totally our country for a long time. In return for this success, we had to lose the diversity of our culture. Development brought us an uniformity, a monotony. We are all standardized now.

So I think we have many things to learn from Indonesia. This nation has various and multiple cultures. And it seems to me that the Indonesia people are proud of such a diversity. They have a splendid state motto, "*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*": unity in diversity. We Japanese have been looking for unity only. We have neglected our diversity. But if we want to live meaningfully under the new circumstances of less children society, we should learn from them how to harmonize national unity and local diversity.