

Land of the Setting Sun

by Steven W. Mosher

A decade ago, the Japanese economic boom appeared unstoppable. The salarimen, as the Japanese middle class are called, were grinding away at their customary 70-hour workweek. Economic growth was consistently running at 4 or 5 percent a year. Pundits were predicting that the Japanese economy would soon eclipse that of the United States. Books with titles like *Japan as Number One* and *The Coming War with Japan* became bestsellers.

Ten years later, Japan is a far different place. The economy ran into a brick wall in the nineties, averaging only an anemic one percent growth. During the Asian economic downturn of 1998, the economy actually shrank by 2.8 percent. Never able to reach Number One, this country's economy has now slipped to fourth place, behind the U.S., the European Union, and possibly China.

There are many explanations for Japan's failure to live up to its earlier promise. But for us at Population Research Institute, one factor is key: For over four decades now, the Japanese people have been having too few children to replace themselves.

The Japanese childbearing average first fell below the replacement rate of 2.1 around 1960. After fluctuating around 2.0 for the next 15 years, it began to plummet further in 1975. By 1998, the latest year for which figures are available, Japanese women were averaging a scant 1.38 children.

If the birth rate continues at this low level-and all indications are that it will-the population of 127 million will soon begin to shrink at an alarming pace. According to United Nations' estimates, by the year 2050 Japan will have 35 million fewer people than it does now. The 92 million Japanese who remain will have a median age of 54. There will be so few women of childbearing age that the population decline will accelerate.

But the consequences of all this child unfriendliness are already here. The ranks of the salarimen are greying, and young workers are in short supply. All of a sudden, Japan looks old and tired.

Japanese women are remaining single-having been convinced in some numbers that marriage perpetuates patriarchy and the single life is more rewarding than marriage and motherhood. The Japanese birth rate is plummeting as a result. Those women who do get married do so later, have children later, and stop at one or two.

The depopulation crisis has already forced Japan to slash pensions and raise the retirement age from 60 to 65 to keep pension funds afloat. By 2040, says the OECD, the rise in the ratio of dependent old to working young may be reducing Japan's growth in living standards by three-quarters of a percentage per year, cutting Japan's GNP by 23 percent by mid-century.

Immigration, once unthinkable to the insular Japanese, is being touted by some as a solution to the looming shortage of workers-and taxpayers. Yet Japan would have to accept some 600,000 foreigners a year to maintain its present work force, and it is unclear where such large numbers of immigrants would come from, and how well they would fit into a society which is fearful, suspicious, and even downright hostile to foreigners.

The Economic Planning Agency of the Japanese government recently published a plan for addressing the low birth rate. In it, they proposed a hodgepodge of measures from reducing the work week and providing a diversity of child-care services, to promoting home schooling and improving the environment in the home. If the experience of other countries is a guide, none of this will have much effect.

Efforts to emphasize the value of children will likewise fall on deaf ears. Japan lacks a tradition of robust religious faith, and the Japanese people are notoriously hard to convert. But the Archbishop of Nagasaki said of his own flock that they averaged 3 children, or more than twice as high as the Japanese standard. Still, given that Christians are only 0.7 percent of the population, they will hardly be able to make a dent in the looming depopulation.

The whole sad spectacle is reminiscent of the decline of Greek civilization. As Plutarch wrote over a thousand years ago, "One remarks nowadays all over Greece such a low birth rate and in a general manner such depopulation that the towns are deserted and the fields lying fallow, although this country has not been ravaged by war or epidemic. The cause of this harm is evident. By avarice or by cowardice, the people, if they marry, will not bring up children that they ought to have. At most, they bring up one or two . . . It is in this manner that the scourge, before it is noticed, has rapidly developed. The remedy is in ourselves, we have but to change our morals."

Despite Plutarch's exhortations, the ancient Greeks didn't change their morals, and so died out. (The current inhabitants of Greece are by and large the descendants of early Christians). It remains to be seen whether the Japanese will change theirs.

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Footnote:

The New York Times reported on May 30 that Japanese businesses are paying mothers up to \$10,000 for each additional child they have above their second, in a desperate hope to resist the nation's demographic implosion. Japan's population is expected to drop by nearly 25 million within 50 years. The population 65 or older is expected to increase to 32% from 17%.