

Small in Japan: the perils of solitude

Japan's population shrinks by half a million every year. Is it already too late to reverse this decline?

BY TOM FEILING

To date, the coronavirus has yet to hit Japan as hard as it has Europe and the United States. At the time of writing, Japan has 15,649 cases and 606 deaths. Some observers put the relatively slow spread of the virus down to the widespread use of face masks, which the Japanese don at the first hint of ill health, but the most likely explanation is that Japan is benefiting from inbuilt social distancing.

This is not a culture that prizes physical proximity. The Japanese are not ones for shaking hands or kissing when they meet, and they do a lot less meeting than most: Japan's National Institute of Population and Social Security Research estimates that people living alone will make up 40 per cent of all households by 2040.

Mass solitude might be a good way to avoid contagious diseases, but it is having a dire impact on Japan's fertility rate, which currently stands at 1.36 children per woman (it dropped below 2.1 births per woman, the rate needed to keep a population stable, in 1971). Japan also has one of the highest life expectancy rates in the world. As a result, people aged over 65 make up a quarter of the population—and will likely make up a third by 2050.

The population is shrinking by 500,000—a city the size of Manchester—every year. Across rural Japan, villages and small towns are being abandoned as their residents age and die. Wild animals such as bears and monkeys, which have been confined to the mountains for hundreds of years, are moving into lower lying land, where they ransack gardens and break into people's homes. Schools are closing down for want of pupils and people of working age are moving to big cities such as Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya.

Growing cities mask the depopulation problem, which has become a bad news story that everyone is aware of and no one wants to talk about. Yet according to Masashi Kawai, author of the best-selling *Mirai no nenpyo (Chronology of the Future)*, the next two decades will bring changes that even the most complacent city dweller will be unable to ignore.

13 per cent of Japanese homes are currently unoccupied, but as the shrinking process creeps from small towns into city suburbs, more houses will be abandoned, and house prices will collapse. This will lead to the impoverishment of the property-owning middle class, which will in turn cause the tax base to shrink. With growing numbers of retirees and fewer workers to pay for their pensions, the Japanese government will start to run out of money and will no longer be able to maintain vital infrastructure. If Masashi Kawai is to be believed, by 2065 Japan can expect to see “foreign occupation of unpopulated areas”.

Why have the Japanese become so averse to having children? They certainly used to be fecund enough:

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in 1950, Japan had one of the highest marriage rates in the world and the fertility rate was 3.6 children per woman. The nuclear family and the national economy prospered together. A typical *salariman* could expect to meet his future spouse at work, for his company not only supplied him with wages and housing but also gave him opportunities to meet members of the opposite sex.

Fast-forward 70 years, and the job for life is a thing of the past. Growing numbers of Japanese either work part-time or on short-term contracts and this makes it harder to find a marriage partner at work. Some have adapted well to “freelance” dating, but many have given up on the prospect of finding a partner and are effectively living online instead.

41 per cent of Japanese adults are unmarried, and by extension childless, for having children outside wedlock is still very much taboo. Those that do marry tend to have only one or two children. Ask them why they do not have more, and they will tell you they cannot afford to. Wages are declining in real terms and children have become both more precious and more expensive than they were in 1950. Moreover, many women do not want to have more children—and growing numbers do not want any at all.

It's hard to believe that Japan, a country long regarded as a harbinger of the sleek, hi-tech future that supposedly awaits us all, might be undone by a mass turn towards solitude. Not that it is alone, for this trend can also be seen in the West. In Germany, the fertility rate stands at 1.59; in Italy, it is 1.32; and in Spain, 1.3. All three countries can expect to see their populations shrink over the next 50 years—in Spain's case, by a quarter.

The country with the lowest fertility rate in the world is South Korea, where it stands at 1.1 births per woman. The South Korean government is so worried that it has raised the spectre of national extinction, warning that unless something is done to encourage women to have more children, the last South Korean will die 750 years from now.

Why aren't falling birth rates recognised for what they are—an existential problem of the first order? Well, the year 2770 is an awfully long way away. There is also the power of inertia to take into consideration. It's hard to believe that humanity is doomed

to extinction when most of us have grown up believing that the most pressing problem the world faces is overpopulation.

But mass childlessness and ageing are far from confined to the rich world. The fertility rate in Russia is currently 1.82; in Brazil 1.72; and in Thailand, 1.52. Even China, the most populous nation on earth, is



The Telenoid robot (pictured) is used in care homes

having to come to terms with negative population growth. The Chinese government introduced its one-child policy in 1979, in an attempt (rather too successful, as it turned out) to reduce population growth. It ended the policy in 2015, and Chinese people are now free to have as many children as they like. But they're not taking the bait: this year China's fertility rate fell to the lowest ever in peacetime.

The problems created by falling fertility rates will be particularly acute in the developing world. Much has been made of China's great strides to reduce poverty, but average GDP per head is still only \$10,099. The income tax yield from such paltry sums simply is not enough to pay for the nation's pensions, which will consume an ever-larger proportion of the government's budget as the population ages. Unless the people of China start to have more children, they are going to grow old before they've had a chance to grow rich.

Declining birth rates in the developing world are bad news for the developed world too. Until now, rich countries have mitigated the adverse effects of a declining birth rate by inviting in workers from poorer countries. But in the future, the supply of cheap labour will dry up, because those poor countries will have labour shortages of their own.

Take the example of Mexico: in 1968, its fertility rate was 6.75. Families were large and the Mexican economy was weak, so young men and women headed north to the United States to pick fruit, mow lawns and flip burgers. By 2019, Mexico's fertility rate had fallen to 2.09, just shy of the number needed to maintain a stable population (barring wars, famines and epidemics, this represents the biggest fall in human fertility in history). By the time Mexican children born in 2019 come of age, they will be far more valuable to Mexican employers than their parents were. They'll find well-paying jobs at home, and the United States will have no one to pick its fruit, mow its lawns or flip its burgers.

Faced with a chronic labour shortage, the Japanese government is gradually letting in more foreign workers, but it remains unwilling to grasp the multicultural nettle. Rather, it is hoping that robots can do the low-skilled jobs that other countries ex-

pect cheaper foreign migrants to do. Robots are incredibly popular in Japan—much more so than in the West, where people are quick to think of Frankenstein's monster. Unencumbered by such fears, the Japanese have embraced the possibilities robots offer, not only as a source of unpaid labour, but as friends for the lonely.

Dr. Hiroshi Ishiguro, known as the Godfather of Humanoids, believes that the idea of man, wife and two children being replaced by man, wife, one child and a robot is no longer unthinkable. Ishiguro is director of the Intelligent Robotics Laboratory at Osaka University. He has built a robot that looks just like him, which he uses to teach his classes. He likes to scare his students by making his "Geminoid" perform human-like movements like blinking and fidgeting with its "hands".

The makers of the world's first commercially available social humanoid robot claim that "Pepper" can recognise faces and basic human emotions. One young Pepper owner told CBS News: "Obviously there are hundreds of Peppers just like this one, and I suppose they all have similar characters, but I feel this Pepper's personality is somehow connected to me."

This tells us rather more about the nature of loneliness than it does Pepper, who might be able to tell you what the weather will be like tomorrow; but certainly has nothing to say on a topic as complex as Japan's declining birth rate.

Notwithstanding their limitations, robots are being developed to look after the growing number of elderly people who need care at home. This is a curious turn of events, for if there's one thing robots are not very good at, it is care work, which requires decision-making skills and manual dexterity light years beyond the capabilities of even the most advanced robot.

There seems to be a curious symbiosis at work here. If robots have direction without autonomy, many young Japanese have autonomy without direction. It's not hard to see why they feel so rudderless: their country has become a gerontocracy, run by the elderly, for the elderly. Realising their powerlessness, young people have become apathetic. There is a widespread sense of abandonment, and this has only fuelled social isolation.

Much as older people might bemoan the internet, and how anti-social it has made the young, it has rescued a society that had become a hollowed-out shell, kept alive through engrained conservatism and deference to authority. The internet has allowed young people to cultivate their own interests. Unfortunately, finding connections online has made communication less physical, and by extension, less sexual.

It is hard not to ascribe this to Japan's Buddhist heritage. Zen quietism disdains things of the flesh and sees no merit in human communication. Combine this with a hierarchical, Confucian-inspired society that encourages modesty and self-denial, and you have all the makings of an internet-addicted, near-celibate culture.

This does not portend well for the birth rate, but on the other hand, who's to say that childbearing is a necessary component of a fulfilling life? Perhaps Japan would benefit from some population decline. Its path to prosperity is strewn with collateral damage: overcrowded cities, a moribund education system, poor quality housing, environmental degradation and neglect of the elderly. Perhaps population decline can be part of a broader reckoning with how progress was defined in the 20th century.

As suburbs shrink and land prices go down, more land can be given over to domestic food production. Communities can be revived by encouraging craft traditions, which lie at the core of Japan's manufacturing prowess. The rift between old and young can be bridged by multi-generational housing projects. Economic growth might be a thing of the past, but a smaller Japan may turn out to be healthier, wealthier and wiser than the doomsayers would have us believe. ■