

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR
DEMOGRAPHICS AND THE STATE

Leonard Schoppa

1. INTRODUCTION

States have concerned themselves with the size of their populations since soon after they developed their modern form (Gauthier 1996). In the first half of the 20th Century, their concerns grew out of worries that states with slow-growing populations risked falling behind those with higher fertility rates. Viewing today's babies as tomorrow's soldiers and factory workers, many states adopted policies and organized propaganda campaigns aimed at encouraging higher rates of fertility. After World War II, many of these same states came to look at population numbers in exactly the opposite way. Today's babies were now seen as tomorrow's poor and needy welfare cases. Smaller families were seen as being able to invest more in the education of their children. Many states therefore began encouraging families to limit themselves to two or three children (in the case of China, just one) through usually subtle but sometimes brutal means. Today, however, demographic trends have shifted to a point where many states once again see danger in *low* fertility rates. Today's babies are now seen as tomorrow's tax-payers, and there aren't enough of them to pay for the health and pension benefits retiring baby boomers are counting on.

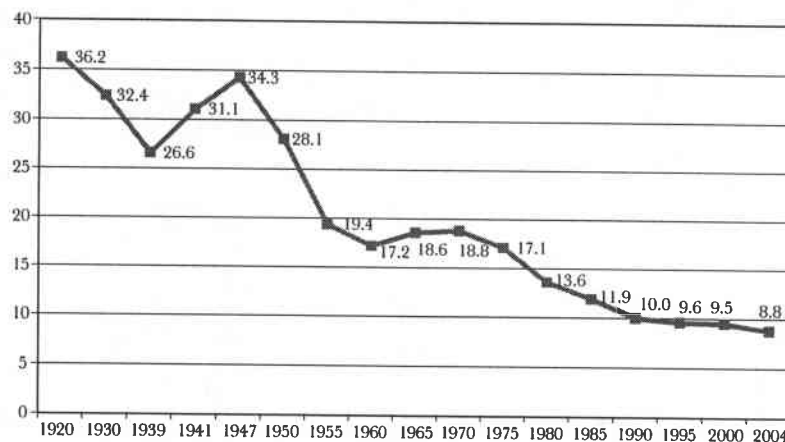
Japan has experienced each of these twists in a particularly pronounced way, pushing aggressively to boost its population size in the period before World War II with its *uneyo fuyaseyo* [give birth and multiply] policies and then reversing course sharply in the aftermath of its defeat when the state embraced modern methods of family planning, including access to abortion on demand. Recently, it is again in the front ranks of states struggling to respond to rapidly falling fertility rates that threaten the fiscal sustainability of social insurance programs. Since 1994, starting with its Angel Plans, and more recently with the provocatively-named Plus One Plan, it has been implicitly or explicitly

committed to reversing the fall in fertility rates through a wide range of policies.

Although this chapter focuses in greatest detail on Japan's most recent "twist" in this saga, it begins by examining the earlier two periods of active state efforts to shape demographic trends. Ironically, I argue, past experience attempting to influence fertility rates has not given the Japanese state much of an advantage in its latest campaign to increase the number of babies being born. On the contrary, memories of aggressive pro-natal policies during the war have made it difficult for the government to adopt (or even *discuss*) policies aimed at boosting fertility rates while post-war policies encouraging small families with mothers devoted to raising and educating their children have made the task of reversing fertility trends in the most recent period all the more difficult. Meanwhile, the fiscal challenge facing the Japanese state has been made urgent by the rapid pace of Japan's demographic transition. Japan faces particular difficulty financing its social insurance obligations because it is aging more rapidly than any nation in the world, a "problem" that is in part the product of past efforts to boost and then suppress fertility rates.

2. DEMOGRAPHY AND THE STATE DURING WARTIME

The last time the Japanese worried about a population deficit was during wartime, when the architects of Japan's planned Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere dreamed of populating much of East Asia, including Australia and New Zealand, with transplanted members of the Yamato race (Dower 1986: 275). Japan at this time was already a crowded country. Mortality rates were falling much more rapidly than birth rates as the nation industrialized, helping to make it one of the most densely-populated nations in the world. Yet as leaders of the Japanese state looked at neighbours with larger populations, they calculated that they needed the nation's population to grow from 70 million to at least 100 million if they expected to compete militarily with their rivals. Japan was growing, they knew, but its birth rate was falling rapidly, from 36.2 births per 1,000 members of the population in 1920 to 26.6 in 1939 (see Figure 1). If this rate continued to fall, the Japanese population was destined to remain much smaller than neighbouring China and Russia, which had birth rates of 45 and 43.3 respectively.



Note: births per 1,000 population

Source: NIPSSR 2006: 17.

Figure 1. Japan's Crude Birthrate, 1920–2004.

Government propaganda made it clear to Japanese women that it was their responsibility as citizens to “give birth and multiply.” Fertility choices were not private matters. Women were obligated to take on *kokkateki bousei* [motherhood-in-the-interest-of-the-state] (Norgren 2001: 33–34).

Meanwhile, it was the responsibility of the Japanese state to take on the powerful social and economic forces that were driving birthrates down. Everywhere, as nations industrialize, fertility rates fall, and Japan was industrializing very quickly in the 1920s and '30s. When nations were predominantly agricultural, there was some symbiosis between the interests of states (which needed larger populations to staff growing armies) and the interests of families (who counted on children to help out on the farm). By the time the Japanese state took up its campaign to boost birth rates in the late 1930s and early 1940s, however, it found itself asking the growing number of urban families to *sacrifice* by feeding and educating larger families that were not contributing to the family income, merely to serve the interests of the state.

Urbanization and Japan's interactions with the world also brought to Japanese society new ideas and new movements interested in improving the quality of children by reducing their number. Although abortion was illegal, couples in this era used a variety of contraceptive techniques, most frequently the condom, but also contraceptive pins, rings, and

intrauterine devices. Contraceptive supplies were “displayed prominently in drug stores during the 1920s and early 1930s” (Whelpton 1950: 35), and many urban areas had local birth control clinics to offer advice on how to use them correctly. There were 60–70 in the Tokyo metropolitan area alone (Norgren 2001, 26). There are no reliable statistics on birth control use in pre-war Japan, but post-war demographers looking back at birthrates in the era argue that “the practice of contraception became well established among certain groups” by the 1920s, and “an increase in use of preventive methods played an important role in causing the decrease in the birth rate that occurred from 1920 to 1938” (Whelpton 1950: 35).

With the nation at war with China in the mid-1930s, the government decided to begin restricting access to birth control. An ordinance passed in 1930 banned the sale and display of “harmful” birth control devices (but not the condom), and in 1937 the government extended the ban to written publications on birth control. The police monitored and harassed birth control activists, and they also stepped up prosecution of doctors and others performing illegal abortions. While these actions did not close off all access to birth control (the condom was kept freely available because the army valued its utility in preventing the spread of venereal disease), post-war demographers attribute the rise in birthrates from 26.6 in 1939 to 31.1 in 1941 in part to the way these prohibitions restricted the use of certain birth control techniques “by making it more difficult for people to learn of their contraceptive qualities” (Whelpton 1950: 38).

The Tōjō Cabinet in 1941 adopted an explicitly pro-natal policy aimed at using all of the persuasive powers of the state to encourage marriage and child-bearing. The Population Problems Institute of the newly-formed Ministry of Health and Welfare (MHW) declared that year that in order to reach the state’s target of five babies per woman, it would adopt policies aimed at lowering the marriage age for women from 24.4 to 21. With government support, patriotic young women’s groups set up marriage counselling centres designed “to cause women to move from an individualistic view of marriage to a national one.”¹ The state also established matchmaking centres, asked employers to offer special bonuses to workers who had babies, and promised free

¹ Nihon Seinenkan, *Dai Nihon Seishonendanshi* [History of the Greater Japan youth and child group], quoted in Havens (1975: 927).

higher education to families who had more than ten children (Havens 1975: 928). Finally, to encourage soldiers to marry and start families, the government offered special furloughs to single soldiers before deploying them for duty overseas. It also gave inductees advance warning so that they could get married before joining the military (Whelpton 1950: 35).

These extra efforts in the early 1940s helped keep birth rates above the lows of the late 1930s in 1940–42, and probably kept birth rates higher than they would have been during the years when World War II imposed the greatest deprivations on the Japanese home islands, but they ultimately could not prevent a steep fall in births as families faced growing difficulty obtaining food and other necessities of life (Whelpton 1950: 34–35). By the final year of the war, the birth rate had fallen to a record low of 23.2.

3. DEMOGRAPHY AND THE STATE IN THE EARLY POST-WAR YEARS

When the MHW's Population Problems Institute was founded in 1939, it had conceived of the "population problem" referred to in its name as involving a birth *dearth*. Almost overnight with the conclusion of the war, this institute, the bureaucracy as a whole, and Occupation authorities all came to regard the "population problem" as one of *over*-population. Defeat had led to the repatriation of eight million Japanese who had been living or fighting battles overseas. As these citizens (most of them male) returned to the home islands, many married or rejoined spouses and immediately began adding to their families, causing the birth rate to peak in 1947 at 34.3 births per 1,000 residents. Between repatriation and the baby boom, Japan's population grew by 11 million in the first five years after the war, leaving Japan with a 1950 population of 83 million that was far larger than could be sustained by its post-war economic base.

This time the state apparatus found itself pushing in the same direction as economic and social forces. Mothers struggling to find enough food to feed their families were eager to gain control their fertility, and the prewar pro-family-planning group, the Japan Birth Control League, began actively pushing for the liberalization of birth control and abortion rules as early as 1947 (Norgren 2001: 88). Furthermore, the effort to rebuild the Japanese economy after the war led to the resumption of urbanization and industrialization trends that encouraged families to limit the number of their offspring.

In 1948, the new Pharmaceutical Affairs Law repealed restrictions on sales and marketing of contraceptive drugs and compounds. Many such pharmaceuticals were approved in the year after it went into effect and were widely advertised (Whelpton 1950, 39). Reported rates of contraceptive use rose from just 19.5 percent of women under 50 in 1950 to 40 percent in 1957.²

Also in 1948 the legislature passed the Eugenic Protection Law, authorizing abortion when the health of the mother was in jeopardy or when the child was likely to be born "eugenically inferior." Just one year later, the law was revised to allow for abortion when an additional child would threaten the economic welfare of the family. While the Eugenic Protection Law initially set up special medical committees to evaluate cases before authorizing abortions, after another set of revisions in 1952 abortions were allowed at the discretion of the physician. The number of abortions performed increased quickly after the passage of these laws, rising from 320,000 in 1950 to over a million in 1953.³

Together, these measures helped Japan record a sharp decline in the birth rate, from 34.3 in 1947 to 19.4 in 1955—a pace of decline that was "unprecedented in recorded world history" (Oakley 1978: 620). By 1954, when the government's Council on Population Problems came out with a report stating explicitly that "it is necessary for the Government to adopt a policy designed to check the growth of population," it was in fact ratifying what had already been done (Taeuber 1956: 32–33).

4. DEMOGRAPHY AND THE STATE SINCE 1990

According to the fertility surveys the Populations Problems Institute conducted every five years, Japanese couples had their fertility firmly under control at a level that was projected to take Japan to zero population growth by early in the 21st century. Cohorts of women born between 1932 and 1952, the first generation to come of age in post-war Japan, had children at a remarkably stable rate. The cohorts had on average 2.01 children, with no pronounced trend upward or downward. The

² Figures are for the percentage of women under 50 who are currently practicing contraception, reported in NIPSSR (n.d., Internet), Table 11.

³ Norgren (2001: 36–52) offers an extended discussion of the Eugenic Protection Law and its revisions, emphasizing the role of the ob-gyn doctors' lobby in pushing for liberalization. Data on abortions performed are from NIPSSR (n.d., Internet), Table 10.

1932 cohort had 2.03 children, and the 1952 cohort had 2.01—numbers that were very close to the population replacement rate of 2.07 (NIPSSR, 2003: 31–33).

Yet by the time the organization got around to removing the “problem” from the English version of its name in 1996, when it became part of the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (NIPSSR), the institute’s demographic data and fertility surveys were already signalling the emergence of a new population problem.

The latest problem had its roots, as noted at the start of this essay, in the demographic after-effects of the state’s first attempt to boost Japan’s fertility rates in wartime Japan. Combined with the post-war baby boom, this effort to urge Japanese to “give birth and multiply” had created an extra large cohort of individuals born between 1941 and 1950 that was roughly 20 million strong. Japan’s demographers had known since that time that this generation, when it retired, would give Japan a much older population profile than it had had up to that point, but the gravity of the challenge the state faced did not start to sink in until after the 1973 oil crisis. As early as 1975, the MHW and the associated policy community began talking about the looming “aging society problem” Japan faced as this large cohort (then aged 25–34) approached retirement age (Campbell 1992: 210). What made their retirement years a concern was the fact that Japan had in the interim begun promising this generation of workers that they would be well-taken-care-of in their golden years. Pension programs had been established and expanded. The government had even established a program of free health care for those over 70. While these programs cost little in the 1970s, when retirees made up just eight percent of the population (NIPSSR 2003: 14), it didn’t take much mathematical skill to calculate that the cost was going to soar when the 1941–50 generation retired.

Compounding this concern about the retirement of this large cohort was evidence that this generation was going to *live longer* than expected (NIPSSR 2003: 52). Between 1997 and 2002, projected life expectancies for 2050 went up from 80 to 81 for men and from 86 to 89 for women. In the process, Japan added over three million very-old citizens to the number of elderly it expects to have to support in that year.⁴

Japan’s most recent “population problem” started with this concern about a surplus of old people, but there was little the state could do to

⁴ Data for the 1997 projections are from Takahashi *et al.* (1999: 108, 113); Data for the 2002 projections are from NIPSSR (2002: 12, 17).

alter this demographic projection. Instead, the Japanese state's efforts to deal with its new population problem have again focused on *fertility*. Here again, its latest efforts are being shaped in various ways by its previous attempts to influence fertility trends. The problem is that the Japanese government's attempts to use "birth control as a fundamental solution" to its population problems, as Prime Minister Yoshida put it in 1949, proved too successful too quickly. Each 10-year cohort born since 1941–50 has been smaller than that one, and recent ones have been much smaller. Between 1991 and 2000, just 12 million babies were born, making this cohort just 62 percent the size of the one born between 1941 and 50. Japan's birth rate, which stood at 34.3 in 1947, was down to 8.8 in 2004 (see Figure 1 above). Cohorts of women *completing* their periods of fertility recently continue to have about two children on average, but the "total fertility rate"—which captures the fertility behaviour of women aged 15 to 40—has fallen to one of the lowest levels in the world. It stood at 1.29 in 2003 and 2004.⁵

The demographers working at the Populations Problems Institute saw this trend emerging and began to fret about it as early as the 1980s, but most of Japan did not wake up to Japan's "declining fertility problem" (*shōshika mondai*) until 1990 when the institute reported that the total fertility rate (TFR) for the previous year had fallen to 1.57. This report came to be known as the "1.57 shock," not because the rate was that much lower than rates up to that point (it had been 1.66 the year before), but because the TFR had fallen below the previous record low recorded in 1966 when it fell abruptly for one calendar year as couples adjusted family planning to avoid giving birth to a daughter during the Chinese zodiac year of the fire-horse (*hinoeuma*). According to superstition, women born in one of these years are likely to gnaw their husbands to death, a prospect that makes them unattractive candidates for marriage.⁶ That the fertility rate had fallen below the 1966 level even though 1989 was *not* an unlucky year signalled to many that the falling fertility rate was a real problem. As one government commission noted in 1990, "Just

⁵ NIPSSR (2006: 18). The total fertility rate is a demographic statistic that is calculated by taking the actual number of children born to all women between 15 and 40 and then adding to this an extrapolated number of children younger women between these ages can be expected to have if they give birth at the rates of those above them in age. Thus, for example, if women aged 27 give birth to an average of 0.12 children in a given year, the TFR is calculated by assuming all women between 15 and 26 will go on and have 0.12 children during the year when they are 27.

⁶ The year of the fire horse arrives once every 60 years. See Ueno (1998: 103).

as in the last days of the Roman empire, the decrease in the number of children is a sign of the decline of civilization.”⁷

What worried government demographers more than a “fall of civilization,” in fact, was the implications of the declining fertility rate for the fiscal sustainability of state social insurance programs for the elderly. It was bad enough that the retirement of the 1941–50 generation was going to cause the costs of these programs to soar in the 2010s and beyond. Now the state was faced with the prospect of having to finance these costs on the backs of cohorts even smaller than the 12 million born in 1991–2000. How much smaller were these cohorts going to be? Was there anything the government could do to reverse recent trends and encourage Japanese couples to have more babies—more future *taxpayers*? The goal was no longer an increase in the number of soldiers and colonists to carry the Japanese flag across Asia, but government demographers in the 1990s began to study and brood about fertility trends in much the same way their predecessors had in wartime.

For many reasons, however, the state could not return to the policies that had boosted Japanese birth rates in the early 1940s. A constitution guaranteeing freedom of the press made it impossible to ban advertising for contraceptives. The fact that women now had a vote, and after fifty years of access to abortion were not about to let the state take this option away, ruled out any effort to restrict the availability of abortion services. Even less threatening policy proposals, like the suggestion that the government promote marriage or expand the size of the child allowance, caused women’s groups to raise objections on the grounds that decisions about whether to marry or have children were *private* matters and should not be subject to influence by the state. As Yuriko Ashino, the deputy director of the Family Planning Federation of Japan put it, “Population control deserves praise rather than criticism. You won’t find today’s women having babies for the sake of their country or because someone told them to.”⁸

As Ashino’s reference to “*today’s* women” suggests, much of the resistance to the government’s new pro-natalism was a direct reaction to the way *yesterday’s* women had been pushed into having babies on behalf of the state under wartime *umeyo fuyaseyo* policies. Not only professional feminists like Ashino but rank and file members of the govern-

⁷ Quoted by Suzuki (1995: 14).

⁸ Quoted in Suzuki (1995: 16).

ment bureaucracy working on the government's policy response were constrained by this historical memory. When I asked MHLW officials whether they considered raising fertility rates a goal, they uniformly brought up this historical legacy to explain why the government could not make this an explicit goal.⁹ One official who had worked for many years with like-minded officials to advance women's issues within the ministry recalled the "repulsion" (*hanpatsu*) expressed by members of her group when it was proposed that they seek to use the decline in fertility as a reason for advancing policies promoting gender equality. "Many didn't want to say anything that suggested women needed to have more children," she recalled. Over time, they have become more comfortable with using the declining fertility trend as a reason to "create an environment in which women who want to have children can do so," but the goal is always expressed in this way in order to avoid arousing memories of the *umeyo fuyaseyo* period.¹⁰ The government's challenge in the latest period of concern about demography has therefore been to find ways of reversing the downward trend in fertility rates without using any of the aggressive tactics that worked (to some degree) in the 1940s and *without even openly discussing* the goal of influencing fertility rates.

As a result of this constrained deliberative process, the steps the government took in the period immediately after the "1.57 shock" were tentative and ultimately ineffectual. The first policy package, the Angel Plan of 1994, focused narrowly on the goal of expanding child-care services. Replicating the model of the Gold Plans for the elder care services, it set specific targets for expanding child-care services: an increase in the number of spaces in child-care centres (especially for children aged 1–2); longer hours of service (so that parents would have an extra hour in the evening before they needed to pick up their children); and specialty services (sick child-care centres; weekend coverage). That there was pent up demand for child-care spots was clear, since many centres, especially in growing suburban areas of Tokyo and Kansai, had long

⁹ Interviews with MHLW officials, April and May 2001. It seems that attitudes have changed (or have been over-ruled) since these interviews were conducted. In November 2006, the MHLW announced that it was going to set a fertility target of 1.4 and attempt to boost fertility to this level through a variety of policies (*Daily Yomiuri* 11/11/2006: 3).

¹⁰ Interview with Chihoko Asada, May 9, 2001.

waiting lists. It was also clear that these expanded services would make life easier for working parents, and especially working mothers.¹¹

What was not clear was whether these expanded services would have any impact on fertility rates. There was little deliberation about the relationship between this policy initiative and fertility behaviour, and fertility rates kept falling after 1994. By the time NIPSSR announced its new population projections in 1997, the total fertility rate had fallen to 1.39.

MHW officials gradually came to the realization that their efforts to address child-care service needs, by themselves, were not going to address the deeper causes of the declining fertility problem. Through discussions of the Council on Population Problems (*Jinkō Mondai Shingikai*), culminating in the publication of its analysis of the causes of declining fertility in 1997, policymakers came to realize that the roots of the problem lay in the structure of Japan's employment system, which imposed steep opportunity costs on working mothers (JMS 1997, Internet). Even with expanded child-care services and a program of child-care leave introduced in 1992, mothers of young children were finding it difficult to meet the expectations of their employers, but the system provided little room for such mothers to slow down or take a break while their children were young. If they quit or went part-time, they were likely to find it difficult ever to move back onto the career track since Japan's "lifetime employment system" continued to reserve the best jobs for young people hired right out of college or in their first years out of school. Neither did this system give these women's husbands much opportunity to help out at home. This basic incompatibility between the Japanese employment system and childrearing, the advisory council argued, was causing couples to have fewer children and turning off young women to the idea of marriage.

Michiko Mukuno, the MHW official who took the lead in overseeing the work of the *Jinkō Mondai Shingikai*, admits that government officials failed to grasp the extent of social change that would be needed to tackle the declining fertility problem when they began addressing the issue with the first Angel Plan.¹² Only after the publication of this commission's report, and the adoption of a more comprehensive approach to the declining fertility problem with the New Angel plan in 1999 and

¹¹ For details on the Angel Plans, see Schoppa 2006: 170–174.

¹² Mukuno is quoted in Kabashima (2000: 99).

the Plus One Plan in 2003, did the government begin putting in policies based on a clear *logic* linking them to increased fertility rates. The approach was also based on social scientific evidence which showed that fertility rates were higher in nations such as Sweden that imposed lower opportunity costs on working mothers. In the Swedish case, fertility rates went up after the state made child-care leave more generous.

The problem Japanese officials have confronted, in the years since they began putting in place policies based on this design, is that they are once again confronting powerful social and economic forces that lie behind the opportunity cost structure they blame for the steep fall in fertility rates. The government has attempted to make the Japanese employment system more accommodating for working parents by introducing a year of paid child-care leave (now compensated at a rate of 40 percent of income), requiring firms to offer shorter hours and flex time to working parents of children under three, and further expanding child-care services, but it has been unwilling to challenge the broader structure of the lifetime employment system that makes moving in and out of careers so costly for Japanese women. The government's leave and flex time programs, moreover, have failed to challenge entrenched gender-role norms that cause *mothers* to claim most of the new benefits for working *parents*. The only attempt to push fathers to do more to help out at home was legislation passed in 2003 obliging employers to fashion "specific plans" for helping employees balance work and family lives. The Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare announced at the time this legislation passed that it hoped many firms would adopt plans encouraging fathers to take time off from work to spend time helping with newborns, but it betrayed its limited expectations by suggesting that it hoped *ten percent* of fathers would take advantage of plans allowing fathers *five days* of leave after the child was first born (Schoppa 2006: 167). Even this degree of intrusion in employment practices was strongly criticized by employers' organizations.

Ten years after the *Jinkō Mondai Shingikai* revealed its strategy for boosting fertility rates by reducing the opportunity costs of motherhood, the state has so far had little impact on either opportunity costs or fertility rates. The proportion of mothers working fulltime with young children is actually *down* since 1992. The proportion working part-time with young children has barely changed.¹³ The number of

¹³ See data cited in Schoppa (2006: 179).

fathers taking child-care leave is miniscule. In 2005, the total fertility rate fell to a new record low of 1.25.¹⁴

5. CONCLUSION

The history of the Japanese state's attempts to shape demographic trends makes it clear that Japanese officials care deeply about the size and structure of their population. They need people to man the Japanese military and the nation's industrial base and to pay the taxes needed to cover the government's fiscal commitments, but they also worry when the population has *too many* poor or old people that require large transfer payments and social services. The state has attempted to steer population trends between the shoals of too few and too many, making extraordinary efforts to influence demographics in wartime, after the nation's defeat, and since 1990. What we also see in this history, however, is the way social and economic forces and prior policies condition the degree to which the state is able to achieve its demographic objectives.

When it attempted to boost fertility rates through aggressive interference in birth control efforts of private citizens during the war, the Japanese state was able to temporarily increase birth rates, but only at the cost of burdening future efforts with memories of these very controversial interventions. After the war, in contrast, the state was able to accelerate the sharp reduction in fertility rates with very little backlash since it was working with social and economic forces that were compelling couples to control family size for their own reasons. In the most recent period, the state has had virtually no success in influencing fertility rates because it is working against powerful social and economic forces and a historical legacy that made explicit pro-natalism a taboo. Though the government eventually identified a relatively uncontroversial logic designed to boost fertility rates by reducing opportunity costs, it has been unable to shift policies that define the opportunity cost structure sufficiently to reverse the decline in birth rates.

¹⁴ See data in *Daily Yomiuri* (11 November 2006: 3).

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