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DEMOGRAPHIC CRISIS IN JAPAN AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF ATTEMPTS TO BUILD FAMILY-FRIENDLY SOCIAL POLICY TOOLS

ABSTRACT Albite Japan has been experiencing unfavourable demographic changes for socio-economic development for at least half a century, it is only in recent years that we have noted measures there aimed at no longer preventing the demographic crisis itself, but at mitigating its effects. All available statistical data confirm the demographic trend observed in the country, characterised on the one hand by an increase in life expectancy (which in itself is inherently a positive trend), and on the other by a low fertility rate (which reflects negatively on both the sustainability of the social fabric and the development of the national economy). In other words, it eventually leads to an extremely rapid ageing process in Japanese society. This rapidness can be judged when we contrast Japan's natural change rate of -2 in 2007 with an alarming -609 per thousand population in 2021.[1] The purpose of the article is therefore, firstly, to identify the sources of the demographic crisis in Japan, and secondly, based on them, to carry out a comparative analysis of the case in question to deter-

[1] Statistics Bureau – Ministry of Internal Affair and Communications Japan, *Japan Statistical Yearbook 2023,* 2022, *2-1 Total Population. B 1920 to 2021*, at https://www.stat.go.jp/data/nenkan/72nenkan/zuhyou/y720201b00.xlsx, 21 March 2023.

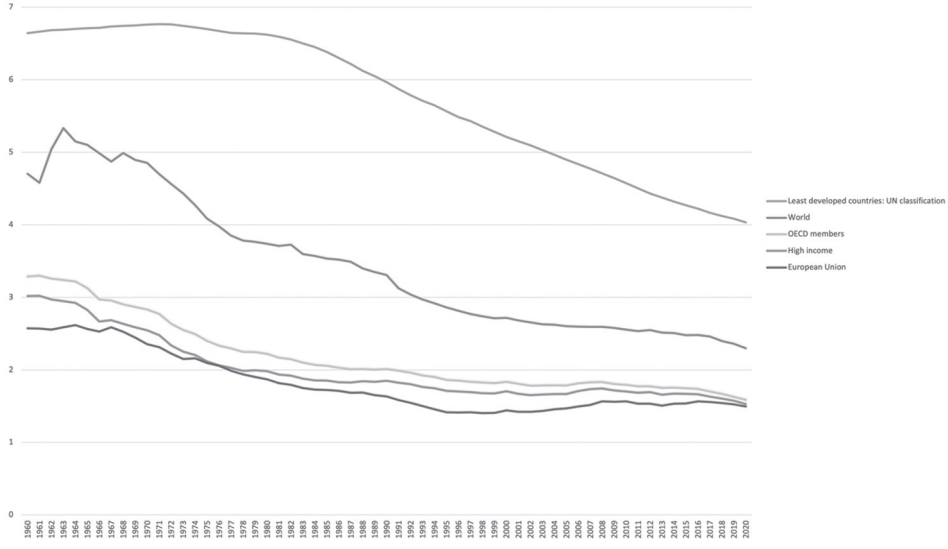
mine factors which have a decisive influence on the problem and to detect whether their occurrence is characteristic only for the Land of the Cherry Blossoms. All this can be referred here to Japan's current social policy and constitute answer the question of whether it is, or not, overdue in the context of the titular issue.

Keywords: demographic crisis, low fertility rate, ageing population, Japan

INTRODUCTION

A review of the agenda of contemporary issues of transnational nature reveals that among the most frequently mentioned questions is the phenomenon of population ageing in highly developed countries. Nowadays, this problem affects almost all of the countries of the European Union (except the Czech Republic) and those that are affiliated with the organisation of highly developed countries of the OECD (with the exception of Israel). That the aforementioned problem is not the sole affliction of Japan is best shown by statistics from the United Nations 2021 report, citing data from 2015-2019, according to which, out of 197 countries, as many as 81 states faced low fertility rates.[2]

Figure 1. Average fertility rates for the least developed countries (according to the UN classification), the World, OECD members, high-income countries, European Union from 1960 to 2020



Source: own compilation based on The World Bank. Data, *Fertility rate, total* at https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN, 21 March 2023.

[2] United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Policies 2021: Policies Related to Fertility*, New York 2021, at https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org.development.desa.pd/files/undesa_pd_2021_wpp-fertility_policies.pdf, 21 March 2023, pp. 5-6, 10.

However, what is surprising concerning the title process is the fact that regardless of cultural, social, economic or political factors, the abovementioned problem affects, to a similar degree, countries of the Confucian culture (such as Japan, South Korea) and the Judeo-Christian culture (such as Germany, Poland), open to migration (Germany) as well as closed to it (Japan), democratising their political system (South Korea) as well as those regarded as models of democratic system (Germany), at last being economic giants (Japan, Germany) as well as those just entering the path of accelerated development (Poland).

At the same time, it gives a great deal of food for thought, and yet such observation, that despite the urgent nature of the title phenomenon, it was not taken seriously for a considerable period of time. It was rather considered to belong to phenomena, to put it humorously, of meteorological nature, and therefore transitory and changeable like the weather. The danger was basically unperceived. And even if it was noticed, no conclusions were drawn from warning voices and symptoms of the impending demographic regression with regard to the need for a long-term approach to modelling current national demographic policies and, what should follow, the country's own social policies.

The failure to pursue a clearly defined national demographic policy for many years has been so glaringly reflected only in Japan. Indeed, years of ignoring the meaningfulness of numbers relating to demographics have had the effect that the Land of the Cherry Blossoms is among the world's top countries with the lowest indicators in terms of the birth rate, fertility rate, percentage of children and adolescents (under 15) as well as the highest indicators in terms of the proportion of the elderly (65+) in the overall population structure.

Table 1. Selected demographic indicators of Japan from the years 1960-2021

	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2020	2021
Population growth (natural)	0,98%	1,15%	0,71%	0,29%	0,15%	-0,16%	-0,55%	-0,61%
Fertility rates	2,00	2,13	1,75	1,54	1,36	1,39	1,33	1,30
Young population (people aged less than 15)	30,2%	24%	23,5%	18,2%	14,6%	13,1%	12,0%	11,8%
Elderly population (people aged 65 and over)	5,72%	7,06%	9,1%	12,08%	17,73%	23,02%	28,56%	28,86%

Source: own compilation based on OECD reports: *Young population*, at https://data.oecd.org/pop/young-population.htm#indicator-chart, 21 March 2023; *Elderly population*, at https://data.oecd.org/pop/elderly-population.htm#indicator-chart, 21 March 2023; *Fertility rates*, at https://data.oecd.org/pop/fertility-rates.htm#indicator-chart, 21 March 2023.

Amid all this, it becomes difficult to remain silent about the fact that the contemporary "discovery" in the public discourse of the subject of population ageing is surprising since, after all, this problem is a process that has been affecting Japan for some time. Even a casual comparative review of variously constructed demographic diagrams created in relation to the issue shows conclusively that the process of inversion of the so-called demographic pyramid could be observed as early as 20-30 years ago. Thus, the acceptance of this observation as accurate leads to the conclusion that the policy of the Land of the Cherry Blossoms has been unable or unwilling to find a satisfactory solution to the problem in question for many years. Perhaps because, as the research assumption may be formulated here, the long-term demographic policy has became a victim of the short-sighted political play in Japan. Paul Johnson's statement[3] that the politicians see *res publica* only in terms of voting has lost nothing of its relevance and is still strong regardless of political colours in power at any given time.

With rising the average life expectancy in mind, the simplest explanation of ageing process allows it to be contrasted with demographic growth. Low or even negative demographic growth, as in the case of Japan, is unquestionably a key factor contributing to the country's ageing population. In fact, the increasingly lower fertility rate which fluctuates around a value of over 2.0 implies that we are no longer dealing with generational replacement but with gradual shrinking of the population. This appears to be borne out by the *Demographic Transition Theory* whereby the transition of societies from a phase of high birth rates to its low values may be believed to accompany the inevitable demographic development of societies. According to Dirk Jan van de Kaa,[4] however, the introduction of a new factor into such a sketched model – the migration balance – raises questions about such a demographic process. Nevertheless, it becomes difficult to undermine the theory mentioned above if one considers the indication by Rajmund Mydel[5] that migrant countries with a large number of allochthons (i.e. migrants) like Germany or the US are heading towards the demographic old age.

Bearing in mind the issue featured in the title, this demonstrates how crucial the very question of considering the determinants of fertility is. Still, the factor in question cannot be regarded as the only one affecting the ageing of societies. Indeed, rising life expectancy is among the others commonly found in the literature.[6] According to statistical evidence, we are not only living longer, but also our quality of life, despite the advanced age, is improving. Nonetheless, it should be stressed that while both of these processes must be viewed as a positive and even desirable phenomenon, it is the occurrence of a low birth rate in parallel with these changes that translates into an accelerated rate of population ageing.

3 P. Johnson, *A History of the Modern World: from 1917 to the 1980s*, London 1983, p. 682.

4 D.J. van de Kaa, "Is the Second Demographic Transition a Useful Research Concept? Questions and Answers," *Vienna Yearbook of Population Research*, vol. 2 (2004), p. 6.

5 R. Mydel, *Japonia w procesie przejścia od demograficznej dojrzałości do demograficznego schyłku*, Kraków 2016, pp. 20-21.

6 E. Frątczak, "Population Ageing in Poland," in A. Hoff (ed.), *Population Ageing in Central and Eastern Europe: Societal and Policy Implications*, London 2016, p. 12.

THE HARBINGERS AND THE COURSE OF THE DEMOGRAPHIC CRISIS IN JAPAN

So far, the occurrence of low birth rates has most often been associated with either armed conflicts or epidemics. Economic crises, religious upheavals, cultural changes or industrial (technical) revolutions have also been mentioned among the causes, albeit less frequently. Human fertility historically responded to these external shocks by declining as a reaction to rising mortality, typically with a nine-month lag, and bouncing back one or two years later, what was observed due to 1918 influenza pandemic and 2015 Zika virus outbreak in Brazil.[7] Yet, the phenomenon of ageing populations that we are currently witnessing has by all indications other and not yet clearly defined causes. Worse still, it is neither a passing trend nor is it confined to a handful number of nations, as long-term statistics analysis demonstrates.

In line with the well-recited opinion, Japan only entered the phase of an ageing society in the 1970s. A deeper analysis of the statistical material, however, shows that the symptoms revealing potential demographic problems in Japanese society had emerged much earlier. After all, available demographic data shows that this reversal progressed from 1872 to 1944, despite the fact that from 1872 to 1944 Japan's population increased in absolute numbers by more than 39 million people, from 34.8 million to 74.4 million,[8] since 1920 a decline in the number of births has been noticeable. The census conducted in 1935 (the second by Western methodology after the 1918-1920 census), clearly recorded this decline especially in the central part of the largest of Japan's islands – Honshu. Based on the data compiled at the time, it is clear that although the decline was not steep in its course and the Japanese were still dealing with the increased reproduction rate, the fertility rate steadily declined from 5.24 to 4.36 between 1920 and 1937.[9]

What is noteworthy here is that, in the case of Japan, the number of children born to married couples was the key to calculating fertility rates . Accordingly, the noticeable decline in the number of married women in 1935 compared to 1920 was precisely reflected in the reduced birth rates. Indeed, the percentage of married women of childbearing age (15-49) fell from 68.3% to 64.1% between 1920 and 1935.[10] The fact that the analysed decline in fertility was not at the same time a temporary, incidental phenomenon is revealed by the 1950 census. Drawing on it, and obviously considering the regularities of Rosset's demographic law of war, we can speak of a further deepening of the process in question.[11]

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7 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Policies 2021: Policies Related...*, p. 27.

8 Y. Tsubouchi, "Changes in Fertility in Japan by Region: 1920-1965," *Demography*, vol. 7(2) (1970), pp. 124-125.

9 K. Yamaguchi, S. Takahashi, *Trends of Population Reproduction in Japan*, Tokyo 1966, p. 20.

10 Y. Okazaki, *An Analysis of Decline of Birth Rate in Japan*, Tokyo 1967, p. 31.

11 Y. Tsubouchi, "Changes in Fertility in Japan by Region...," pp. 124-125.

Naturally, the interpretation of the data presented cannot overlook, among the causes of the process mentioned in the title, those factors that left a significant imprint on Japan's demography, which can be perceived even today. These include the invasion of China undertaken by Japan in the 1930s, and especially its involvement in World War II on the German and Italian side. According to Japanese government calculations, between 1937 and 1945, 1,740,955 Japanese soldiers were killed. Civilian casualties, on the other hand, were estimated at about 393,000. Moreover, among more than 1.3 million soldiers and civilians who surrendered to the Red Army in August 1945, only about milion returned to Japan over the next few years.[12]

In contrast, Japan's demographic status in the immediate post-war years was certainly impacted by the return of more than 4.4 milion soldiers from the war front.[13] In accordance with the generally known principles of post-war demographic compensation, this explains why a population boom was recorded between 1947 and 1949, despite the apparent numerical decline in Japan's total population following wartime losses. In fact, each year, during the mentioned period, approximately 2.7 million children were born. However, that *baby boom* was, as it turned out, short-lived, and by 1950 there was a marked decline in the number of childbirths to 2 million per year.[14] At the same time, if one considers that the birth-rate in question actually fell by more than half from 4.54 children per woman of reproductive age on average in 1947 to 2.04 children in 1957, it is not surprising to assess that this was one of the most striking declines in such a short period of time globally.[15]

LIBERALISATION OF THE ABORTION LAW AND FALLING FERTILITY RATES IN JAPAN

The steep decline in the number of births recorded since 1950 can be explained, at least in part, by the amendment to the abortion law initiated in 1948,[16] which was essentially a departure from the 1880 penalisation of intentionally causing foetal expulsion.[17] This change resulted in more than one million abortions per year in Japan between 1953 and 1961, as the figures quoted further demonstrate. Subsequent amendments to the law in question in 1949 and 1952, facilitating abortions for economic reasons,[18] were

12 J.W. Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*, New York 1993, p. 299.

13 Ibid., p. 298.

14 M. Atoh, "Japan's Population Growth During the Past 100 Years," in F. Coulmas, et al. (eds), *The Demographic Challenge: A Handbook about Japan*, Leiden 2008, p. 10.

15 N. Ogawa, et al., "Japan's Unprecedented Ageing and Changing Intergenerational Transfers," in T. Ito, A.K. Rose (eds), *The Economic Consequences of Demographic Change in East Asia*, Chicago–London 2010, p. 134.

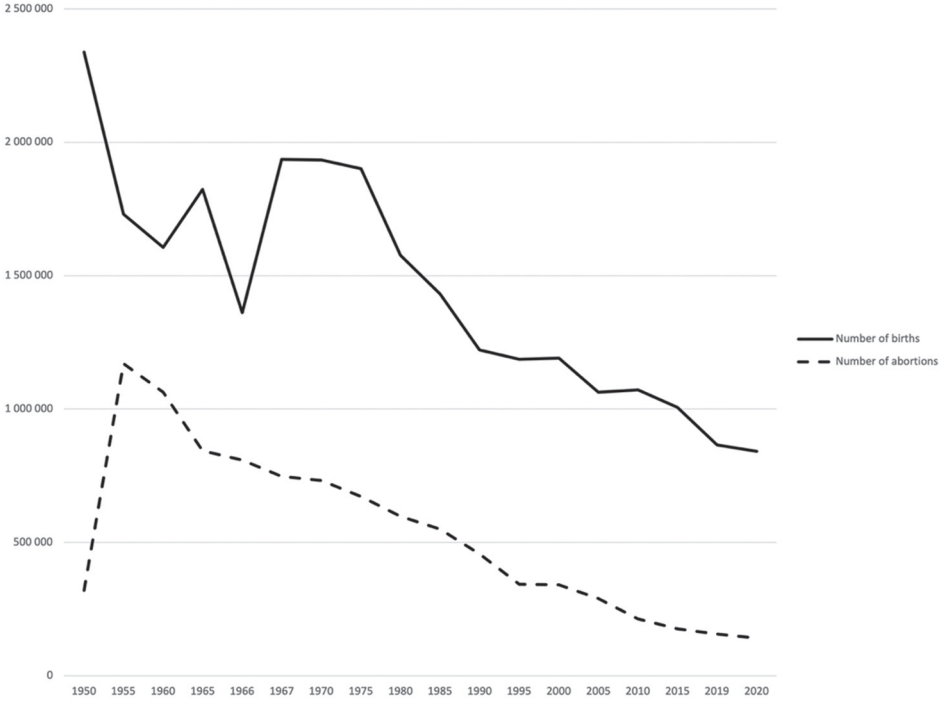
16 M. Kato, *Women's Rights?: The Politics of Eugenic Abortion in Modern Japan*, Amsterdam 2009, p. 44.

17 M. Atoh, "Japan's Population Growth...," pp. 6-8.

18 M. Hashimoto, "Economics of Post-War Fertility in Japan: Differentials and Trends," *Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 82, no. 2, part 2 (1974), p. 174; M. Kato, *Women's Rights?...*, p. 44.

also reflected in their high numbers. This is particularly evident in the 1960s, when there was an increasingly widespread concept that the 2+2 family model was optimal. Thus, some families with two children decided to terminate subsequent pregnancies for this very reason.[19]

Figure 2. Number of births vs. number of abortions from 1950 to 2021



Source: own compilation based on: MHLW (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare), *Handbook of Health and Welfare Statistics 2021: Major Indexes of Vital Statistics (number and percent) by year*, 2021, at https://www.mhlw.go.jp/english/database/db-hh/1-2.html, 21 March 2023; MHLW, *Handbook of Health and Welfare Statistics 2021: Number and percentage of induced abortion by age group, by year*, 2021, at https://www.mhlw.go.jp/english/database/db-hh/2-1.html, 21 March 2023; IPSS (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research), 人口統計資料集. 表４－２０人工妊娠中絶数および不妊手術数：1949～2018年, 2020, at https://www.ipss.go.jp/syoushika/tohkei/Popular/P_Detail2020.asp?fname=T04-20.htm, 21 March 2023; IPSS, 全国, 生命表データ: 出生数, 1 March 2022, at https://www.ipss.go.jp/p-toukei/JMD/00/STATS/Births.txt, 21 March 2023.

The scale of the problem is even more emphasised by juxtaposing the number of births with the number of abortions. While a decline in the absolute number of abortions can be noted against the total number of births, its correlation with the proportionally declining total number of births becomes apparent. The latest official statistics

[19] Ch. Ueno, "The Declining Birth-rate: Whose Problem?," *Review of Population and Social Policy*, vol. 7, (1998), pp. 103-105.

including births and abortions in absolute figures, up to 2020, clearly show this correlation. In 1950, 2,337,507 births and 320,150 abortions were noted, in 1960 – 1,606,041 births with an unusually high number of abortions, i.e. 1,063,256, in 1970 – 1,934,239 births and 732,033 abortions, in 1980 – 1,576,889 and 598,084, in 1990 – 1,221,585 and 456,797, in 2000 – 1,190,547 and 341,146, in 2010 – 1,071,305 and 212,694, and in 2020 – 840,835 and 141,433 respectively.[20]

While Japan's demographic situation temporarily stabilised starting in the 1960s, it only lasted until the mid-1970s[21] when the birth rate began to decline again.[22] The only anomaly here is the year 1966 which saw a marked decline in the number of births with an increase in the preceding and following year. This phenomenon is associated with the occurrence of the so-called "Fire Horse" (hinoe uma 丙午) year in the Chinese calendar. This sign occurs once every sixty years, and it is traditionally assumed that girls born under this sign will bring bad luck to the whole family. Correspondingly, the number of births fell by as much as 31% compared to 1965 – from 1,823,697 to 1,360,974 – only to spike sharply again in 1967 by 42%– to 1,935,647 which was the highest level in the entire decade of the 1960s.[23]

While recording the decline in the number of abortions, it is noteworthy to point out that they occurred in the greatest number in similar age groups, yet even here we notice changes since the mid-1990s. Based on the available data from 2000 as well as 2020, 24% and 25% of the procedures in question concerned women aged 20-24, respectively. In the 25-29 age group, it was 21% and 20%; in the 30-34 age group, the percentage of procedures was 18% and 19%, while in the 35-40 group it was 16% and 18%, respectively.[24] This is a noticeable change, as from 1955 until 1995 women aged 30-34 constituted the predominant group. The second largest group during that period comprised younger women – aged 25-29. The aforementioned change only became clear after 1995 when 20- to 24-year-olds became the dominant group.[25] Considering Japan's

[20] MHLW, *Handbook of Health and Welfare Statistics 2021: Major Indexes of Vital Statistics (number and percent) by year*, 2021, at https://www.mhlw.go.jp/english/database/db-hh/1-2.html, 21 March 2023; MHLW, *Handbook of Health and Welfare Statistics 2021: Number and percentage of induced abortion by age group, by year*, 2021, at https://www.mhlw.go.jp/english/database/db-hh/2-1.html, 21 March 2023; IPSS 人口統計資料集. 表４－２０人工妊娠中絶数および不妊手術数：1949～2018年, 2020, at https://www.ipss.go.jp/syoushika/tohkei/Popular/P_Detail2020.asp?fname=T04-20.htm, 21 March 2023; IPSS, 全国, 生命表データ: 出生数, 1 March 2022, at https://www.ipss.go.jp/p-toukei/JMD/00/STATS/Births.txt, 21 March 2023.

[21] S. Fukuda, "The Socio-Economic Status of Women and Marital Fertility in Post-War Japan: Effects on Education, Employment and Family Structure on Parity Transitions," *The Journal of Population Studies*, vol. 40 (2007), p. 90.

[22] N. Ogawa, et al., "Japan's Unprecedented Ageing...," pp. 134-135.

[23] IPSS, 全国, 生命表データ: 出生数, 1 March 2022, at https://www.ipss.go.jp/p-toukei/JMD/00/STATS/Births.txt, 21 March 2023.

[24] MHLW, *Handbook of Health and Welfare Statistics 2021: Number and percentage of induced abortion by age group, by year*, 2021, at https://www.mhlw.go.jp/english/database/db-hh/2-1.html, 21 March 2023.

[25] R. Sato, N. Shiraishi, R. Bando, *Induced Abortion in Japan: A Demographic Analysis of Its Trends and Causes*, Tokyo 2008, p. 2.

data on the number of abortions, we must mention that these figures may differ from the actual state of affairs, since the costs of abortions are not only covered by insurance companies, but they are mostly paid in cash. This, in turn, implies a temptation to evade the tax system and leads to unreliable data representation in the official statistics.[26]

While touching upon the abovementioned issue, it cannot be overlooked that under the "Maternal Health Law" (Botaihogohō 母体保護法), amended in 2013, a legal abortion can be performed in Japan if one of the following conditions occurs:

- the continuation of pregnancy or childbirth may, for physical or economic reasons, substantially harm the health of the mother;
- the pregnancy is the result of rape or the woman got pregnant without being able to oppose or refuse it.

In this process, the termination of pregnancy can be performed only after obtaining the joint consent of the woman and her husband. Such consent is not required when the father of the child is unknown, incapable of expressing his will, or when the woman is unmarried.[27] The Japanese text of the law refers to haigūsha 配偶者, or a person who has acquired the status of a spouse. However, the cited law does not take into account the situation where a man and a woman are not in a formal relationship.

Among the most frequently quoted reasons for taking the decision to terminate a pregnancy, the top ranking are: the cost of child support (30.1%), the fear of having a retarded child due to getting pregnant too late (29.6%) and the high cost of the child's education (28.3%).[28] The data presented is borne out by research conducted in 2015. The following factors were identified as the main reasons for not having the desired number of children: the high costs in raising and educating children (56.3%), the reluctance to have children at an older age (39.8%) and the inability to conceive (23.5%). These factors were followed by unwillingness to embrace the mental or psychological burden of raising children (17.6%), own health problems (16.4%) and willingness/need to make sacrifices for the career (15.2%).[29] As a complementary point, it should be highlighted that abortion and deliberate choice not to have children are two different issues, but in the Japanese context abortion is commonly seen in these categories, however drastic it may sound, as a contraceptive due to society's highly reluctant attitude towards contraception in general.[30]

The long-standing heated public debate prior to 1999 about the commercial authorisation of the contraceptive pill in Japan is also noteworthy here. One of the

[26] Y. Sugimoto, *An Introduction to Japanese Society*, Cambridge 2021, p. 188.

[27] MOJ (Ministry of Justice, Japan), *Maternal Health Law*, Act No. 84 of 2013, *Japanese Law Translation*, 2013, at https://www.japaneselawtranslation.go.jp/en/laws/view/2603#je_ch3at1, 21 March 2023.

[28] Ch. Ueno, "The Declining Birth-rate...," pp. 103-105.

[29] IPSS, *The Fifteenth Japanese National Fertility Survey in 2015: Marriage Process and Fertility of Married Couple: Attitudes toward Marriage and Family among Japanese Singles*, 2015, at http://www.ipss.go.jp/ps-doukou/j/doukou15/doukou15_gaiyo.asp, 21 March 2023, p. 53.

[30] T. Norgren, "Abortion before Birth Control: The Interest Group Politics Behind Post-War Japanese Reproduction Policy," *The Journal of Japanese Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1 (1998), p. 59.

arguments raised against its authorisation was the alleged cause-and-effect relationship between the moral freedom of women achieved through it and the growing spread of AIDS. For this reason, the pill was initially only recognised as a medicine and was not prescribed as a contraceptive. Nevertheless, it is interesting that the discussion on the legal approval of Viagra continued in Japan for less than six months, without seeking its impact on the morality of men. It should be added, however, that this negative attitude towards the use of the contraceptive pill resulted also from reports of deformed babies being born, which was mistakenly blamed on the contraceptive rather than the use of thalidomide. This explains why condom use and abortion have become the main methods in Japan to control the reproduction rate. According to 2016 data, only 4% of couples controlling their fertility resorted to the contraceptive pill, while the bulk of them (about 82%) used condoms.[31]

FACING THE TREND OF PROCRASTINATION WHEN STARTING A FAMILY IN JAPAN

At the same time, with the decline in the number of children being born, there was a trend towards an increase in the average age of men and women getting married,[32] which continues to this day. The latter is of particular relevance here, as the declining birth rate is explained in part by two factors: women marrying progressively later and the increasing percentage of people remaining single.

The fact that the significance of the processes beginning at that time was not recognised initially is shown by another similar study. While in 1975 nearly 48% of men aged 25-29 were reported to have never married, by 2010 this percentage rose as high as 72%.[33] Nevertheless, the fertility rate for people in formal relationships is surprising, as it remained relatively constant until the mid-1980s. Given the declining fertility rate since 1975, this leads to the conclusion that one of the reasons for the demographic changes in question was a smaller proportion of the population getting married or doing so at a later age,[34] which postponed their decision to procreate.[35]

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31 Y. Sugimoto, *An Introduction*..., pp. 186-187.

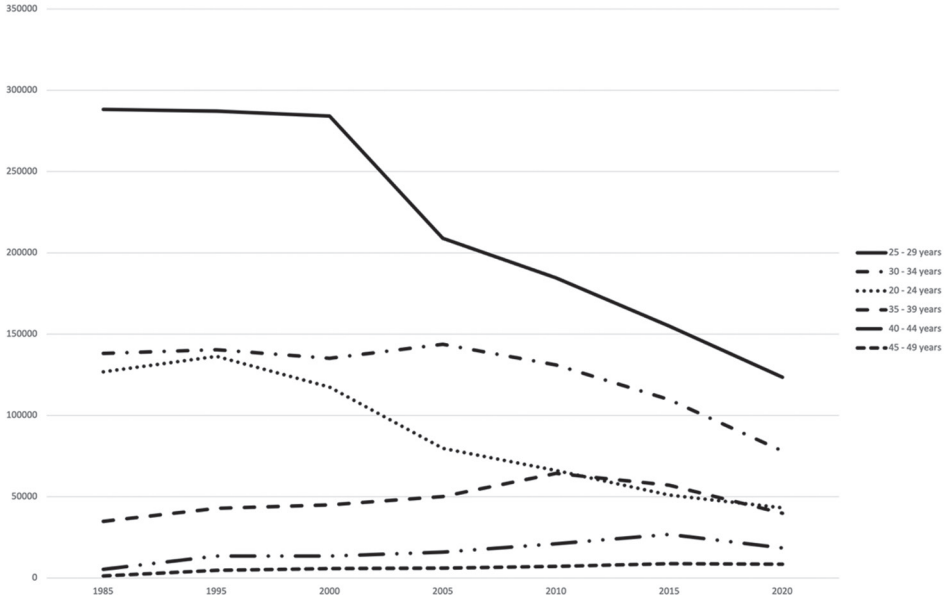
32 Statistics Bureau – Ministry of Internal Affair and Communications Japan, *Statistical Handbook of Japan 2021*, 2021, at https://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/handbook/pdf/2021all.pdf#page=23, 21 March 2023, p. 16.

33 N.O. Tsuya, "Below-Replacement Fertility in Japan: Patterns, Factors, and Policy Implementations," in R.R. Rindfuss, M.K. Choe (eds), *Low and Lower Fertility: Variations across Developed Countries*, Switzerland 2015, pp. 88-89.

34 N. Fukuda, *Marriage and Fertility Behaviour in Japan: Economic Status and Value-Orientation*, Singapore 2016, pp. 80-81.

35 K. Slany, "Socjo-demograficzne aspekty „syndromu opóźniania" i jego konsekwencje dla polityki społecznej," *Obrazy życia rodzinnego z perspektywy interdyscyplinarnej. Roczniki socjologii rodziny*, vol. 17 (2006), pp. 13-17.

Figure 3. Number of first marriages by men aged 20-49 in the range from 1985 to 2020



Source: own compilation based on MHLW, *Handbook of Health and Welfare Statistics 2021: Number of first marriage and its percentage by age group, by year*, 2021, at https://www.mhlw.go.jp/english/database/db-hh/1-2.html, 21 March 2023.

The roots of this situation stem from the progressive industrialisation since the 1950s and the associated practice of unusually strong work ethic. Additionally, there was an increase of migration from rural to urban centres and young people attached greater importance to their education and careers, deferring their decision to start a family, which is noticeable especially nowadays.[36] Moreover, the latter factor would correspond with the breakdown of the paternalistic model of lifelong employment (shūshin-koyō 終身雇用).

Still, as it was mentioned here, from 1975 onwards the fertility rate was decreasing and departing from generational replacement, and this fact escaped public attention. So there was the emergence of the social phenomenon of "new single people" (nyūshinguru ニューシングル), i.e. who consciously chose not to marry.[37] As a result, from the 1980s onwards, not only did the average age of people getting married start to rise, especially for men, but the proportion of men who were unmarried by the age of 50 also increased. While it was 1.7% in 1970, by 1990 it rose to 5.6%. According to the latest available estimates, the rate already reached 23.4% in 2015. At the same time, the age of people getting married increased, with an average age of 30 in

[36] M. Atoh, „Japan's Population Growth...," pp. 13-14.

[37] R.D. Retherford, N. Ogawa, S. Sakamoto, "Values and Fertility Change in Japan," *Population Studies*, vol. 50(1) (1996), p. 15.

2015 (29.4 for women and 31.1 for men), while back in 1970 it was 24.2 and 26.9 respectively.[38]

As it was already mentioned, the increasing age for marrying is considered to be the main but not the only reason for the declining birth rate in the Land of Cherry Blossoms. Indeed, it is highlighted that there is an increase in the costs of not only having children, but also of providing their good education, especially on the third level.[39] The latter expenditure has been regarded, particularly since the 1970s, as a way of offering the child a better start in professional life. Thus, in the first half of the 1990s, the costs of raising a child to the completion of a four-year undergraduate degree were estimated at an average of around 20-30 million yen.[40] According to the data from 2001, they were already fluctuating in the range of 29-63 million yen, with Tokyo alone as an example.[41] Although Article 26 of the Japanese Constitution guarantees access to free compulsory education covering six years of primary school and three years of middle school,[42] opting for a full (up to the tertiary level) public education programme still means an expenditure of 12 million yen for parents (up to 46 million yen in the case of private education).[43] Not purely statistically, an interesting fact is that parents more often invested in their sons' education than in their daughters'. However, these proportions evened out in the 1990s, and when it came to 4-year studies, females tended to dominate among students.[44]

ON JAPAN'S ATTEMPTS TO COMBAT LOW FERTILITY RATES

From 1970 onwards, a new phenomenon emerged among the demographic problems outlined above, namely the noticeable entry of the population into an ageing phase. In fact, for the first time, the proportion of people aged 65 and over reached 7.1% of the total population in Japan.[45] This process accelerated significantly in the following decades, which can be clearly illustrated by the increase in life expectancy of the country's population. It was only 42.06 years for men and 43.20 years for women between 1921 and 1925. By 1975, the average already rose to 71.73 years for men and 76.89 years for

38 Statistics Bureau – Ministry of Internal Affair and Communications Japan, *Statistical Handbook of Japan 2021*, at https://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/handbook/pdf/2021all.pdf#page=23, 21 March 2023, p. 18.

39 J. Tsutsui, *Work and Family in Japanese Society*, Singapore 2020, pp. 15-16.

40 Ch. Ueno, "The Declining Birth-rate...," pp. 108-110.

41 "Rising Child Costs 63 Million Yen: Study," *The Japan Times Online*, 15 May 2001, at https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2001/05/15/national/raising-child-costs-63-million-yen-study/, 21 March 2023.

42 "The Constitution of Japan," *Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet*, at https://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution_and_government_of_japan/constitution_e.html, 21 March 2023; MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology-Japan), *School System*, at https://www.mext.go.jp/en/policy/education/overview/index.htm, 21 March 2023.

43 "Rising Child Costs..."

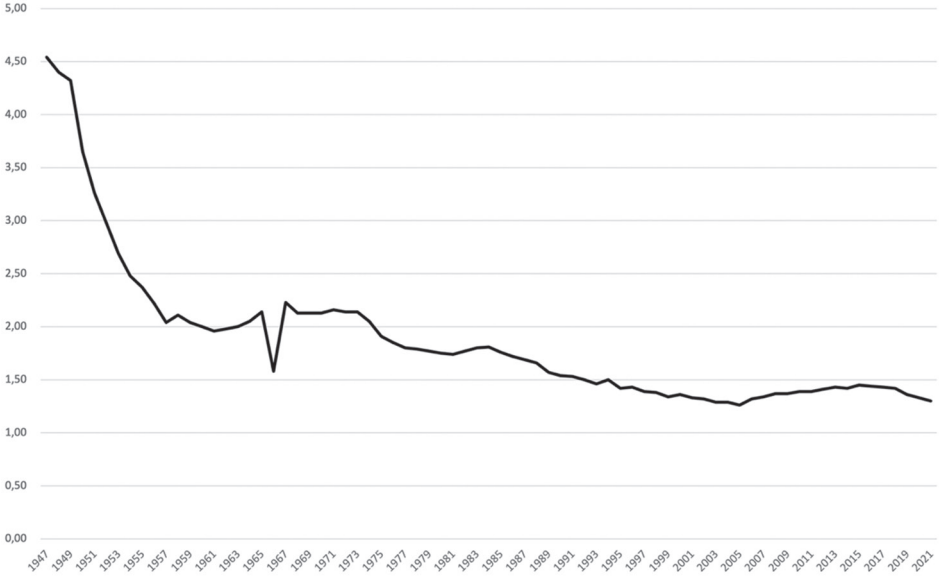
44 Ch. Ueno, "The Declining Birth-rate...," pp. 108-110.

45 R. Mydel, *Japonia w procesie przejścia...*, pp. 46-47.

women,[46] and by 2019 Japan's historic average expected longevity was 81.5 years for men and 87.5 years for women.[47]

Although the progression of the ageing process in Japanese society was obvious, it may be thought-provoking that this fact only filtered into the wider public consciousness in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Meanwhile, according to the 1975 census, the fertility rate already fell in Japan for the first time to 1.91 and reached 1.57 in 1989, dropping below the historically low value of 1.58 recorded in the previously mentioned 1966, the year of the "Fire Horse". This revelation was termed a "1.57 shock" (1.57 ショック). The response to this decline included the enforcement, in 1991, of the "Act on Parental Leave, Child Care Leave and Other Measures for the Welfare of Employees Caring for Children or Other Family Members" (Ikujikyūgyō, kaigokyūgyōtō ikuji mata ha kazoku-kaigo wo okonau rōdōsha no fukusha ni kansuru hōritsu 育児休業、介護休業等育児又は家族介護を行う労働者の福祉に関する法律), which first introduced maternity leave and granted working parents the right to care for both healthy and sick children. Still, it should be pointed out that the law came into force in 1992 and was amended several times,[48] but anyway it did not increase the birth rate which even fell to 1.3 in 2021.

Figure 4. Fertility rate in period 1947-2021



Source: own compilation based on MHLW, *Handbook of Health and Welfare Statistics 2021: Total fertility rates by year*, 2021, at https://www.mhlw.go.jp/english/database/db-hh/1-2.html, 15 March 2023.

[46] H.D. Ölschleger, "Fertility and Mortality," in F. Coulmas, et al. (eds), *The Demographic Challenge: A Handbook about Japan*, Leiden 2008, p. 29.

[47] Statistics Bureau – Ministry of Internal Affair and Communications Japan, *Statistical Handbook of Japan 2021...*, p. 17.

[48] J. Tsutsui, *Work and Family...*, pp. 16-17".

Meanwhile, the quest to find some solutions was evidently not supported either, with demographers in the 1990s disagreeing on whether Japan would have to face the long-term consequences of low fertility rates at all. In fact, there were claims that only a temporary decline is taking place and that by the end of the decade the fertility rate would approach a demographic renewal level.[49] The rude awakening was experienced at the beginning of the 21st century when in 2002 the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare published forecasts of Japan's demographic development. These predictions were alarming, as they suggested that the fertility rate would stabilise around 1.39, which, along with the increasing life expectancy, meant that Japan's population would be shrinking.[50]

Recognising the fact that the lack of opportunities to combine a career with the role of a mother and the rising costs of child-rearing hampered the birth rate, the government introduced a number of new social policy measures, such as increasing protective legislation for mothers taking maternity leave or the solution of paternity leave. Moreover, public infrastructure expenditures (on crèches, kindergartens) were increased, which, as it was presumed, would also bolster and accelerate the decisions to have children.[51] As these measures proved insufficient,[52] a further social policy measure was taken in 2019 and fees were abolished in pre-school education for children aged 3-5 from low-income families, as well as in day-care places for children up to the age of 2. Subsidies were also granted to parents with children attending private educational institutions, while charges and tuition fees at universities were reduced or waived for children from low-income families.[53]

Based on the data analysis, however, it can still be said that the listed countermeasures have apparently proved insufficient and that high hopes are simply unfulfilled. Indeed, the 1990s decade and the first two decades of the 21st century were a period of rapid acceleration of the demographic trends revealed earlier. What is noticeable here is that the average Japanese household became increasingly smaller from the 1970s onwards, decreasing from 3.41 occupants in 1970 to 2.33 in 2015. At the same time, the number of households with elderly people increased from 12.79 milion in 1995 to 21.713 milion in 2015. The age pyramid is quite similar. While in 1985 10% of the total Japanese population comprised people over 65, in 2015 it topped 26.6%. The age of the mother at the time of giving birth to her first child was also changed. Until 1990, women aged 25-29 (45.1%) were predominant, while in 2015, women aged 30-34 (36.3%) began to prevail. In addition, it is worth indicating that 2015 was the first

[49] L.J. Schoppa, "The Policy Response to Declining Fertility Rates in Japan: Relying on Logic and Hope Over Evidence," *Social Science Japan Journal*, vol. 23(1) (2020), pp. 4-5.

[50] Ibid., pp. 3-8.

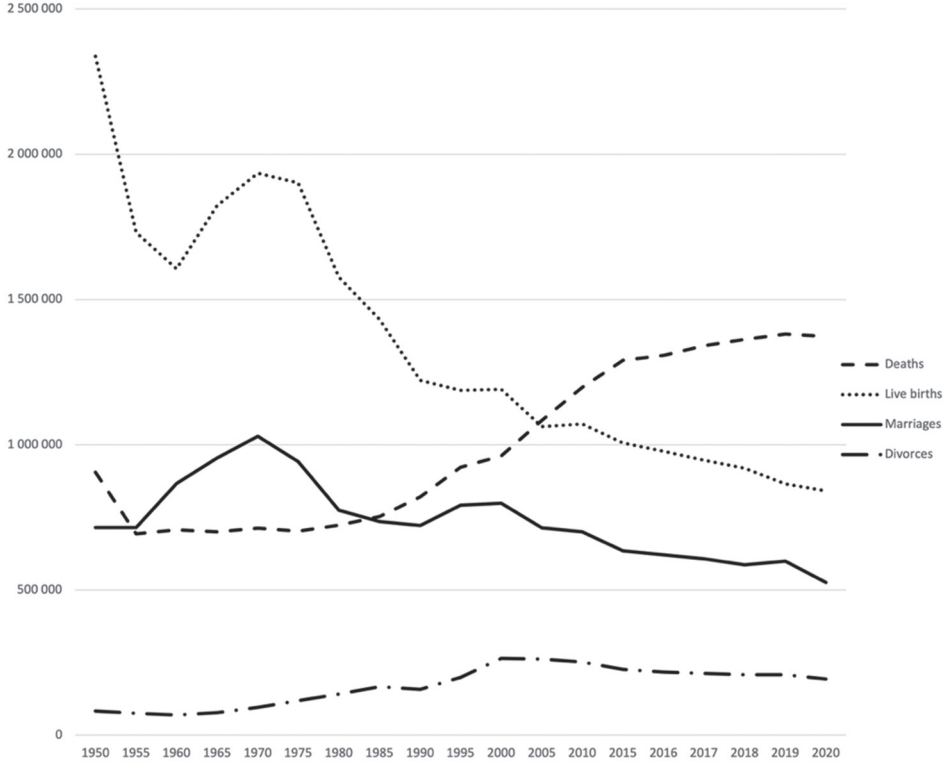
[51] Ibid., pp. 5-8.

[52] Statistics Bureau – Ministry of Internal Affair and Communications Japan, *Statistical Handbook...*, pp. 10-18.

[53] KYODO, "Japan Enacts Legislation Making Preschool Education Free in Effort to Boost Low Fertility Rate," *The Japan Times Online*, 10 May 2019, at https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/05/10/national/japan-enacts-legislation-making-preschool-education-free-effort-boost-low-fertility-rate/, 19 May 2019.

year when Japan's population shrank to 127.095 milion people, compared to the previous census (2010) with 128.057 milion inhabitants.

Figure 5. Total number of births, deaths, marriages and divorces from 1950 to 2020



Source: own compilation based on MHLW, *Handbook of Health and Welfare Statistics 2021: Major Indexes of Vital Statistics (number and percent) by year*, 2021, at https://www.mhlw.go.jp/english/database/db-hh/1-2.html, 21 March 2023.

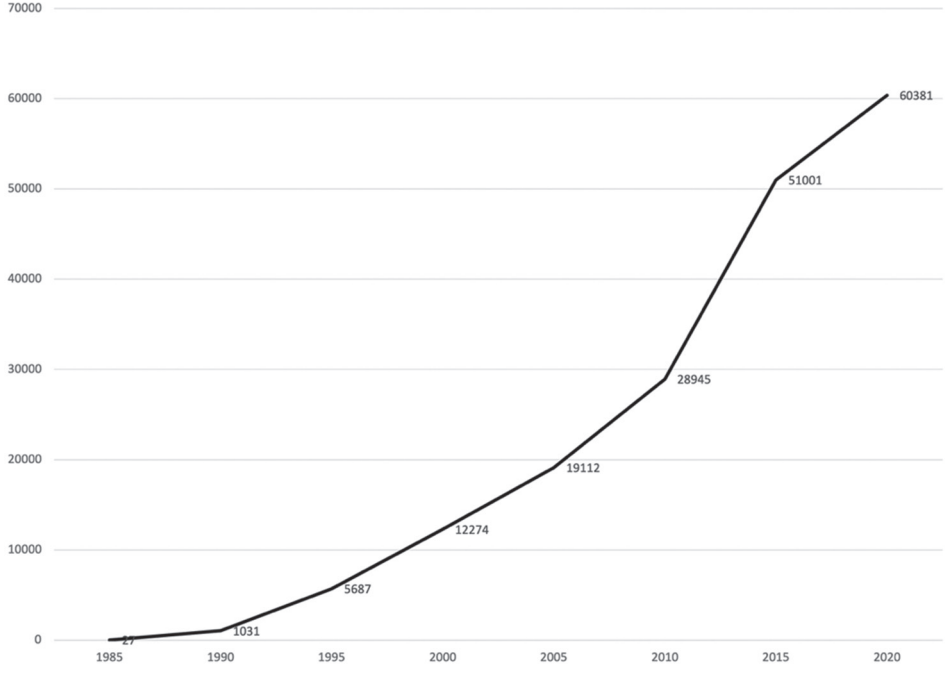
Alongside the abovementioned measures undertaken to counteract the ongoing demographic crisis, the instrumentarium of social policy in Japan includes nowadays *in vitro* fertilisation funding. Indeed, there has been a steady increase in recourse to this reproductive procedure in the Land of the Rising Sun since the birth of the first child via this method in 1983. Juxtaposing the total number of births in 2020 (840,835) with the number of children born using IVF (60,381) allows us to indicate that this method already accounts for 7% of newborns.

Given that the number of IVF procedures is on an upward trajectory and, additionally, that in 2022 the Japanese government decided to start partially subsidising IVF for women under 43 years of age,[54] it can be assumed that the percentage of children

[54] M. Jinguji, "Pre-implantation Tests of Fertilized Eggs Get Green Light from April," The Asahi Shimbun, 10 January 2022, at https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14518896, 21 March 2023.

born in this way will continue to grow. Whether this will prove to be the foundation of a sustained trend just like the decreasing average age of women undergoing this procedure from 38.2 in 2015 to 37.9 in 2019,[55] and whether this will allow Japan to curb or even reverse the unfavourable demographic development, it will be visible only in the future.

Figure 6. Number of children born as a result of IVF procedure between 1985 and 2020



Source: own compilation based on Y. Katagiri et al., "Assisted Reproductive Technology in Japan: A Summary Report for 2020 by the Ethics Committee of the Japan Society of Obstetrics and Gynecology," *Reproductive Medicine and Biology*, vol. 22(1) (2023), p. 3.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, it may be somewhat surprising to claim that, despite an increasing number of warning signs in the area concerned, the real and statistically confirmed threat of demographic decline did not reach the Japanese public awareness until early 1990s. Quite like the existence of *vinculum substantiale*, a necessary link between the demographic security and the growth (or at least maintenance) of society's wealth was not seriously

[55] H. Saito, et al., "Assisted reproductive technology in Japan: A Summary Report for 2015 by The Ethics Committee of The Japan Society of Obstetrics and Gynecology," *Reproductive Medicine and Biology*, vol. 17(1) (2018), p. 25; Y. Katagiri, et al., "Assisted reproductive technology...," p. 3.

considered there until the early 1990s. Nonetheless, to defend such a well-established conviction, we must refer to the words of Peter McDonald, according to whom the origins of this surprising approach can be traced as far back as the 1970s and 1980s when leaders believed that low fertility rates were only temporary.[56]

However, in view of these figures, such an approach must appear as a surprise, given that the unfavourable demographic forecasts should have appealed to the public's imagination for a long time and should have forced people to take long-term countermeasures rather than short-term and ill-coordinated emergency measures. Meanwhile, there was a widespread illusionary belief that the introduction of certain family-oriented policies would automatically translate into the anticipated effects, or that the ramifications of low fertility rates could be tackled by immigration policy, which was not considered as an effective remedy. The latter idea, however, due to the lack of more widespread public acceptance of the use of this "lifeline," has not been seriously considered in Japan so far.

It seems reasonable to make the additional statement that none of the existing solutions in Japanese social policy can be regarded, in view of the statistical data collected here, not only as leading to an effective and long-term reversal of the demographic processes in the Land of the Rising Sun, but even entitles one to express cautious optimism in this regard. Therefore, since the solutions adopted there have failed and continue to fail, it is reasonable to conclude that Japanese society apparently needs a cultural change first. Such transformation that would reflect a widespread understanding and acceptance of the appreciation of cultivating the necessary link, *vinculum substantiale*, between demographic security and the growth (or at least maintenance) of society's prosperity.

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[56] P. McDonald, "Low Fertility and the State: The Efficacy of Policy," *Population and Development Review*, vol. 32(3) (2006), pp. 487-488.

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