



# Failure Analysis of Modern Japanese Population Policy

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## Population Stagnation and Urbanization even in the Edo Period

In contemporary Japan, the total population has begun to decline. Meanwhile, regional maldistribution is becoming more pronounced as population density is increasing in Tokyo and other metropolises and there is population decline in rural areas, making “regional revitalization” a policy challenge. Since 2015, the government has promoted the Comprehensive Strategy for Overcoming Population Decline and Vitalizing Local Economy, which aims to rectify the concentration to Tokyo by creating jobs in the regions, push for support of young people’s employment, marriage, and child-rearing, and support a population of about 100 million by 2060.



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However, population decline has been a problem many times in the past.

From the Kyoho through the Koka eras (eighteenth–mid-nineteenth century) of the Edo period (1603–1868), the population stagnated. This was due to global cooling that resulted in poor crops as well as restrictions on birth (abortion or infanticide) implemented to maintain a certain living standard. Another factor was that Edo (Tokyo) and other big cities “absorbed” the farm village population as proverbial “graveyards” or “whirlpools” with low birth rate and high death rate, amid general lack of population growth.

This population stagnation and urban migration was thought to threaten the economic base of the warriors who depended on agricultural production, which is why many thinkers advocated population growth and control of urban population concentration. For example, in his *Seidan* (*Discourse on Government*), Ogyu Sorai (1666–1728), a Confucian philosopher, argued that they should clarify the distinction between city and farm village, prohibit movement through the family register system, prohibit farmers from changing their occupation, and do something called “*hitogaeshi*,” which meant forcefully returning to their former residence people who had moved and stopped being farmers for many years. Muro Kyuso (1658–1734), a Neo-Confucian scholar and contemporary of Sorai, also argued a dispersal of the population concentrated to Edo to surrounding areas (Hachioji, Kasai, Totsuka, Itabashi and others). Nakai Chikuzan (1730–1804), who was active at the Kaitokudo, a merchant academy in Osaka, advocated the need to abolish the restrictions on birth in order to increase the population, mental reform that promoted the importance of raising children, and more of “*akago yoiku shiho*” (method for nursing babies) and other measures already implemented (prohibition of abortion and infanticide, provision of child-rearing support, etc.).

Nevertheless, it has been pointed out that the population stagnation raised the income level per person and brought flexibility to people’s lives, which was what made possible the economic

development of the late Edo period. Stability in people's lives led to population growth again in the latter half of the nineteenth century, which came with a rise in demand and increases in private investment, thus promoting further population growth via economic development.

### **Takata Yasuma's Warning about Population Decline**

The economic development of the late Edo period led to the modernization of the Meiji period (1868–1912), but the population growth accompanying the economic development came to be seen as a problem in the late nineteenth century.

In Europe, the economist Thomas Robert Malthus's *An Essay on the Principle of Population* was widely known for arguing that poverty is caused by a population growth rate exceeding the agricultural production growth rate, and this was also introduced in Japan at an early stage. This led to a similar popularization of the idea that population growth leads to increased poverty, which fueled arguments for the need of overseas emigration and the acquisition of colonies. In particular, coinciding with unemployment, chronic import excess, and other issues caused by the post-World War I recession, accurate figures of population growth became available through the national censuses starting in 1920, after which "overpopulation" came to be seen as a problem more than previously and its solutions became a subject of intense debate.

Meanwhile, people started worrying about future population decline in Japan. Partly influenced by the neo-Malthusianism that wanted to improve the living standard in major West European countries by limiting how many children are born. A demographic development from "high birth and death rates" to "high birth rate and low death rate" and finally "low birth and death rates" was predicted, which would cause a population shift that brings both economic development and future unrest to Japan.

The renowned sociologist Takata Yasuma (1883–1972) identified population growth as a factor for social development and criticized the "overpopulation theory" that existed in Japan at the time. Today, that argument would be expressed something along these lines: the development of specialization due to population growth brings diversity, while the surplus coming from that specialization, communication between diverse people, and the promotion of competition will produce much knowledge. Moreover, since increasing specialization and growing knowledge develop the economy, population growth is not a Malthusian factor for restricting economic development, but rather one that promotes it. Using Takata's words, "As long as it increases [...] all cultural activities and especially economic activities will prosper as a consequence of it," which will have the effect that "The country will have the means to support an even greater population."

At the same time, Takata also took cues from the arguments of sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936), who said that society will necessarily transition from a *Gemeinschaft* (community), which is based on family and regional ties, to a *Gesellschaft* (society), which is individualistic. According to Takata, if society moves toward becoming a *Gesellschaft*, people will start prioritizing their own living standard on the basis of individualism, which will reduce the number of children per family and decrease society's birth rate. In the West European countries that have completely become

*Gesellschaften*, each member of society reduces the number of children to realize an affluent life for themselves and the population is headed toward decline. By contrast, Takata argued that Japan, which has not yet become a *Gesellschaft*, had a growing population due to weak individualistic tendencies.

Takata was a patriot who was enraged by the rejection of the Proposal of Elimination of Racial Discrimination, submitted by the Japanese representative, at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 after the end of World War I, and he argued that the difference in population growth rate compared to the West European countries should be used so that Japan can oppose West Europe and realize international equality. Takata meant that while the West European countries were waning due to population decline, Japan would not be able to avoid a falling birth rate as the *Gesellschaft* matured. He argued that Japan had to delay the speed by which the individualistic tendencies were coming to Japan, maintain the current population growth, and realize cultural and economic development, and to do that, Japanese people had to provide for the growing population even if it meant lowering their standard of living at that point in time, for example by making potatoes and sweet potatoes their staple food. Thus, Takata said that population growth had to be left to take its own course, and in the editorial of a magazine, he called for Japan to “Be fertile, increase in number” (The words “Be fertile, increase in number, fill the earth” from the Old Testament, Genesis, Chapter 9:1 were also known in Japan from the Meiji period and were used for newspaper headings and so forth).

However, rice prices fell due to the global agricultural surplus after the World War I, and after the rice riots of 1918 (the popular disturbances caused by rising rice prices due to World War I and Siberian Intervention), the government encouraged rice production in Taiwan and Korea and imported that rice cheaply to Japan Proper, which caused rice prices in Japan Proper to fall and made the farmers’ lives hard. Furthermore, the Great Depression after 1929 sharply reduced the export of raw silk thread, a major export item, further exacerbating poverty in the farm villages.

Although the poverty of the farm villages came about without any direct relation to population, from the perspective of the actually suffering farmers and those sympathetic with them, the explanation that “Overpopulation in mountainous and cramped Japan is the cause of poverty” became very persuasive, not at all acknowledging the arguments of Takata who saw population growth as something positive. Because of this, the 1931 Mukden Incident and the foundation of Manchukuo the following year were supported by many Japanese people as events that opened up a new world for destitute farmers.

### **“Be Fertile, Raise the Children up” during War**

However, when the establishment of Manchukuo and the ensuing North China Buffer State Strategy caused the outbreak of the Second Sino–Japanese War in 1937, the expansion of the arms industry served as a prelude to the development of the heavy and chemical industries, which rapidly expanded the proportion of the population engaged in the secondary sector of the economy (mining and manufacturing industry), while the population working in the primary sector of the economy (agriculture, forestry, and fishing industry) decreased. The rapidly progressing industrialization and

the concomitant urbanization of the population decreased the potential for population growth by shrinking the farm village population that had previously supported the population growth, and they came to be seen as harbingers of national crisis.

In fact, the declining birth rate became pronounced after mid-1938, owing partly to the large numbers of young people who were mobilized to the military. In a short period of time, not only was the overpopulation resolved, but people were now worrying about population decline.

It was easy to foresee that if the birth rate were to continue to go down like this, Japan would eventually face population decline just like the West European countries. Especially future population estimates can be calculated quite accurately based on birth and death rate trends.

Nakagawa Tomonaga, a research officer at the Institute of Population Problems, the Ministry of Health and Welfare (currently National Institute of Population and Social Security Research), predicted the future population based on dropping birth and death rate trends in 1940, and rather accurately said that the total population of Japan Proper would peak at 122,741,777 in 2000 and decrease to 111,776,766 in 2025. (The actual peak was 128,084,000 in 2008, so the actual population was higher than Nakagawa's estimate after 1975, but this was because the average life span increased more than Nakagawa had anticipated.)

At the same time, he predicted that the birth rate decline and population aging would progress so that in 2025, "The current age composition gives us a smaller young population and a bigger elderly population than any other country" (Nakagawa Tomonaga, "*Shorai jinko no keisan ni tsuite*" [On the Calculation of Future Population], *Journal of Population Problems*, 1-2 (5.1940), pp.1-13, currently viewable on the website of the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research). The accuracy of Nakagawa's estimate is relatively well-known among present-day researchers.

Such information has also been available to the general public, and there is an explanation of the same future population estimate in *Jinko seisaku no shiori* (Guidebook to Population Policy), published in August 1941 by the Institute of Population Problems and likely written by Nakagawa.

In order to meet the same problem of "total population decline due to population urbanization" that had existed during the Edo period, the second Konoe Fumimaro Administration made a Cabinet decision on the "Outline for the Establishment of National Land Planning" in September 1940, which talks about the "quantitative increase of the population [through national land planning] and reasonable distribution of regional functions through that increase." The national land planning suggested by those engaged in population policy at that time (post-war director of the Institute of Population Problems Tachi Minoru, urban planning authority Ishikawa Hideaki, etc.) aimed at harmony between city and farm village centering on small cities as spheres of living, and sought to keep down the urban population. Tachi, Ishikawa, and others were part of the National Land Planning Research Institute, whose board chairman Takata Yasuma also supported the national land planning and argued for the maintenance of the farm village population or *Gemainschaft* as a means to population growth.

Furthermore, the "Principle to Establishing Population Policies" that was proposed by the Cabinet Planning Board was adopted by the Cabinet in January 1941. It declared that a certain population

size needed to be secured for the creation and sound development of the (Greater) East Asia Co-Prospersity Sphere, and aimed at taking various measures to realize a high birth rate and a low death rate as well as ensure quantitative and qualitative development of the nation with a goal of 100 million people by 1960 for the sake of “securing the permanent development” of population growth.

The “Principle to Establishing Population Policies” talked about improving the infant death rate to lower the overall death rate as well as improving tuberculosis prevention and introducing a bride price loan system and a family benefit system to increase the birth rate. These were policies that took inspiration from European countries with different political systems that already had decreasing birth rates (Sweden, Germany, Italy, France, and other countries), such as the birth and child support policies introduced in Sweden to ensure a stable population.

Furthermore, “Be fertile, increase in number for the country” was a famous slogan of population policy during the war, but this was something coined by the Racial Hygiene Research Institute of the Ministry of Health and Welfare at the end of the publication of the “Ten Rules on Marriage” (*kekkon jissoku*) in October 1939, which was inspired by Nazi German eugenic slogans. However, at the end of the official publication of the “Ten Maxims on Marriage” (*kekkon jikkun*), which were based on the Ten Rules on Marriage, in 1941, it had been changed from “Be fertile, increase in number for the country” to “Be fertile, raise the children up for the country,” and the slogan used throughout the Pacific War was officially “Be fertile, raise the children up.” This was a slogan born from the sense of crisis over the “decline of Japan’s population.”

## The Post-war Reappearance of the Overpopulation Theory

Yet after World War II, Japan lost its colonies, many returnees came back to Japan Proper, and many men were demobilized, which led to the first baby boom and the number of births soared. In addition, partly because the country’s economic power had gone down due to the war damages, overpopulation once again came to be seen as a problem, just as it had been from the late nineteenth century to mid-1930s. Amid such developments, the sense of wartime crisis over population decline was forgotten.

It cannot be denied that some parts of the Allied Forces that occupied Japan saw the need to reduce the birth rate because they considered population pressure a factor in Japan’s military expansion overseas. However, research in recent years has indicated that while the General Headquarters of the Allied Powers (GHQ) did recognize the need to control the birth rate to some extent, they had in mind contraception as the means to achieve it, and it was rather the Japanese side that actively promoted artificial abortion (Toyoda Maho, “*Senryoka no jinko seisaku’: yusei hogoho no chuzetsu joko o chushin ni*” [“Population Control” under the Occupation: Centering on the Abortion Stipulations of the Eugenic Protection Act], Japanese Society of Comparative Family History, ed., *Jinko seisaku no hikaku shi* [Comparative History of Population Policy], Nihon Keizai Hyoronsha).

Contrary to its name, the National Eugenic Act, which was enacted on the basis of eugenics during the war in 1940, actually was mainly concerned with controlling abortion as a way to prioritize population growth. By contrast, the Eugenic Protection Act, which was enacted in 1948 on the

proposal of Kato Shizue, a Japanese feminist who had led a neo-Malthusian childbirth restriction movement before the war and who became a member of the House of Representatives after the war, relaxed the conditions for allowing abortion. In the next year of 1949, the act was revised to make possible abortion for economic reasons and the birth rate went down considerably. The Edo period and post-war Japan were the same in the sense that birth regulation was considered necessary to maintain the standard of living and was widely practiced.

The lowered ratio of dependent population (aggregate of the juvenile and elderly populations) in the total population meant a reduced burden on the working-age population (population bonus), which contributed to the development of the Japanese economy and realized the rapid economic growth, but at the same time, people were starting to see the declining birth rate as a problem. From around the mid-1960s, the declining birth rate was seen as a problem and the need for birth rate recovery was promoted in the *White Paper on Health and Welfare*.

Yet in the 1970s, the first baby boomers started getting married and the second baby boom occurred, while *The Limits to Growth; A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (1972) was becoming a big sensation internationally around the same time, which contributed to a reframing of population growth in relation to resources and the environment, once again breathing new life into the overpopulation theory. At the Japanese Population Conference in 1974, they called for a “national agreement on having no more than two children.”

However, a comparison between the aforementioned Nakagawa Tomonaga’s population estimate and the real population shows that Nakagawa’s estimate for 1955 was 90,107,431 while it was actually 89,275,529 (excluding Okinawa, which was under the United States administration at that time), and that his estimate for 1975 was 111,453,336 while it was actually 111,939,643, which are not big differences. That is, the repatriations immediately after the war, the two baby booms, and the subsequent rapid birth rate decline were nothing more than short-term outliers when considered from a long-term perspective and they did not significantly affect the population trend. From a long-term perspective, the birth and death rates have followed a natural downward trend, and just as Nakagawa predicted, the total population of Japan today has started to shrink, becoming an “age composition [with] a smaller young population and a bigger elderly population.”

## **System Design in Consideration of Long-Term Trends**

As we have seen so far, the “birth rate decline” and the “population maldistribution between city and region,” which are issues in Japan today, are also issues that were the subjects of intense debate in the past. As was the case in the Edo period and during the post-war rapid economic growth, birth rate decline also has an aspect of resulting in a higher living standard per person. As such, we should not feel threatened by population decline more than is warranted and we ought to avoid forcing the implementation of “Be fertile, raise the children up” policies.

At the same time, as pointed out by the business scholar Peter F. Drucker in his *The Unseen Revolution* (1976), long-term estimates are possible for populations and the issues that come from those changes can be “predicted” from early on. In the same book, Drucker states that population

aging has a big effect on all of society, and argues for the need to estimate the expanding role of pension funds when the number of elderly grows and increase productivity for the sake of supporting the elderly.

In Japan, we have the accurate population estimate of Nakagawa Tomonaga, and although it was officially recognized by the then government, it is unfortunately difficult to say that any form of system design has been conducted at an early stage to prepare for and respond to the long-term trends of birth rate decline and population aging.

Takata Yasuma argued that the birth rate would go down with the transition from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, and that this would be irreversible. Research applying job search theory in recent years has found that support from relatives, local society, and other aspects of familiar community in finding a spouse has a powerful effect for increasing marriage probability, while the spread of individualistic ideology weakens communal marriage systems and increases the costs and difficulties associated with finding a partner, which has the result of more people remaining unmarried and a decline in total fertility rate (Kato Akihiko, “Two Major Factors behind the Marriage Decline in Japan: the Deterioration in Macroeconomic Performance and the Diffusion of Individualism Ideology,” *Journal of Population Problems*, 67-2 (6.2011), pp.3–39).

If we take into consideration Takata’s argument, the revival of community goes against the flow of history and is difficult, so if we need to soften the degree of population decline, what we need to do should be providing individual support for marriage, birth, and child-rearing on the basis of individualism so that having children is no longer a burden.

Based on that, we should accept that long-term population decline and population aging are irreversible conditions, and should steadily design sustainable systems for social security, public finance, and so forth, for the future.

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