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A Country in Crisis: The Changing Demographics of Japan

Katherine Ziomek

I. Introduction

The current rhetoric regarding Japan's demographics is that the country is facing a crisis. Since WW II, the Japanese birth rate has been falling, and there are fears that the Japanese population is aging without replacement. This crisis is, however, the result of traditional Japanese values and perspectives on marriage, women, child-bearing, and immigration. Although the current demographic crisis raises concerns about the future of the ethnic Japanese population, it is important to discuss and acknowledge the ways in which Japanese society created the conditions for this crisis to take place.

I begin with a statement about the scope of this paper regarding conceptions of gender and limitations of research. Next I outline the current state of demographics in Japan. Additionally, since low birth rates and increasing life expectancy are resulting in an aging population, I examine the current and future implications of an aging population in Japan, including the physical and financial vulnerability of the elderly. Then, I discuss reasons for the changing demographics of Japan, including the status of women, perspectives toward working wives and mothers, and the changing field of employment in Japan. Finally, I explore some solutions to the demographic crisis that have been recommended or attempted, and I finish by supporting one potential solution: immigration reform.

i. Limitations of research

In this paper, I discuss marriage and child-bearing in Japan. This discussion is limited in scope, given that I focus on cisgender females and cisgender males, terms that describe individuals who identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. Another limitation is that the statements and research presented in the newspaper articles and peer-reviewed journal articles that I consulted for this paper focus on cisgender heterosexual relationships. Although Japan is becoming more tolerant of

the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) community, same-sex marriage has not yet been legalized (Tai), and as such, discussions of child-bearing are limited to heterosexual relationships. I would recommend that further research be conducted on the relationship between the Japanese LGBTQ community and beliefs regarding child-bearing, birth rates, the demographic crisis, and concerns regarding the growing elderly population. Additionally, using data from the World Bank Group, I constructed graphs to illustrate how the demographics in Japan are changing. However, when separating data by “gender,” the World Bank Group does not include specifications other than “male” or “female,” which tend to refer to cisnormative gender identities. The fact that this data does not acknowledge non-cisgender identities represents a limitation in the research and a potential bias in the data collection, yet I will retain the binary terminology in order to maintain consistency and facilitate replicability.

II. Demographics in Japan

In Japan, the average household size decreased from 4.8 members to 2.4 members between 1920 and 2010 with a decrease of 5% occurring between 2005 and 2010 (Schröder et al. 761, 762). In addition, since 2005, the death rate in Japan has been greater than the birth rate, which has resulted in a demographic crisis for the country (Schieder 15). Since the birth rate is lower than the death rate, concerns regarding population replacement and population growth are understandably high. Projections suggest that by 2060, the Japanese population will decrease from 127 million to 87 million (“Why the Japanese Are Having So Few Babies”).

Utilizing data compiled by the World Bank Group, I created the graphs in the Appendixes that demonstrate pertinent demographic trends in Japan.¹ The graph in Appendix A shows the decreasing birth rate in relation to the death rate in Japan. Since the mid-1970s, the crude birth rate (defined as the birth rate per 1000 people) has been decreasing while the crude death rate (defined as the death rate per 1000 people) has a U-shaped trend, steadily increasing since the 1980s. While both rates fluctuate, since 2007 the crude death rate has been higher than the crude birth rate, with the difference between the two rates becoming more pronounced (the World Bank Group).

Appendix B, combined with Appendix C and Appendix D, provides an accurate picture of changing population patterns in Japan. The graph in Appendix B demonstrates the percentage of the population aged sixty-five and above in Japan. In 2013, the percentage of Japanese aged sixty-five and above hit 25% and continues to increase, reaching 25.41% in 2014 (the World Bank Group). The first year

¹ I have previously done research on the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami disaster and included graphs created using data from the World Bank Group, which included data up to the year 2012 or 2013, depending on the indicators. The graphs present in this paper are updated versions with data to 2014 for all indicators discussed in this paper.

with data available in the World Bank Group's data is 1960, and the percentage of the elderly population in Japan was 5.73% in that year. It is clear that there was a pronounced increase in the percentage of Japanese aged sixty-five and above from 1960 to 2014 and that a very different population structure exists in Japan today than in previous years.

Appendix C provides additional insight into the percentage of Japanese society that survives until age sixty-five grouped by "male" and "female." Since 1960, the percentage of both males and females that reach the age of sixty-five has increased. In 2014, 94.01% of females lived until age sixty-five and 88.04% of males lived until age sixty-five (the World Bank Group). Thus, in Japan, an increasing percentage of individuals are aged sixty-five and over in any given year. In addition, Appendix D depicts the increasing life expectancy of Japanese individuals. These trends illustrate that the life expectancy of males, females, and the total population is increasing.² In 2014, life expectancy at birth reached 86.83, 80.5, and 83.59 for females, males, and the total population respectively (the World Bank Group). In sum, these statistics illustrate the following trends in Japan's demographics: the crude birth rate is decreasing and the crude death rate is increasing. Additionally, the percentage of the total population that is sixty-five and above is increasing, the share of the total population living to sixty-five and above is increasing, and the life expectancy for Japanese individuals is increasing.

i. Implications of an Aging Population

In Japan, there are several factors that result in an aging population. First, the birth rate is declining. Second, the life expectancy in Japan is increasing incrementally. One implication of an aging population is a larger financial burden on younger generations in Japan due to the costs associated with maintaining elder healthcare and pension payments (Schieder 15).

During the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami disaster, one major implication of an aging population became clear, namely an increased vulnerability to natural disasters. Given that Japan experiences approximately 1,000 tremors each year and is prone to earthquakes (Cyranoski 392), the percentage of the Japanese population that is vulnerable to earthquake and tsunami-related negative health outcomes will increase. In the 2011 disaster, there were estimates of over 20,000 deaths (Lay and Kanamori 33), and "65% of the dead were over 60 years old" (UNESCO and IOC 3). Additionally, elderly individuals are more vulnerable to negative health outcomes, and following the disaster, the elderly population specifically was affected by influenza A (H3N2) (Kamigaki et al. 2, 6), pneumonia

² A notable exception is the visible "dip" in the graph. This dip represents the year 2011, which was when the Great East Japan Earthquake occurred.

(4), mental illness (Matanle 837), and trauma in farming communities as a result of being forced to evacuate land that was passed down through generations (Sugimoto et al. 630).

Another aspect of the elderly population's vulnerability to disasters is a lack of mobility. Mobility was a concern in this disaster, given that such a high percentage of the total deaths were among those aged sixty and over, 92.5% of these deaths being drowning related (Matanle 836–837). Given that Japan is prone to earthquakes, the increasing vulnerability of an aging population evokes compassion and concern for the well-being of the elderly, with additional concerns regarding the financial costs of an aging population. Since the aggregate number of elderly individuals is increasing, the result will be greater financial costs to the state and taxpayers who will have to pay for the healthcare of elderly individuals following disasters and trauma. That being said, this acknowledgment is not intended to further victimize or to blame the elderly for their vulnerability during times of disaster; it is important to recognize all of the implications of the demographic crisis, including financial implications.

III. Reasons for Demographic Change

i. Japanese women as wives and mothers

In Japan, there is a traditional idea of what life looks like: “male-breadwinner–female-homemaker” (Piotrowski et al. 1040). Increasingly, however, Japanese individuals are choosing to delay or postpone marriage. In 2010, 60.3% of women aged 25–29 had never married (Fukuda 107). One reason why many Japanese individuals choose to delay or opt out of marriage is due to financial considerations (“Why the Japanese Are Having So Few Babies”). In Japan, weddings are expensive—costing 3.2 million yen, or 40,000 dollars, on average (“The dearth of births”). Because of cultural norms, having children out of wedlock in Japan is extremely rare, and therefore the declining rate of marriage is related to the declining birth rate. Since the rate of marriage is declining, there is a subsequent decline in total births—only about 2% of total births occur outside of wedlock (Fukuda 108; “Why the Japanese Are Having So Few Babies”).

In Japan, when a woman is in the workforce and then becomes a mother, she faces difficulties in both her work and personal life. In their article, Cooper and Hagiwara recount several interviews they conducted with Japanese women who described their lived experiences as women who have had to choose between childbearing and their careers. One Japanese woman, Terue Suzuki, described her experience as a working wife and mother after having children. Suzuki explained,

“I had a satisfying job and really wanted to go back to it. In Japanese society, when a woman chooses work instead of staying at home to look after her husband, she’s called a devil wife” (Cooper and Hagiwara). The lived experience of another Japanese woman, Yoko Ogata, provides insight into several layers of traditional Japanese attitudes toward women, marriage, childbearing, careers, and how they impact Japanese women. Ogata stated, “I wanted to have kids but I kept putting it off because I wanted to gain recognition for my work.” Additionally, Ogata married a co-worker, but “colleagues told her to ‘be a good wife,’ while others told her husband he ‘shouldn’t make his wife continue working’” (Cooper and Hagiwara). At the age of thirty-six, a time when she was being given a great deal of responsibility and control at work, Ogata became pregnant and experienced a miscarriage. She stated, “my husband and mother-in-law were very angry and asked if I hadn’t had a miscarriage on purpose.” Following this, Ogata and her husband divorced (Cooper and Hagiwara). Unfortunately, these perspectives toward working women in Japan are not rare. In 2010, a survey of 6,000 Japanese couples found that “70 percent of respondents said mothers should stop working when their children are small to focus on raising them” (Cooper and Hagiwara). As these statistics illustrates, the opinion that women cannot simultaneously be mothers and have careers is common in Japan, providing a social obstacle for Japanese women.

ii. Working in Japan

The availability of work and the changing expectations of workers in Japan also has had an impact on the country’s demographics. The Japanese have created the expression “freeter,” which refers to “part-time workers between the ages of 15 and 34, not students, and not married if female” (Cook 36; Piotrowski et al. 1040). The number of “freeters” in Japan has increased since the 1990s, with the ratio of irregular to regular employees being 22.1% in 2012 for males (Cook 36). According to Japanese society, “freeters” can be described as follows:

... layabout youths who lack a work ethic and shirk their responsibilities to the nation ... victims of the changing employment market and long recession ... and contributors to the demographic woes that Japan is facing through their limited social welfare contributions and their low rate of marriage. (37)

In Japan, research suggests that male “freeters,” or irregular employees, marry less, as they “have difficulty maintaining long-term romantic relations and transitioning from dating to marriage, in part because of their irregular employment status and

low breadwinning ability” (Cook 37). Additionally, research suggests that males working in temporary or non-regular jobs are “more likely to postpone marriage” (Piotrowski et al. 1040). The trouble with temporary or non-regular jobs is their lack of permanence.

In the post–WW II period in Japan, the conception of work was called a “standard employment relationship,” which was a permanent, full-time job with benefits (1040). In Japan, the relationship between a male “breadwinner” and female “homemaker” assumes that standard employment is a given, especially since some companies in Japan used to provide lifetime employment and guarantees of promotion, ensuring that workers’ families were cared for (1040). This is no longer the case in Japan. Neo-liberal economic influences changed the nature of employment in Japan. While the Japanese economy was suffering in the early 1990s, companies began to focus on cost reduction, and social insurance made it cheaper to hire non-regular workers instead of regular workers. Furthermore, in the 2000s, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi began to deregulate the Japanese economy following the models from the Thatcher–Reagan era (1041). Currently, non-regular workers account for “over one third of the entire workforce, or more than 20 million workers” (1041). As a result, neo-liberal social and economic policies affected a significant proportion of the Japanese population, and these policies played a large part in creating the conditions for the current demographic crisis. There is an empirical relationship between a non-regular male worker in Japan and a diminished likelihood of marriage (1051). Importantly, temporary work is becoming a permanent part of the Japanese lived experience since it “has a stigmatizing and negative effect on the acquisition of future employment as a regular worker,” and the majority of temporary workers are young or middle-aged males (1041).

Another outcome of the current situation of temporary workers in Japan is the phenomenon of “parasite singles.” In 2004, Masahiro Yamada described “parasite singles” as single, adult individuals who continue living with their parents for an extended period of time due to economic constraints such as working part-time jobs (Schieder 17, 18).³ In Japan, there is a cultural expectation that children are the responsibility of their parents, and once the parents become elders, the caretaking responsibility shifts to the children (Fukuda 108). However, it is becoming increasingly difficult for Japanese youth to transition into permanent work that can cover the cost of a wedding or independent living because of job insecurity and the lack of opportunities for good-paying jobs (Fukuda 108). As a result, a greater number of young Japanese individuals continue to live with their parents well into adulthood.

³. It is important to note that while “parasite singles” can be female or male, the term has been used to criticize single women in Japan, and the term can also be used to mean a woman “rejecting the austerity of marriage and children, preferring conspicuous consumption” (Schieder 15).

It is important to acknowledge difficulties that women face in the traditional Japanese workplace. Since many Japanese companies hire university graduates with the expectation of permanent, lifelong employment, Japanese women face difficulties making progress in their careers if they take a break to have children (“Holding Back Half the Nation”). In Japan, women have a labour-force participation rate of 63%. Additionally, 70% of Japanese women do not work for a decade or more after the birth of their first child and many never return to work at all, so there is a concern that the potential of Japanese women is being neglected (“Holding Back Half the Nation”). However, societal concern over unused female brain power is hardly new. Writing in the 19th century, Mill stated that increased equality between women and men would ultimately benefit society:

[There would be a] doubling [of] the mass of mental faculties available for the higher service of humanity. Where there is now one person qualified to benefit mankind and promote the general improvement, as a public teacher, or an administrator of some branch of public or social affairs, there would then be a chance of two. (81)

Mill acknowledged that integrating and supporting women more effectively in the workforce would be to the benefit of all. Unfortunately, many of the inequalities Mill identified remain major issues for Japanese women in the 21st century, effectively resulting in the underutilization of half of the population. Given the many difficulties the Japanese population will face as its demographics shift, this failure to embrace working women is especially problematic. There are several potential solutions to this crisis, which I explore in the following section, but if Japan truly wishes to address the future challenges posed by the demographic shift, then improving the status of women in Japan must be a priority.

IV. Possible Solutions to Demographic Change

The demographic crisis is clearly affecting various sectors of Japanese society and evokes concern and emotion from government officials. At this point, it is important to ask the following question: How can the Japanese government encourage positive population growth in non-invasive and socially beneficial ways? Previously, the Japanese government has used different strategies to try to increase the birth rate “including a ‘women’s handbook’ to educate young females on the high and low points of their fertility, and state-sponsored matchmaking events” (“Why the Japanese Are Having So Few Babies”). Additionally, the government has invested

in child benefits and daycare centres; however, these strategies have not been successful (“The dearth of births”). In this section, I discuss some of these strategies as well as some other potentially viable strategies that the Japanese government may consider.

As stated by Mill, women who are forced to not work or forced to choose not to work are a large source of unutilized potential in society. Thus, a recent strategy proposed by the Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzō Abe, is promising. In response to a shrinking birth rate combined with a shrinking economy, Abe has implemented his “Abenomics” growth strategy (“Holding Back Half the Nation”). This strategy attempts to bring awareness and practical solutions to the issue of how women are viewed in Japan, and his speeches cover topics including operating hours of kindergartens and breastfeeding when outside the home (“Holding Back Half the Nation”). With this strategy, Abe’s goal is not only for more women to work but also for women to be more successful in their careers. For example, “by 2020 Mr. Abe wants women to occupy 30% of all ‘leadership’ positions—which would include members of parliament, heads of local government and corporate executives” (“Holding Back Half the Nation”). Moreover, Wingfield-Hayes (2013) writes that Abe’s strategy stands a good chance of succeeding:

Evidence from Europe and America suggest helping women to stay in work can increase the birth rate. In countries like Sweden, Denmark and the US, where female employment rates are high, birth rates are also higher. In countries where female employment is low, like Italy, South Korea and Japan, birth rates are also low.

Since the goal is ultimately to increase the birth rate in Japan, evidence suggests that improving the status of working women in Japan will have a positive impact on this goal. Thus, bringing awareness to the struggles Japanese women face and helping them maintain their working status regardless of their family structures will help to increase the birth rate. Unfortunately, being a woman who has a family, raises children, and builds a career is not currently accommodated in the structure of Japanese society. Cooper and Hagiwara (2012) write that in Japan, there are only 166 childcare places per 10,000 people, as compared to 2010 in the UK and 365 in Australia, making childcare scarcity another barrier for working Japanese women. The Japanese women who fight through social disapproval and wish to continue working after having children may struggle to do so because of the low number of daycare centres, the long waiting lists, and the high cost (Wingfield-Hayes). One practical solution that Abe has implemented “has been to try to shorten waiting lists

for child care by allowing more private companies into a previously state-dominated sector” (“Holding Back Half the Nation”). Increasing the number of daycares available and thereby allowing more children into daycare will eliminate this barrier for many mothers who wish to continue working. It is possible that eventually some women in Japan will choose to become working mothers if they have superior childcare options available to them.

One possible solution to the demographic crisis is immigration reform. Immigration reform is a complicated issue for an ethnically homogenous nation like Japan, and consequently many oppose this idea (Wohns 6). Recently there has been political support for this reformation, including the 2008 proposal from Japan’s Liberal Democratic Party “to increase the number of immigrants to 10% of the population” (Wohns 6). Even so, Japan currently has immigration policies that still favour those who are ethnically Japanese (Carens 181). However, considering that Japan is experiencing a demographic crisis with a shrinking birth rate and an increasing life expectancy, the Japanese government may have to consider reforming its immigration policies and welcoming people who are not ethnically Japanese.

While the concern over a shrinking birth rate is valid, we must pause to consider whether the concern in Japan is really over the shrinking total birth rate or whether it is for the global decline of an ethnically Japanese population. When polled, 65% of the Japanese population stated that they would reject immigration reform, and this desire to maintain ethnic homogeneity “often manifests itself in xenophobia” (Wohns 6, 7). Immigration reform may alleviate some difficulties in Japan’s future, such as the financial difficulty of supporting a growing elderly population. However, increased immigration to Japan from many different countries around the world may also lead to difficult societal discussions regarding traditional Japanese attitudes toward heterosexuality, marriage, the “male-breadwinner–female-homemaker” mentality, and beliefs regarding births outside of wedlock. Given these potential issues, the government’s top priority should be to support and empower Japanese women in their career and family choices with immigration reform as a secondary solution.

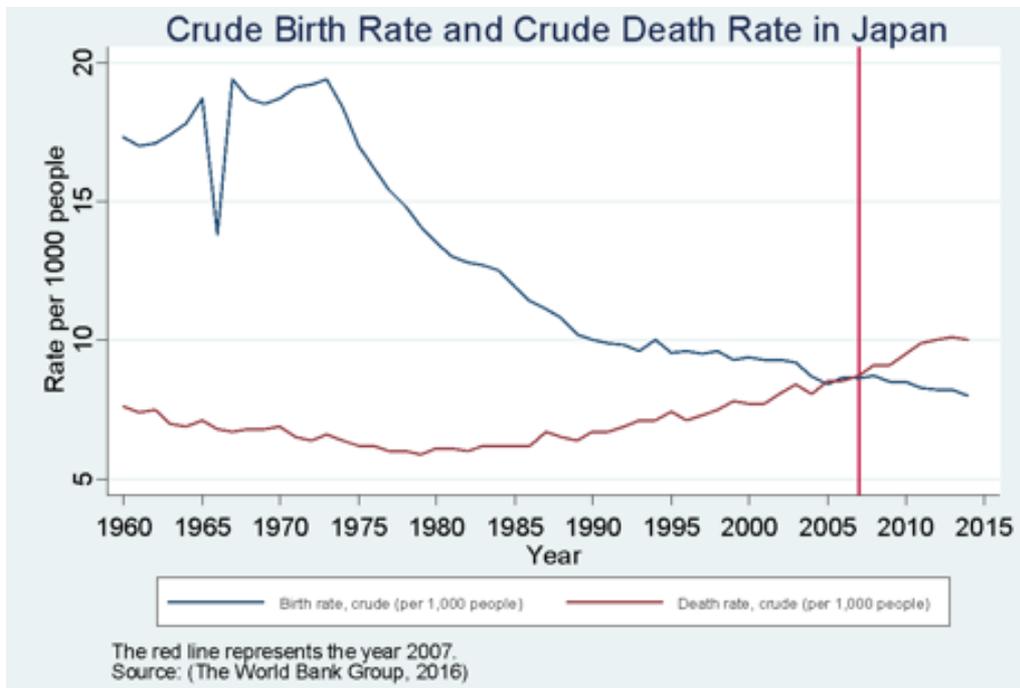
V. Conclusion

Japan is experiencing a demographic crisis in which the birth rate is decreasing while the population is aging. These demographic changes are as a result of social issues in Japan, such as the societal pressure on women to leave work once they marry or become mothers. Additionally, Japanese individuals face increasing finan-

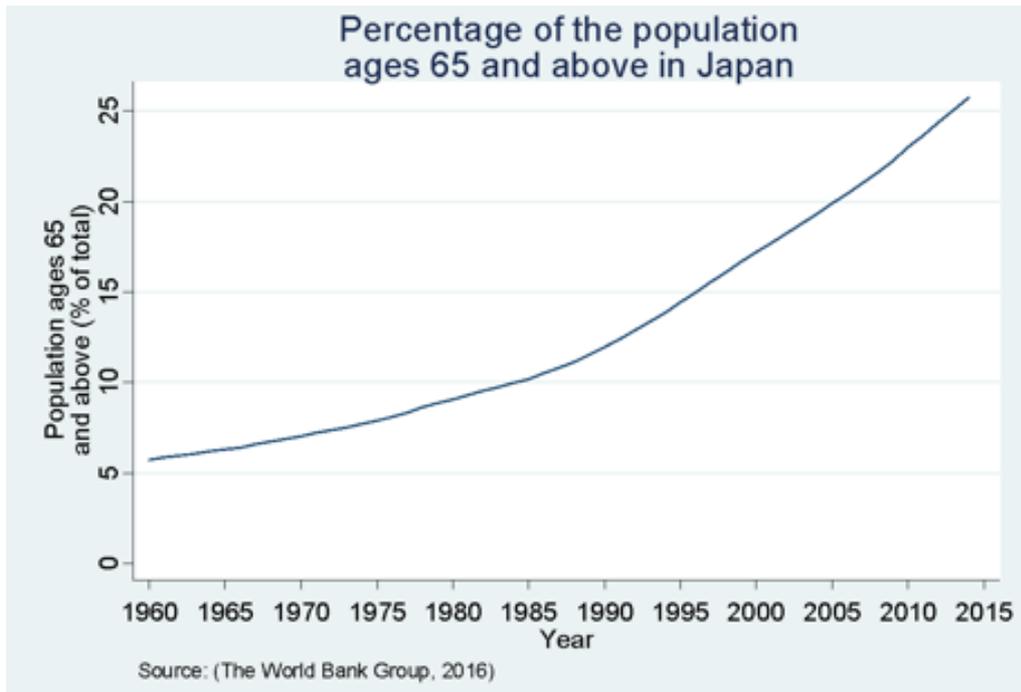
cial difficulties in following the traditional Japanese lifestyle of “male-breadwinner–female-homemaker,” which results in decreasing marriage rates. Even if the decline of the ethnic Japanese population can be slowed by immigration, the status of Japanese women must be improved regardless of whether they are or not (or wish to be) mothers. As Wingfield-Hayes states, “women who are having children are not working. Women who are working are not having children. Both are terrible for Japan’s future.” Thus, improving the status of women in Japan will improve the country’s demographic crisis, and perhaps in the future Japanese women who choose to have both a career and children will not be termed “Devil Wives.”

Appendices

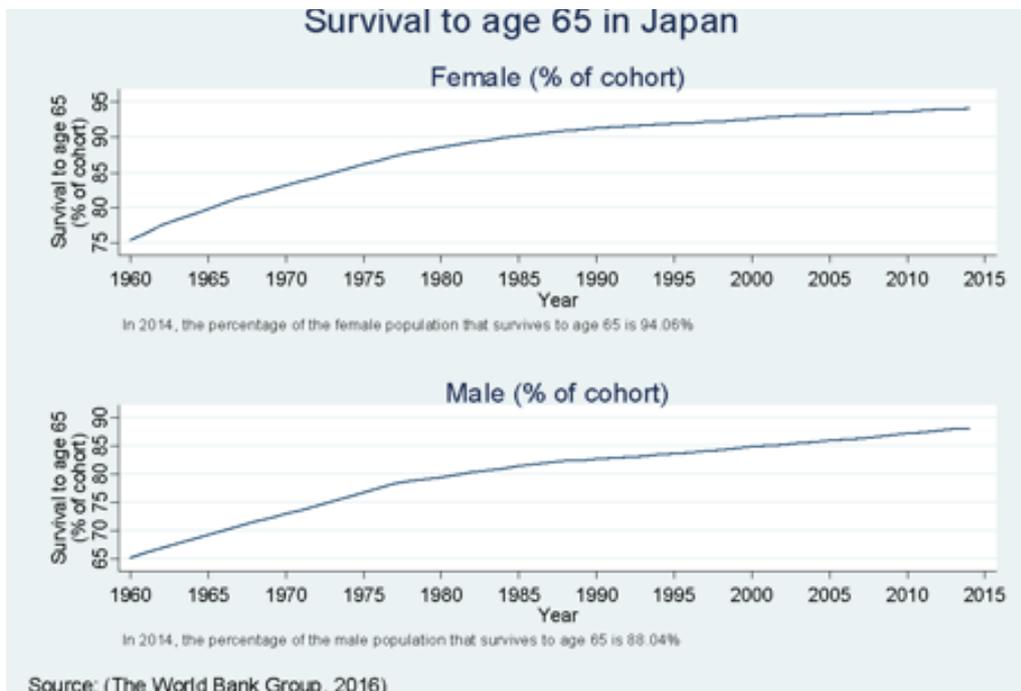
Appendix A:



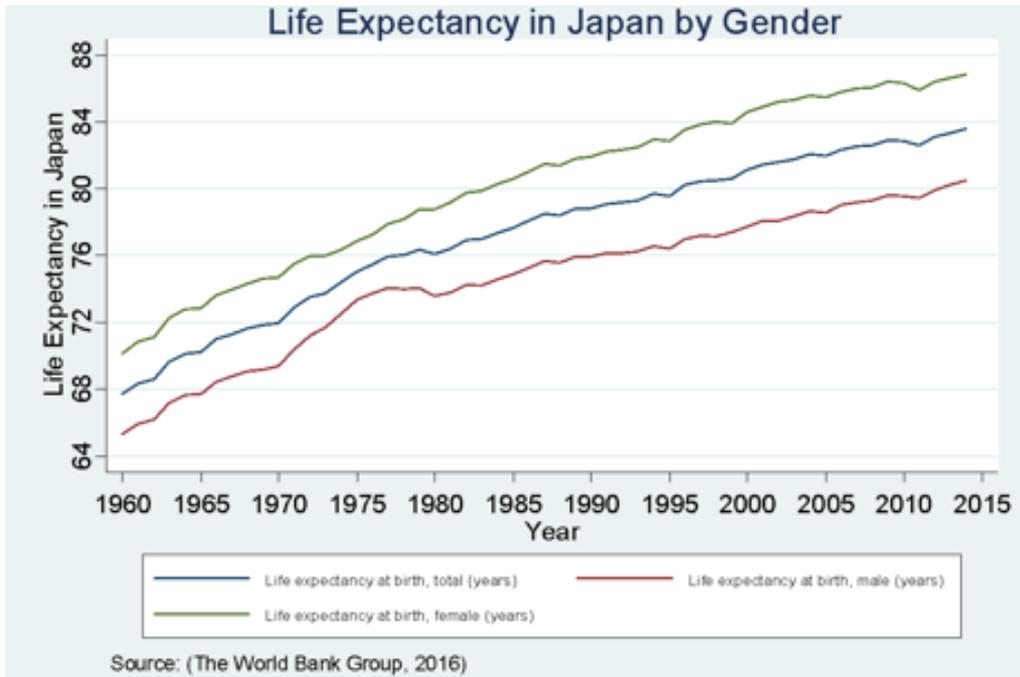
Appendix B:



Appendix C:



Appendix D:



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