

The 'Graying' of Japanese Society: What will it afford its future senior citizens?

Written by: [Vincent Musumeci](#) UMAC class of 1999 BEc major.

One of the most important issues facing leaders and planners in Japan is the current demography of the national population. As is illustrated in the graphic below from the Bureau of Statistics there is a definite 'silver' bubble within the Japanese population that will be most evident by the year 2020 when it is forecast that two thirds of the population will be over the age of 60 years.

This will create a number of problems, both sociological and economic in nature. Primarily the largest effect of the age bubble in the year 2020 will be the fiscal burden borne by the remaining one third of the population that is under the age of 60 years. Japan currently affords its senior citizens an extremely generous level of indirect social welfare. This is because traditionally the elderly have a much higher propensity to vote and therefore governing bodies are eager to please their main electing constituents. Also from a cultural perspective respect for the elderly has been a cornerstone of the Japanese altruistic approach to the social structure.

Without a doubt the traditional generosity afforded to the Japanese elderly cannot continue to be granted. This is due to the fiscal dilemma that Japan has currently created for itself with total government debt amounting to about 140% of GDP. This fiscal situation will be carried well into the next millennium and since the government also wants to reduce taxes to stimulate economic activity it will indeed be a long time before the current government debt is retired.

The problem of the 'silver' age bubble within Japan is much more than a pure economic condition. It is almost metaphoric with regards to the demographic paradox being experienced.

"The old can't die fast enough and the young can't be born quick enough."

I believe that this is symbolic of the underlying sentiment of young society in Japan. The social psyche of Japan still exists in a state of dichotomy between the wants of the young and the directives of the old. While the youth want to move forward while recognizing the past in quid pro quo fashion the old conservative guard who leads the nation wants to regress or at very least maintain the traditional status quo.

Specifically decreasing birth rates and lengthening average lifespans causes the age bubble problem. In turn this creates more austere economic welfare conditions in the future for those who are currently living. Economic indicators exist on the surface and although they are indeed informative they are by no means illustrative of the root of the problem. To examine why this is occurring an in depth look at how contemporary Japanese economic developments have affected the social psyche is needed to understand why Japanese society doesn't want to have children