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*Shōshi Kōrei Shakai no Mienai Kakusa (Invisible Inequalities in an Aging, Low Fertility Society)*, by Shirahase Sawako. Tokyo: Tōkyō Daigaku Shuppankai, 2005, 224 pp., ¥3,800 (hardcover ISBN 4-13-051121-1)

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Until recently, sociologists who study Japanese society have had it easy. Their efforts to describe and analyze social changes that have taken place in Japan over the past century (e.g. urbanization and the transition from agricultural society to an industrial society to a postindustrial society) have been aided by prior work by sociologists who study Europe and North America, which experienced these same trends decades earlier. The fact that Japan experienced these changes within a more compressed time frame made the process a little different, but Europe and North America nevertheless provided a very helpful road map.

Sociologists studying the changes that are going on in Japanese society ‘today’, however, have a much more difficult—and interesting—task. Now that Japan has the oldest society in the world (in 2004, over 65 residents made up 19.5% of the population), it is sailing in uncharted waters. While many other societies are aging too, Japan is the nation that is on the leading edge of this trend as the share of its population that is elderly sets new world records every year. By 2050, Japanese demographers now predict, 35.7% of the population will be 65 or older and 21.5% will be over 75.

Japan is aging earlier and faster than other societies in part because fertility rates there were ‘higher’ than in other industrialized societies until 1960, creating a larger bulge of baby boomers than elsewhere. But it is aging quickly as well because its fertility rate has fallen to levels that are much ‘lower’ than in the United States and Northern Europe. In 2005, the fertility rate was 1.26. In 2006, it edged upward to 1.31. Here too, it is sailing in previously uncharted waters.

Shirahase Sawako's book is at the forefront of the effort to understand the changes that are going on in Japanese society as it transitions to an aging, low-fertility society ahead of its peers. Other books and articles have documented the macro-trends. Most of the statistics in the paragraphs above are doubtless familiar to readers of this journal because government reports and best-selling *shinsho* have been mulling over the implications of these trends for many years. What Shirahase's book adds is a careful examination of the micro-data to see what subgroups of Japanese society (e.g. women, the poor, the highly educated, the older and younger generations) are experiencing as their society as a whole moves in this direction.

Her starting point is the observation that Japan's shift toward an aging society involves a large shift in the burdens of providing income support and caregiving. Whereas in 1990, a working age population of 86 million helped support an over 65 population of 15 million (a ratio of 5.7:1), by 2050, a working age population of 54 million will be supporting an over 65 population of 36 million (a ratio of 1.5:1). What this means at the micro-level is that whereas elderly Japanese today typically have several children and in-laws to help with their care and support, by 2050, there will be many middle-aged couples who are the sole source of care for two grandparents on the wife's side and two grandparents on the husband's side. As Japan begins its transition to this future, who is bearing the growing burden? Which gender? Which class? Which generation?

She asks similar questions about the recent decline in marriage and fertility. Which subgroups are driving this trend? Delayed marriage has created a growing group of 'unmarried adults living with their parents' (a phrase Shirahase prefers to the term 'parasite singles' popularized by Yamada Masahiro). Who exactly are these people?

Shirahase's argument is that a close look at the micro-data shows that the transition to an aging, low-fertility society is creating 'invisible inequalities' (the *mienai kakusa* of her title). The burdens are being borne more heavily by women. They are providing most of the care of the elderly and are still doing most of the childcare and housework even though they are working outside the home in larger numbers. Childbearing still imposes extremely high opportunity costs on the ability of working women to stay in full-time careers and increase their pay, which no doubt is a big reason so many are putting off marriage.

Her most interesting arguments, however, concern unmarried adults living with their parents. As noted above, this a tribe that has been labeled 'parasite singles' by Yamada, who argued that the group was growing in large part because the spoiled children of rich parents were hesitant to trade the good life (where their mothers continue to cook and clean for them) for the diminished lifestyle they expected if they were to marry and set up their own household. What Shirahase shows, using data collected by the National Institute for Population and Social Security Research (NIPSSR), is that unmarried adults living with their parents tend to be composed disproportionately of 'poor' young adults who are living with relatively poor parents. While Shirahase does not attempt to project into the future, her documentation of this pattern raises some serious concerns about what life will be like for these families if these low-earning childless adults continue living with their parents as the entire household ages. Will the younger generation be able to support the household when the head of household retires? Who will provide care and income support for the younger, childless adult when he or she ages—especially if the single adult never had a permanent job with benefits and skipped out on paying into the national pension system?

Also fascinating is Shirahase's analysis of the intergenerational bargaining that is going on in Japanese households as the society ages. This bargaining goes on, she points out, not between the 'elderly' and 'the working age generation' as a whole but separately in each family. Traditionally, care for the parents in Japan has been the responsibility of the oldest son and his wife. There was not much

room for bargaining. But in some households, aging parents are ‘negotiating’ for support from one or more of their children by offering support from their earnings, savings and bequests. For example, the parents may build a two-generation home for the younger generation and provide childcare for the grandchildren in exchange for the younger generation’s support when they need more care. Shirahase is interested in the degree to which Japan is seeing more of this latter ‘model’ of intergenerational bargaining as aging shifts greater burdens of care upon a shrinking generation of working adults.

What she finds is that this process of working out deals across generations within families is not working too smoothly. How much care children provide to aging parents is mostly a function of the parents’ health and how much care they need, rather than any characteristics of the caregiver. Caregiving still falls heavily on daughters, and even more on daughters-in-law, because of the paternal line tradition. Deals that involve grandparents caring for the children so that mom can stay in a full-time career—in exchange for the middle generation later caring for the aging grandparents—can fall apart dramatically if the grandparents require care while the mother is still trying to maintain her career. In such cases, she can find herself suddenly needing to care for both her children and her parents, forced to quit her job and confronted with the challenge of managing the entire household on a lower family income. All these patterns suggest that inside-the-family deals are not doing much to alleviate the challenge of negotiating the transition to an aging society.

While Shirahase does a good job of documenting care-sharing patterns across generations within families, her analysis is hampered by the fact that her survey data on care for aging parents come from 1993 when the NIPSSR conducted its last in-depth study on this issue. At that time, the elderly to working age ratio was close to the 5.7 level cited above for 1990 and only beginning its transition toward 1.5. While this gives us a good baseline for thinking about how care for the elderly was shared at the ‘start’ of this trend, it does not tell us how care will be shared when elderly to working age ratios approach the levels expected in 2050. It could be that the older generation who needs care in the future will plan ahead more, accumulate more savings and make more balanced deals with their (much smaller number of) offspring. Those with the means certainly can be expected to do so.

While Shirahase’s source of data limits what she can tell us in the above case, the quality of data she employs and the way she presents it is on the whole a great strength of this book. She uses not only NIPSSR survey data on topics like caregiving and adult children living with parents but also time-series data on personal and household income from the Social Stratification and Social Mobility series. The book provides not only excellent, detailed breakdowns of aggregate data showing recent trends and patterns in income distribution, marriage and care-sharing but it also provides insights into what is driving the trends and patterns by analyzing micro-data using logit models.

While this book provides a glimpse at only the earliest stages of Japan’s transition to an aging, low-fertility society, Shirahase sets the agenda for sociologists who study Japanese society as they confront the challenge of analyzing how that society is experiencing its path-breaking transition to an ever-more aged society. What she suggests is that this newest transition, like those that came before, will involve inequalities across genders, classes and (now) generations as well.