

Reviews

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Tsung-hsi Fu and Rhidian Hughes (eds), *Ageing in East Asia: Challenges and Policies for the Twenty-first Century*, Routledge, Abingdon, UK, 2009, 208 pp., hbk \$160, ISBN 13: 978 0 415 45465 0.

Why do so many social scientists define the old age portion of the dependency ratio as those aged 65 or more years, but talk of population ageing with reference to those over 60? Does the term ‘ageing’ itself imply a loss of function, rather than simply adding years to life? Most importantly, is ‘ageing’ primarily an issue of contemporary government policy requiring urgent emergency action; or is it a matter of social self-awareness, injecting demographic sophistication into current efforts to overcome poverty and promote equitable institutions? These are some of the niggling concerns that come to mind when reading this timely exploration of East Asia’s efforts to deal with population ageing. Luckily the 17 writers have raised enough points for reflection in this compact but readable collection to make it a valued addition to university courses on social change in Asia.

In a short Foreword, linking the historical experiences of Western Europe with the recent social welfare initiatives of East Asia, Michael Hill praises the eight case study chapters because they generally take a broad rather than narrow view and do not simply echo the language of ‘crisis’. This praise is only partly deserved. It is true that the authors and the editors have not taken up the Chicken Little cry of ‘the sky is falling’, and for that we can be grateful, but only the Thai case study (Chapter 10) spends much time documenting the benefits of ageing populations, and the valuable resource represented by older people in any community. These latter issues are embedded in the nature and causes of ageing, a topic taken up by the editors in the Introduction (Chapter 1). They rightly point to life expectancy and total fertility rates as the key to understanding demographic ageing, but they reverse the importance of these factors: the pace of population ageing in East Asia is almost entirely due to the very rapid decline of fertility and the very low fertility levels achieved in the past two decades. The reduction in the numbers of babies and children in the population, rather than the absolute increase of old people, make for rapidly ageing nations.

Ageing in East Asia reminds us that for individual Asians, of course, innovations in medicine, nutrition and social protection have increased the probability of living to older ages, and this has added to the number of older people – but we should think of these numbers as reflecting larger proportions of survivors from very large birth cohorts. Individuals born today join smaller cohorts, but the proportion of those cohorts to survive to 70, 80 or 90 years will continue to grow. The absolute sizes of future cohorts will plateau and eventually fall, if today’s very low fertility levels are maintained and if there is not some as yet unimaginable explosion of life expectancy. With that demographic foundation set by the editors, the challenge taken up by the country chapters is to describe how nations

currently intend to deal with the growing proportions of older people in their midst. What they report involves both an alphabet soup of acronyms (LTCI, SBWT, MPF, HOAA, NOAA, CSSA, CPF¹) – thank goodness for the comprehensive List of Abbreviations (pages xii–xiii) – and a description of burgeoning lists of government promises. Promises is the operative word in most countries, since the government schemes, allowances, pensions, insurance and funds never cover more than a small portion of older people, and in some cases they are not designed to cover the current older population, but rather are savings schemes that will only be released when current workers retire. Those who are elderly today have to struggle as best they can. As we read the chapters on China, Malaysia and Thailand, what becomes clear is that many of the promising-looking schemes are currently little more than small pilot projects, more inspirational than effective.

Arguably, one of the challenges will be to assist the fit elderly to care for the unfit. After all, this is what largely happens today in many societies, and it would be a far more efficient approach than birth bonuses, or problematic intercultural labour recruitment. After all, the fit elderly know and often love their unfit partners and friends, so they already have the incentive to help. What they may need from governments are infrastructure, guidance and occasional encouragement. The studies in this volume show that none of the East Asian governments have given any thought in this direction. Perhaps this could be a practical innovation for the next decade.

NOTE

- 1 LTCI: Long Term Care Insurance (Japan). SBWT: *Skim Bantuan Warga Tua* (Elder Assistance Scheme, Malaysia). MPF: Mandatory Provident Fund (Hong Kong). NOAA: Normal Old Age Allowance (Hong Kong). HOAA: Higher Old Age Allowance (Hong Kong). CSSA: Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (Hong Kong). CPF: Central Provident Fund (Singapore).

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Simon Evans, *Community and Ageing: Maintaining Quality of Life in Housing with Care Settings*, Policy Press, Bristol, UK, 2009, 168 pp., pbk £24.99, ISBN 13: 978 1 84742 070 1.

Given the evolving nature of extra-care housing and retirement villages, this book makes an important contribution to our understanding of the potential benefits of these housing-with-care settings as valued communities, together with their limitations as regards clarity of purpose, inclusiveness and sustainability. The book's chapters explore: the concept of community and its meanings to us as we age; an overview of housing-with-care settings inside and beyond the United Kingdom (UK); ways in which community is promoted and experienced in such settings; the extent to which provision supports diversity as well as its potential for