

SKIMMING

THIS EXAM IS ONLY AN EXAMPLE AND THE LENGTH AND NUMBER OF QUESTIONS MAY DIFFER IN THE ACTUAL PROFICIENCY EXAM

Part 1 Skimming (15%)

20 minutes

- This part of the exam aims to test your ability to locate main ideas in a text. The text is about the causes and consequences of the decreased birthrate in Japan.
- Each of the following headings matches one of the paragraphs in the text. Write the paragraph number beside the correct heading. The headings are not in the same order as the information in the text. One of the answers is given as an example.
- It may be useful to spend a few minutes previewing the text before you begin answering the questions.
- Each question is worth 1 point.

Paragraph/section
Number

Heading

4	<i>e.g. the increasing use of a new word in Parliament</i>
	a) A 19 th century Japanese law for unskilled workers
	b) A new policy to encourage women to have more children
	c) The types of bad jobs and negative conditions foreign workers will face
	d) Research results from many studies on why Japanese women have fewer babies
	e) An international study that illustrates how Japan will need foreign workers in the future.
	f) A government declaration regarding the need for increased immigration.
	g) Why foreigners do not remain in Japan.
	h) The potential consequences and problems of a falling birthrate and its possible solutions

Japan's Population Problem

Introduction

1 Japan's population is likely to peak at about 127.5 million people in the year 2020. From that point on, if the situation remains unchanged, it will begin a reverse track, contracting significantly to an estimated 105 million people by 2050. According to the much talked about UN paper on this issue, this gross decrease will have a detrimental impact on the nation's labour force with serious social and economic consequences. Shōshika, or the trend towards having fewer children, is by no means unique to Japan – the number of children born to women in industrialized countries has been in decline since the 1970s. What is different, however, is the means available to Japan to somehow try to rectify what could become a cataclysmic imbalance. Further, the decline in number of births in many other nations has at least seemingly stabilized. In Japan it is still falling, down to 1.29 children per women in recent surveys.

The Problems of a Decreasing Population

2 Japan is fast becoming the world's oldest ever human population (by 2025, 27.3%, or 33.2 million people, will be aged over 60). Coupled with the aforementioned low birth rate, the problems Japan faces in the immediate future are acute. With Japan's labour force expected to decrease by 10% in the next 25 years, the economic outlook is far from bright. In all likelihood the domestic market will shrink, production will fall and the government's revenue base will contract considerably. Moreover, it will struggle to meet welfare and medical payments for an increasing number of elderly as the dependency ratio (the number of workers supporting the elderly) will shift dramatically. In 1950 one elderly person was supported by 12 members of the working population, by 1990 it was 5.5 workers, and by 2020 it is estimated to be 2.3 workers.

3 Naturally the government is concerned about such a scenario and must consider what the possible outcomes might be in the long term. Moreover, how can Japan ease this predicted slide, maintain its population and therefore ensure economic security and continued prosperity? The rural population has all but been depleted and is no longer the viable supply source of labour it once was. Other alternatives too, have almost been exhausted. Making greater use of elderly or female workers, for example, is difficult as participation rates (especially among part-time workers) are already quite high. Similarly, greater automation has taken place in many industries and moving production offshore has its limitations. Consequently, the two most plausible possibilities are either by making more children or through increasing immigration. With relation to both of these, however, the Japanese government is in a very challenging situation.

Increasing the Baby Count

4 Japan's leaders have been aware of the nation's falling birthrate and its consequences for some time. The word shōshika (the word the Japanese use to describe the falling birthrate situation) has been appearing in parliamentary records with increased frequency. In 1992 it appeared just seven times, whereas in 2015 it was recorded 168 times. The issue was first brought to the public's attention after the so-called '1.57 Shock' of 1989 when the overall fertility rate hit a record low of 1.57 children per women. In 1994, in order to halt the falling birth rate, a program to support child rearing dubbed the 'Angel Plan' was initiated, but without significant results.

5 The Angel Plan initiatives revolved around lessening the difficulties of childcare through counseling services. Its goal was to create infrastructures to support working parents, and encouraging attitudinal change from one of fixed male and female roles to one of dual parenting and shared responsibilities. After revision in 1999, the 'New Angel Plan' focused greater attention on child rearing support and the placement of day care centres near train stations. Yet many of these plans simply placed the responsibility on local governments, which were already struggling to cope. Moreover, as will be seen, they lacked social backing due to the government's failure fully to debate these issues publicly.

6 One reason for the difficulty the government has had is that the issue of 'making babies' is, in Japan, significantly more sensitive than perhaps in other developed countries. The main reason for this is historic. From around the 1930s, Japan's leaders urged women to produce as many children as possible to fuel the war effort. Under the slogan "umeyō, fuyaseyō" (let's give birth! Let's increase [the size and strength of the nation!]) contraceptive goods disappeared and abortion clinics were closed. This totalitarian approach towards women's reproductive health was not welcomed by the Japanese people. As a consequence of such forced policies, Japan's politicians are more cautious these days when discussing these issues. However, In March 2017 Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro, reinitiated debate on how to stop the downward trend of Japan's birth-rate.

Reasons for the Decline in Birthrates

7 While opinion is divided, a number of major contributing factors have been identified by experts. Jolivet (1997), in a study of Japanese women and childbirth, examined some of the reasons why Japanese women are recently less inclined to have children. Most of the reasons found were social and included a tendency to marry at a later age (and therefore to have children at a later age – or not at all) or not marry at all, and to study or work instead of having children. Goodman (2002) similarly sees the issue as one of lifestyle choices. Today many women would rather seek a career than start a family and this trend – while by no means unique to Japan – is certainly more profound there due to societal constraints. Terms like 'parasite single' (referring to young singles who continue to live with their parents while working) today reflect this negative attitude. For example, only 27.9% of single female respondents to a recent survey thought having a child would be enjoyable. Certainly, social attitudes and trends are important but such things are difficult for the country's leaders to change easily (and require the implementation of laws to back them up). White (2002: 151), on the other hand, tends to see the main cause for the low birth rate as economic in nature, a view shared by Ogawa and others. Both these social and economic factors are probably equally responsible but it is the latter which seems easier for the government to address.

The 'Plus One Proposal'

8 The government's latest attempt to end the downward trend and increase the number of women having children is named the 'Plus One Proposal' – 'plus one' indicating the increase the Ministry of Labor, Health and Welfare is hoping for in the average number of children per couple. This new package contains the following proposals:

- A review of working conditions faced by men and women to make their careers compatible with child-raising.
- A study of how local communities can assist people with child-raising.
- To improve social welfare benefits to assist families raising children.

Most notable of the proposals is the idea of making businesses allow male employees to take a minimum of 10 percent of statutory paid paternity leave when they become fathers. Even though they are entitled to this, they rarely use it. Other ideas like reducing working hours or tax incentives for companies to encourage them to allow workers to take their allowed child leave would seem like plausible options worth considering. In addition, Prime Minister Koizumi has also pledged to allocate funds for the construction of 50,000 new day-care facilities. These factors alone, however, will not likely be enough. Furthermore, they are not that far removed from previous attempts of the largely fruitless and unsuccessful original Angel Plan.

Increasing Immigration

9 If Japanese women are choosing to have fewer children, then the next obvious option is to try to maintain the population through opening the nation's doors to greater immigration. Furthermore, the situation Japan faces is perhaps more urgent than one that can be fixed by encouraging people to have more babies. Many researchers argue that it is already too late to try to increase fertility levels to offset the burden on the working population. To be sure, Japan is presently struggling to emerge from its recession with unemployment at a post-War record high. Given this situation, talk about requiring more labourers may seem misplaced. While some of the immediate issues pertaining to immigration may have been deferred, they will not, however, disappear altogether. Furthermore, Japan's immigrant labour population has become a stable feature of industry which is relatively unaffected by economic recessions and declines in production. What is more, greater immigration could in fact help increase demand and innovation in the Japanese economy as well as lead to a larger number of children.

10 A recent United Nations study estimates that, under certain conditions, Japan may need to bring in a massive 343,000 immigrants annually, until 2050, simply to prevent its population from declining. In order to prevent a decline in its working population (15-64 year-olds) in the same period an average of 647,000 new foreign workers may be needed annually. This would mean that by 2050, thirty percent of Japan's population would be foreign immigrants or their descendants.

11 Again, the Japanese government is well aware of the serious situation the labour force population issue presents. In the Justice Ministry's 'Basic Plan for Immigration Control,' released in March 2016, it mentioned – for the first time – the government's concerns over the nation's aging and declining population. This report stirred controversy too, over the possibility of accepting foreign workers to assist in the nursing of elderly people. The impact of some labour shortfalls has already hit home. The personnel shortage in Japan's computer engineering and programming sector alone has been estimated to be around 13,000. As a consequence, the government announced in 2018 that it would recruit 30,000 skilled IT engineers and researchers from overseas by 2020. Further, the former Director General of the country's Economic Planning Agency, Sakaiya Taichi, has said that the sharp decline in the nation's population sometime after 2020 will make it 'inevitable that Japan will look for foreign workers to make up the... shortage.' Sakaiya added that the inflow of foreign workers would provide the cultural stimulus needed to build a creativity-based society in the future. This remark clearly implies that some of Japan's leaders, at least, not only believe that Japan's society is lacking in creativity but also that foreigners could provide a positive stimulus in this regard. Japan lags far behind other nations in terms of foreigners employed. In 1999, fewer than 1% of workers were foreign, compared with 18% in Switzerland or nearly 12% in the U.S.³²

12 A Prime Ministerial Commission looking at Japan's goals in the 21st Century also acknowledges the requirement for foreign inputs when they discuss the need to implement change in this statement:

to respond positively to globalization and [to] maintain Japan's vitality in the twenty-first century... we cannot avoid the task of creating an environment that will allow foreigners to live normally and comfortably in this country. However, it would not be desirable... simply to throw open the gates and let foreigners move in freely. First of all we should set up a more explicit immigration and permanent residence system so as to encourage foreigners who can be expected to contribute to the development of Japanese society to move in and possibly take up permanent residence here. We should also consider preferential treatment for foreigners who study or conduct research in Japan – such as allowing them automatically to acquire permanent residence status when they complete their academic work at a Japanese high school, university, or graduate school.

Likewise, another report issued by Japan's Economic Council, recommended: "we should actively consider aiming to become a vibrant socio-economy that is open to the world by orderly accepting migrant labour from overseas countries." "It is important for Japan to introduce foreign workers in the fields of management, research and technology" wrote the Ministry of Economic Trade and Industry in its 2013 White Paper.

The difficulties of Immigration in Japan

13 Thus, on the surface, the Japanese government appears pro migration in principle and advocates increasing the number of foreigners in Japan. However, an even more difficult task than trying to convince people to have more children is perhaps trying to convince them that they should accept more immigrants. This is a worldwide problem as evidenced by the recent immigrant and refugee backlashes in Europe, Australia and New Zealand. Given traditional attitudes towards foreigners (as examined below), however, the Japanese case is somewhat different.

14 According to Atoh Makoto, the Deputy Director General of the National Institute of Population Research, the UN's proposal would be 'impossible' to implement because of suspicion by Japanese of increased immigration. Other critics say that if Japan formally decided on the introduction of foreign labor, it would receive immigrants from between 50 and 60 countries, and would be bound to become a multiracial society just like the United States, (implying that multiracialism is thus a negative trend). Given the Japanese government's traditionally strict and inflexible official stance towards foreign immigrants it certainly seems that a massive shift in thinking would be necessary before anywhere near the number suggested could be made welcome and the government's positive policies made to reach fruition.

15 Others opposed to immigration argue that a large influx of non-Japanese immigrants would work in the undesirable jobs classified as the 'three k's' (kitanai - dirty, kitsui – hard, and kiken - dangerous). While this sounds like a positive idea, there is significant evidence to suggest that it is already too late for this. Japan is home to a large population of undocumented illegal overstayers (estimated to be anywhere from 250 – 500,000). These people provide a vital link in the nation's labour chain, one which can no longer be replaced by native workers. In spite of their importance, these same people are, however, forced to exist in a precarious legal limbo, denied basic rights and social security.

Historical Background of Immigration in Japan

16 The problems associated with increasing immigration have a significant history in Japan. Despite trying to portray itself as a nation with no migration history, it has in fact been an essential component of the nation's formation. Japan's historic attitude towards immigration speaks volumes about the difficulty for future prospects. In modern times, the country's largest immigrant population has come from the Korean Peninsula. After the Japan-Korea Treaty was signed in 1965 the 500,000 or so Koreans who remained in Japan became 'Special Permanent Residents,' enabling them to claim national health and welfare benefits but refusing them other such rights such as the right to vote in elections.

17 Post World War Two there have been two major policy changes affecting the situation of immigrants. The first was the introduction of the Alien Registration Law in 1952. This law was aimed at controlling all foreign residents by making them carry resident identification cards at all times. All residents over 16 years of age and residing for more than a year were fingerprinted and photographed for these cards (the fingerprinting practice was only abolished in 1999 after decades of protests from human rights groups). The second major change occurred in 1991 with a partial relaxation of the nation's immigration laws. This allowed more foreigners of Japanese descent into Japan in order to take up basic jobs in industries which were short-staffed yet whose jobs were unattractive to Japanese (the aforementioned 'three-k's'). The underlying reason for this was according to an official publication of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party that:

People opposed to the idea of introducing foreign laborers into Japan say that such a move will cause the ethnic structure of our nearly racially homogenous society to deteriorate. However, they will probably agree to the idea of bringing in foreign nationals who, owing to their Japanese ancestry, are thoroughly acquainted with Japanese customs.

18 These 'foreigners of Japanese descent' were afforded special treatment which was justified by the fact that their presence would ease the reunification of Japanese families divided by emigration and that their ethnic ties would facilitate adjustment to and acceptance by Japanese society. The irrationality of this line of reasoning was to become apparent in the following years. And despite this history, it seems that the nation's rulers have yet to learn from these early attempts at immigration.

19 Japan's official hard-line attitude towards foreigners can be traced back as far as 1899, when Imperial Edict No. 352 was issued prohibiting the importation of foreign labour into Japan. To this day, the policy remains very much the same; accepting only skilled labour and declining (officially at least) the rest. The exception is, however, the government's trainee system which acts ostensibly as a front to allowing the controlled importation of unskilled labour.

20 It is fair to say that Japan's attitude towards foreign immigrants has been one of exclusion, containment and control rather than one that attempts to build a society in partnership. Until this situation is drastically improved there is little hope of immigrants being allowed (or willing) to make up even a few more percentage points of the nation's overall population. Thus, not only is the government's rhetoric (as described earlier) seen wanting in terms of concrete actions, it is highly questionable as to whether society is ready or has been prepared for any immediate change in the status quo. Consequently, there seems little hope of non-Japanese supporting Japan's population in the immediate future.

21 As mentioned, at present Japan is in the midst of a decade-long recession. In the medium term this recession will delay serious debate on increased immigration. Even if demand does grow, there is still the issue of where Japan might seek its labour from. While there are large numbers of people of Japanese descent in many Asian nations, as long as the government continues with its policy of offering residence only as far as descendant's grandchildren, this avenue will be quickly exhausted.

22 In any case, should the problems of an impending decline in population be solved through immigration? Perhaps a smaller society may be a better one? (It could be argued that in fact a smaller population may lead to an increase in efficiency if focused in the right direction.) And what is to be done with the burgeoning illegal immigrant population already here? These are also questions the government needs to address and open public debate on. One thing, though, is certain. If Japan wishes to maintain its economic strength it needs to maintain its population, particularly its labour force. The introduction of greater numbers of foreign immigrants can, if managed properly, also lead to the reinvigoration of the culture and society and provide a stimulus for greater achievement (surely something Japan's economy presently requires). Yet this cannot be achieved without adjustments.

23 And then there is the unanswerable question of will these people want to stay anyway? According to some research, a high percentage of the minute number of refugees actually granted asylum in Japan do not wish to remain long-term citing discrimination and rigid rules. Living in Japan is simply not desirable for them in the long term and they decide to leave. In order to keep new immigrants in Japan there are a number of aspects of the nation's recent approach that need to be changed. Not least of which is a lingering discriminatory attitude towards resident foreigners.

Conclusion

24 Japan's population will, undoubtedly, faithfully follow the predicted downward slide given the government's lack of decisive action on either of the two possible options briefly examined in this paper. The former (that of effecting policies aimed at increasing the birth-rate) seems the most probable possibility, yet this alone will not be enough. There are also, arguably, numerous benefits to be gained by a nation through the latter of the options mentioned (increased movement of people by immigration), however, this requires debate and changes that society has probably not been prepared for yet. Serious public debate needs to be opened if the government is to either create an atmosphere where both women and men can work and raise children together, and/or non-Japanese can be welcomed and live 'normally and comfortably.' These solutions alone, however, will only temporarily alleviate the situation. Long term debate needs to be initiated as to how to best attain economic security while not damaging (and preferably assisting) developing nations as well. Now is a prime time for Japan to show leadership and support to its developing neighbours. If Japan wishes to ensure its future prosperity, sooner, not later, critical discussion on these issues will be essential. Time is, however, fast running out.

Key

- A) 19
- B) 8
- C) 15
- D) 7
- E) 10
- F) 12
- G) 23
- H) 3