

Research Summary

“The Security of Rural Ageing: A Comparative Study between Japan and Thailand”

This research has two main objectives: firstly, to investigate and compare the demographic forces that led to the ageing processes in rural areas of Japan and Thailand; and secondly, to analyze the ‘security’ of the ageing population. Research was conducted in 2009, in Fujisawa, Kanto region of Japan and Chiang Mai, Northern region of Thailand. Primary data were collected by in-depth interviews with the ageing population in both areas.

In regards to the demographic forces that led to the ageing processes, there is no doubt that the rapid fertility transition in Japan since the late 1950s and a pro-longed low fertility level has affected the Japanese population age structure, particularly on the rapid increasing of the ageing population. The total fertility rates (TFRs) of Japan have been below the replacement level since the second half of the 1950s. The TFRs remained above 2 until the early 1970s, before declined sharply to a current level of 1.3. Currently, the population aged over 65 had already reached 23 per cent, and expected to be increased to 30 per cent in 2025. The fertility transition in Thailand, on the other hand, took place in the latter half of 1980s, thirty years after the Japanese transition. The TFRs have then gradually declined from the replacement level to the current level of 1.6. The current proportion of the population aged over 65 in Thailand is 7 per cent while the proportion of the population aged over 60 is 12 per cent of the total population, and is expected to reach 20 per cent in 2025.

In comparing the ‘security’ of the population in rural Japan and Thailand, it is important to note that it is a complex and complicated issue due to different backgrounds of the two countries. However, some aspects have been compared and have shown the interesting results. It was found that the average number of children of the Japanese elderly is 1.9 while the average number of children of the Thai elderly is 3.4. For the living arrangements, 63 per cent of the Japanese elderly live by themselves (with husbands/wives) while 67 per cent of the Thai elderly live with husbands/wives and their children and grandchildren. In terms of socio-economic backgrounds, results showed that the Japanese elderly have higher educational level, higher proportion of agricultural land ownership, higher amount of savings, and have enough income to spend in their daily lives than the Thai elderly. In terms of health care access, every studied elderly in both Japan and Thailand has the access to health information and basic health care services but the amount of medical payment is depending upon each individual’s medical rights which lie under the basis of income level and occupation. In addition, it was found that the Japanese elderly have played more roles in the community’s activities and could afford to travel more than the Thai elderly.

The socio-economic and policy implications related to the changing age structure and ageing issues in both countries have also been reviewed. There are some interesting issues that Thailand can learn and adapt from the Japanese experiences. Some of the issues include: the support on the overall quality of life of the rural ageing population; the consideration of the change in employment structure to support the increase proportion of the ageing population; the immigration policies to support the shortages of labour; and finally, the rules, regulations, and policies related to the effort to increase the country’s birth rates – in order to balance the population structure and for the long term population sustainability.