

R oundtable on the Challenges Facing Asia's Aging Societies (April 2, 2025)

By Japan SPOTLIGHT

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Participants



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Some countries in Asia are suffering from their aging societies, but some are not. ERIA and JEF chose the social and economic impact of aging as one aspect of their joint research on economic policy in FY 2024. They particularly focused on Thailand and Singapore, which are both suffering from aging, and how they are tackling this challenge. Japan is the most rapidly aging society in the world and the United States, also experiencing aging, is concerned about these Asian nations in the light of national security, as they could potentially lose their influence and power with their greying populations, which would lead to the shrinkage of their military forces. Participants from these three countries talk about the consequences of aging for their societies in a Roundtable discussion, with our chairman Masakazu Toyoda as moderator.

Introduction

Toyoda: An aging society is said to be one in which 7% of the population is aged 65 or older. Japan has already exceeded 29%, ranking it first or second in the world in terms of population aging. The characteristics of this aging society in Japan are held to be a well-developed medical system, a good welfare system, and good

school education, which is said to lead many people to become more aware of their own health. Generally speaking, it is said that the aging of the population is progressing in developed countries, while it will take much longer for such aging to progress in middle-income and developing countries. However, in terms of the number of elderly people, China and India both have more than 200 million, while the US has more than 58 million elderly people.

An aging society has both advantages and disadvantages. As a result, the following four questions emerge. First, the benefits of an aging society such as the sharing of the wisdom and experience of the elderly and the maturation of society. Second, the disadvantages such as worries about a decline in economic growth and stagnation. Third, coupled with a declining birth rate, an aging population will lead to a shrinkage in population, sluggish economic growth, and also security problems as fewer people will apply for military service. Fourth, even if the population can be maintained by a large number of immigrants, this may cause social problems similar to those in Europe and the US.

Today, we have invited three experts to discuss the issue of aging in some Asian nations. We have Prof. Thang Leng Leng of the National University of Singapore, who has been studying the issue of

immigration and aging in Singapore, Prof. Poowin Bunyavejchewin of Thammasat University, who conducts research on aging in Thailand, especially in the medical and nursing care industry, and Prof. Andrew Oros from Washington College, who has warned about the possible national security crisis that is occurring in Asia amid heightened security tensions.

I'd like to discuss these four issues just mentioned. First, I would like to ask Prof. Thang about the benefits of aging. What do you think are the benefits of aging in Singapore? Do you see it leading to social maturity and improvement in the quality of life?

Benefits of Aging

Thang: I do feel that we do have some benefits as society ages. For one, I realize that in the case of Singapore especially, we are putting more attention on developing an age-friendly environment. And this is really making the society and environment a nicer one, not just for older people but for all ages. So for example, in Singapore, there is an effort to improve neighborhoods, making them more accessible for older people. We have covered walkways for public apartments, especially, for walking to bus stops and subway stations. There is also a lot of greenery and walking paths that were purposefully created so that it becomes more friendly for seniors in the neighborhood. And some places also have more visible signage to be dementia-friendly. So, I think it has really improved the quality of life for all of us. I think it's important in helping a society to mature more gracefully.

The Framework of Singapore government policy on aging has always been more of a whole of government approach to make better connections across society. So you do have connections and cooperation across the government. Along this line, there was the action plan for active aging for 2015, and there will also be a refreshed one in 2033. The key themes are not only creating an environment for amenities for the aged, but also really trying to look at aging as an opportunity for growth as well. And these are some of the good results after seven years, from 2015 to 2023. More people are now employed and working. And then my interest in research is really looking at how there could be more intergenerational bonding and if we could create a city for all ages to make it more friendly. But the 2023 revised action plan for successful aging shows that it is also important to increase connectedness within families or among neighbors in the community, and I think that's very important for our more maturity in society. That is something beneficial for all communities and not just for the people themselves. And another

point is that it encourages innovative ideas for better aging, through new ways of looking at what can be improved for elderly people and technological ideas from young people, and how new businesses can achieve this. So these are some of the benefits I can see as we focus on better life for elderly people as well as the whole community.

Toyoda: Thank you very much. It's nice to say that aging is an opportunity for growth and a better life. Next, I would like to ask Prof. Poowin from Thailand. As you have pointed out, is it good to see the growth of industry for elderly people?

Poowin: I think on the one hand, the growth of the elderly care industry is promising, given the substantial increase in the aging population. On the other hand, I do question how many older people in Thailand can truly benefit from this expansion. In Thailand today, many private healthcare providers build up an elderly care business as a lucrative opportunity to generate revenue. However, the majority of older individuals cannot afford these services. It might not be an exaggeration to say that only the middle class, more specifically the upper middle class, has sufficient financial resources to access the growing range of healthcare services, especially residential care facilities. But at the same time, there is a severe shortage of government-provided residential care services that offer an affordable price. Moreover, due to social or societal norms, living with the person alone is not an option for most Thai families. As a result, families sometimes hire unskilled adults or immigrants to care for their elderly parents or relatives during their time. In other cases, one family member, and most likely a woman, may need to resign from their job to become a full-time caregiver for their elderly relatives. Therefore, I would say that while this business growth is a positive development in Thailand, it does not necessarily mean that most older people in the country are living in good conditions.

Toyoda: Thank you very much. It's a very insightful point that not all people can benefit from aging. How about Prof. Oros from the US? You have had a quick succession of elderly presidents, and is it possible that they are better at satisfying the people?

Oros: I think you show how aging can be a very positive factor for contributing to our society and to addressing problems. Broadly speaking, on the positive side, age can be correlated with wisdom, experience, wealth and strong social networks, among other advantages. So, related to your question directly, US presidents or politicians in general in the US, and in Japan and elsewhere, tend to

be significantly older than the general population, which has its pros and cons. Prof. Charles McClean at Yale University has conducted some fascinating research on local politicians in Japan and how age matters in their decision-making and their levels of support. One important takeaway from his research is that older citizens have many overlapping concerns with younger citizens due to family connections. It's not necessarily the case that older people only care about their social security pensions and younger people care about childcare; older people can care about childcare because their children or grandchildren need that support, and similar with education.

And I find that to be the case also in my own research on military security. A mistaken view from some earlier research suggests that older people will not support a robust military security because they're more concerned with their pensions. My research shows that's generally not the case.

In the recent US presidential election, President Joe Biden ultimately withdrew as a candidate for a second term as a result of widespread concerns about his age. This was seen especially in a poor debate performance that really contributed to his withdrawal as a candidate, but I'd like to point out that his rival, Donald Trump, who now is president for a second time, is also one of the oldest people to serve as president in our history and actually is older now than Biden was when he assumed office. But many people noted during the campaign that Trump had lots of energy and vigor and connected well with younger people, especially the ones in their 20s.

So I think it's a very mixed picture and especially when you get to the level of politicians, which is a very small group in our society. They have unusual characteristics as being a small group. So I don't think that age is necessarily a limitation. I think that's what we see in the recent American election. We see this in research by people like McClean, and we see this in my own research related to military security.

Disadvantages of Aging

Toyoda: Thank you very much. The point that older people can share common interests with young people is a very interesting observation. Let us turn to the second question: the disadvantages of aging. Prof. Poowin, you have been talking about the importance of the medical and nursing care industry and the training of medical and nursing care personnel. Do you think this will lead to an increase in burdens on society or not?

Poowin: As Thailand rapidly moves toward becoming a super-aged society, the demand for certified medical and sick care personnel is increasing to meet the expanding range of healthcare services for the elderly. However, I do not view this as a burden on society. Instead, I see this urgent need as an opportunity for both individuals and higher education institutions. This is particularly relevant given the rising unemployment rate and the declining number of new students enrolling in college and university. For unemployed individuals, especially younger people who graduate with a degree that does not align with the market demands, rescaling through degree programs or training courses to become a certified nurse or practical nurse appears to be a highly productive investment given the rapid growing demand for care services. For those who cannot afford tuition fees, loans provided by state agencies are available to support their enrollment in college or university.

At the same time, colleges and universities can benefit financially by offering degree programs or training courses in nursing and practical nursing. Nurses play a very pivotal role in the elderly care industry because they can perform certain tasks typically handled by medical doctors. In the informal healthcare sector, there is an especially urgent need for nurses in major cities like Bangkok and Chiang Mai and Phuket. Upper middle-class and middle-class families often seek their services to care for elderly relatives, particularly during nighttime hours. In other words, reskilling to become a nurse or practical nurse significantly increases one chance of employment whether formally or informally. This can help individuals and families navigate Thailand's growing economic challenges. In other words, I think the urgent need for medical and nursing related staff should not be seen as a burden on the country. It represents significant opportunities.

Toyoda: Prof. Oros, the aging ratio in the US is about 17%, but because of the large population, the US has more than 58 million elderly people, which is the third-largest in the world. What do you think are the disadvantages, if any?

Oros: The cost of pensions and the cost of health care can rise as the proportion of the elderly increases. However, I agree with Prof. Poowin that it's a mixed picture. But if the question is about the disadvantages in advanced industrial countries where there is universal health care or widely government-supported health care, it can lead to rising health costs. I'll also note that demographers often now talk about the "old old". This is about people 85 years of age or older. And in many places in the world, this is actually the fastest

growing part of the population. That's true in Japan, for example. And so, in that group in particular, in terms of the costs of health care, including when there's cognitive decline, that can be a factor.

But I'd also like to throw out that we can think about measuring aging in different ways. While we often focus on the growth in the number of people over 65, we also can think about the effect of an aging society as a place where there are fewer people of working age or fewer children. And looking at it that way, you see the situation a little differently. So the effect of having a smaller number of working-age people could be labor shortages, for example. But immigration might be one possibility of addressing that sort of shortage. It also could be addressed through automation or increased use of artificial intelligence (AI). I tend to be fairly optimistic about the correlation between a shrinking workforce in many of our societies and the growth of automation and AI. So, in fact, in some places in the world, in the advanced industrial world, you see rising youth unemployment even at a time where the total labor force is shrinking and the number of younger people is shrinking. The reason for that in part is because there's greater efficiency through use of robotics and AI. So, in some ways, there are advantages to having a somewhat smaller workforce because otherwise you might have higher unemployment. There's not a clear correlation between a smaller workforce and labor shortages.

And lastly, I like how you frame the issue about the US because it has a large population and a large number of elderly people. In my own research, which focuses more on military security, I do find that the total size of the population does matter because there's more fungibility of labor, there's more movement possibilities because the total population is very large. In a country where the total population is smaller than the average, as labor shortages emerge, it can be harder to redirect the labor, so that that can be a downside. There can also be a positive side to having a smaller population in that immigration is an easier fix. So if we use an extreme example like China, the second-largest population country in the world, as its population begins to shrink, and as the shrinkage intensifies, it's not realistic to think that you're going to bring in 100 million immigrants from somewhere else. It's not possible. But in the case of Taiwan, for example, the workforce shortage could more realistically be replaced by immigrant labor. So I do think the total population size matters, not just the percentage of the population that's older or not as old. And again, just to repeat my initial point, the way that we measure how old a society is, can be based on different factors, for example, the median age. Depending upon what the average age is, or the number of people in each age group, there are different implications

based on how you think about that.

Toyoda: The issue of immigration is so complex and important that we will discuss it later. Prof. Thang, I understand you're also doing research on Japan. From the viewpoint of the disadvantages of aging, what are the differences between Japan and Singapore?

Thang: Singapore is such a small country, and that's why the workforce issue is critical for us. So in the case of nursing homes in Singapore, for example, we are already mostly using foreign caregivers. I was just visiting a nursing home in Fukuoka city last week, and it's not uncommon to find foreign caregivers who are fluent in Japanese now in institutional settings. But I think comparatively in Singapore, more people, more older people are being taken care of at home. And they could do that because Singapore has a system of foreign domestic helpers at home at reasonable costs. We are also much more used to having foreign helpers at home, compared to Japan. So I think this is one of the differences that you can find in how two societies cope with caregiving concerns. An increase of people who are older than 85 will bring you more chances for caregiving and the lack of family members at home to provide that makes it possible and important to have caregivers.

Another issue is that both nations face problems of social isolation. This whole idea of social isolation is very real. In Japan, there are problems of people dying at home alone, and this is the same thing that Singapore is facing. In Singapore, recent policy under the successful aging framework has targeted this rebranding of active aging and is reaching out to all older people in the community as far as possible, especially those who are not getting out of the house, so that we can tackle social isolation. But it's not easy. And I know in Japan, there are a lot of very good efforts to try to help older people who are socially isolated. These are not easy things to do, but I think they are important because we really need to tackle this issue so that people who live in a community can know they are being supported.

Declining Birth Rates & Depopulation

Toyoda: I see. I think we can learn from each other, perhaps, because the situation varies from country to country. Let us turn to the third question, which is declining birth rates. A declining birth rate is a phenomenon that occurs to greater or lesser extent in every country as its economy develops. It is seen in Europe and the US, as

well as in Asia. However, in Japan, the population is rapidly shrinking due to limited immigration. Population decline is often mentioned as a fiscal problem or an economic problem. In addition, Prof. Oros is sounding the alarm as a security issue, especially in Asia. Prof. Oros, could you elaborate on this issue of security?

Oros: Yes. I find that Asia's aging powers are in fact strengthening military powers. This is a bit of a paradox on the surface, but it is what I found in the first decade of this region experiencing rapid aging, and the super-aged status of Japan. Soon, South Korea, Taiwan, China, and Russia will all be super-aged states. And yet, we widely expect these states to be the most powerful states in the region militarily. So I think the main takeaway is it's possible to be older and stronger at the same time. So the question then is, why would people think otherwise? As for the reason that many people have this idea that aging powers will be in decline, I would summarize it in two main points.

One is a concern about who is going to serve in the military if there are fewer young people. And the second big concern is who is going to pay for militaries and new technologies if there are fewer people of working age. I think these are both reasonable concerns. But there seem to be solutions to these two problems, at least in the medium term. As we get past 2050, however, and population shrinkage has really intensified, Japan's population is likely to shrink below 100 million, and China's population is likely to lose hundreds of millions of people by that point. But that's quite a way off. And new technologies, AI and robotics may be quite different at that point. But in the shorter term, what do we see? Well, in terms of spending on defense, we see all of the countries in Asia that are aging are spending more on defense than they were before the aging began. One question is how is that possible? It's because of increased economic efficiency, as each of these countries still enjoys economic growth. So it's possible, at least currently, to spend more money on the military and on other things, because the economy is growing. Now, it is true, as an issue of *Japan SPOTLIGHT* pointed out last year, that the rate of economic growth seems to be declining in aging states, which does lead to concerns in the medium term. But in the shorter term, I think there are solutions to the spending side.

The other issue is about the people who serve in the military. So far, what countries that have experienced shortages in military recruiting have been examined? Japan, South Korea, China, and the US, basically all of the advanced militaries, have shortages in recruiting. Thus, it can't just be about aging, because there are

different rates of aging across these countries. But what countries have been doing is expanding the pool of potential soldiers, accepting older recruits, accepting people with different health standards – like maybe they need eyeglasses or they're not as tall as they needed to be before. The biggest difference from the past would be women, because in Asia women have served at a lower rate in the militaries than in the US and in NATO countries in Europe. So there are solutions to these challenges. But I will acknowledge that they can be fairly significant. Japan's Self-Defense Forces have had serious shortages in just the last few years, even while the number of women serving has increased a lot. The other solution there is, again, automation and AI. And we see them, of course, in actual military conflict recently. In the Israel-Gaza conflict, and especially in the Russia-Ukraine war, you see that the major militaries are using drones more, and other sorts of uncrewed systems. This is not because they're aging faster than Japan. It's because this is the cutting edge of military technology. So for a country like Japan, or China, this ability to substitute human labor with technology is one reason why Asia's aging powers are likely to continue to be its strongest military powers.

Toyoda: The relationship between aging and security is extremely important. Prof. Thang, what are your thoughts on this issue, security versus the shrinking population? What is Singapore's situation? Singapore's population seems to be maintained by immigration.

Thang: We have for the first time over 6 million people in Singapore in 2024, a 2% increase from 2023. The population has been increasing year by year a little bit, but it's mostly because of immigration. The percentage of foreigners in the population has reached at least 30%. I think it's very interesting when we talk about security that in Singapore, with this shrinking birth rate, if you are a second-generation permanent resident you have to go to the military. And probably that would also make you perhaps have a better sense of belonging to Singapore. Also, the interesting thing that Prof. Oros talked about is high technology. Cutting-edge technology is working as a substitute for labor in the population and I think it's the same in Singapore, although we see fewer younger people over the years getting into the army. National service takes two and a half years in Singapore. So all men who finish high school used to have to go to the army for two and a half years before they come out to go to university or work. Now it has been shortened to two years. I think this is because the military can now leverage new technology, some

cutting-edge technology. So I think technology plays a very important role in supplementing the men.

Toyoda: Thank you very much. Technology and security are very interesting issues. Prof. Poowin, what do you think about the problem of population decline caused by low birth rates and aging of populations? Do you have any concerns about security?

Poowin: I think for the Thai security agencies, there is no direct relation between the aging population and security concerns. It's because serving in the military is the duty of all male citizens. And there is no public debate about these issues. Mainly in Thailand, this problem is often considered in more economic terms rather than security ones. But anyway, like other countries, this issue has a variety of repercussions and significant implications across many dimensions. But a specific concern that I would like to highlight briefly here is the older before becoming rich. Unlike countries like Japan, Germany, and South Korea, which reached a high-income status before confronting demographic aging, Thailand's risk is in becoming an aging society before it is rich. It poses a significant challenge as Thailand must address the economic and social costs of an aging population without having sufficient financial resources or institutional structures typically found in developed economies like Japan. The demographic shift may trap Thailand in the middle-income status as the shifting workforce and increasing social expenditure constrain the resources needed for productivity-enhancing investment, which is required to advance to a high-income status. Thailand seems to need to call for urgent co-ordinated action across economic, social and demographic fronts. But without the comprehensive reforms to both productivity to strengthen the social safety nets and capitalized growth opportunities within the super-aged economy, Thailand still risks becoming stuck in the middle-income trap with a declining quality of life across the generations. And the window for proactive policy intervention is closing rapidly. Unfortunately, success will depend on transforming demographic challenges into drivers of sustainable development through technological innovation, human capital investment, and growth strategies, but these do not seem to suggest much success in the near future.

Immigration & Social Stabilization

Toyoda: Now to the fourth question, immigration and social stabilization – a very important issue. Prof. Thang, I have not heard

that immigrants are destabilizing Singapore politically. Are there any particular practices the Singapore government is carrying out with regard to immigration?

Thang: I think basically Singaporeans are pretty diverse to begin with. We talk about diversity and ethnicity from the beginning as an immigrant society. So in a way, I think there's more tolerance, there's more inclusion of foreigners, for example, in festive celebrations, and at the grassroots level as well. But I was just looking at a recent poll by the National Youth Council about youth-local foreigner relations sentiment. It shows that compared to 38% of foreigners who feel that locals and foreigners get along well here despite their differences, only 17% of Singaporean youth feel the same. But by and large, I think the ethnic coexistence that we have as a society has been emphasized from the beginning, and this does help with the acceptance of foreigners. But of course, immigration is always a hot topic in Singapore. But I think the Singapore government is stabilizing the population with foreigners and also seeing the foreign population as an opportunity. That is very important in helping the growth of the economy as well as the competitiveness of the country's industries.

Toyoda: Thank you. I think in Japan, the rate of decline in the population is large and so we have to learn a lot from Singapore's case. I'd like to hear from Prof. Poowin about the situation in Thailand. Is it fair to say that the problem of social stabilization has not arrived yet in Thailand?

Poowin: Well, I think the situation in Thailand is quite the opposite. It's quite different from the situation in Singapore, which Prof. Thang just addressed. I would say the problem of social stabilization has existed for many years. Thai reliance on immigrant labor, particularly from neighboring countries like Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos, has led to the shortening of long-term challenges to social stabilization. These challenges manifest in the erosion of social cohesion and the rise of xenophobia. Thailand's social structure is strained by widespread discrimination against migrant workers who are often perceived by the Thai public as threats to cultural identity and economic stability and perceived by the state as a threat to national security. Many Thais believe that migrants are more likely to commit crimes than locals despite the fact that there is limited empirical evidence supporting this kind of perception. Such xenophobic attitudes, with many Thais opposing equal pay for migrant workers and rejecting their entitlement to workplace rights, and cultural

frictions are further exacerbated by language barriers and differing customs, which has led to the social exclusion of immigrants. In recent years, new waves of Chinese immigration to Thailand have created additional and substantial social anxieties. Concerns have arisen about their way of living and their businesses, which often hire only Chinese nationals and are sometimes linked to illegal activities. Meanwhile, state agencies such as the Foreign Ministry have long perceived immigration as a threat to national security and national interests. In a word, immigration has contributed to long-standing challenges related to social stabilization in Thailand.

Toyoda: I see. Very interesting. I think we can learn from each other. In the US, immigration has become one of the deciding issues in the presidential election. Prof. Oros, do you have any advice from the lessons of the US on how to make immigration a stabilizing factor in Asian society?

Oros: I think we must acknowledge that immigration is one of the most controversial issues in the US today. It played a major role, as you noted, in the election of President Trump, and is a major factor in the escalating political polarization in the US in just the first few months of Trump's second term, where we're seeing harsh tactics to forcibly remove some immigrants in the US, both those who arrived without prior work authorization as well as those who came as students, and even some who had received permanent resident cards. I predict escalating challenges and polarization in this area in the coming year.

In terms of the lessons for Asia, I'd summarize two main points. Number one, ideally, don't let immigration concerns and divisiveness fester for as long as the US political system did; try to address citizen concerns, and especially rule-of-law issues, earlier. Prof. Thang noted how Singapore has done this. I believe Australia and Canada also have done this much better than the US, even though there can still be specific issues there such as housing prices escalating a lot in major urban areas that is clearly related to a quick growth in populations largely due to immigration. So there still can be issues, but I think we should try to address them early.

The second point is that political actors, whether elected politicians or activist groups, need to stress more broadly the positive and indeed essential role that immigrants are playing or can play to solve real challenges that the society faces. I do think that countries like the US, Australia, Canada, and Singapore have benefited for years from immigration, and politicians and other political actors could stress that and explain more specifically how it

is that immigrants are contributing to broader societal prosperity. I was in Australia twice last year for research where I asked this question, and it does seem that Australia has done a better job at explaining to the general public how having a large number of foreign-born doctors, for example, helps make the broader health costs lower and provide better coverage as a result. There are concerns, labor concerns about construction workers, for example, or unionized workers and how immigrants might destabilize things. I think these concerns were taken more seriously than they were in the US. Now, Australia has an advantage of being essentially a large island, just like Japan, and to some extent South Korea due to being cut off from North Korea. So these states have better opportunities to control their borders than the US or Canada or some European countries have, and that can be an advantage. In terms of a lesson for Asian countries especially for places like Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan, controlling immigration and getting public support for changes that have been happening can be important, such as showing how immigration in certain areas can target labor shortages that are emerging. We also see how international students coming to these countries can help with surplus capacity in universities. So rather than cutting capacity in universities, being more open to foreign students could provide an important offset. That's not exactly immigration because many of those students will depart after their courses. But to show how that can be a benefit, I think this is part of the lessons. It's something that the US did not do well enough and we're paying a price for that right now.

Overall Expectations from Governments

Toyoda: I see. Thank you very much. Very interesting and to a great extent educational for Japanese people. Finally, I would like to have a quick question about the role of governments or expectations for governments. On these issues of declining population, aging society, security, and immigration, I just would like to have a view on the role of governments. Prof. Thang, Prof. Poowin, and Prof. Oros, in this order, could you express your expectations?

Thang: Government plays a big role, especially in Singapore, in terms of setting up the policies that encourage directions. As you can see from the successful aging plan, a lot of things have been slowly put in place to help for the better aging of people in society. I think there's really a need for policies to provide more opportunities for older adults to work, or continue working in later life. I think there are some policies for delaying retirement age and that sort of thing

that have already been put in place. But nowadays we're talking about lives of possibly 100 years. And people can still contribute effectively in their 80s as well. So how can we encourage them to do so with more opportunities? I think that, as in Japan and other places, sometimes when older people after retirement look for a job, they find it very difficult to utilize their own expertise.

Secondly, while in the past, in Japan as well as in Singapore, people would retire at the age of 60 or so and probably live for a few more years and then pass away, nowadays people retire at the age of 65 and even after that they still have quite a long time, maybe 20 or 30 years to live without working. In this regard, I hope that there will be more policies to strengthen families and communities. It's something that I hope governments will do more to realize, such as creating more community roles in society, in a more creative way. In Japan, because of this population decline, you have empty shops and empty homes. And I have seen very innovative ideas being used to revitalize communities with all these empty spaces. In Singapore, everything is very expensive. Housing and land prices are terribly high. But how can businesses like supermarkets in the communities or post offices serve as venues for social gatherings or a social space as well, not just for business but as a space for community solidarity? I hope there will be more efforts from the government to encourage this.

Poowin: Well, I am quite pessimistic. Apparently the government has to do a lot more. But considering the capacities and organizational culture of government agencies, I do not really believe that we can expect significant action from them, particularly in addressing the challenges and problems caused by aging population trends, even though they are well aware that Thailand is transitioning into a super-aged society. Of course, there are some campaigns that try to make the public aware of the implications of these issues. But at the same time, there are still fewer than 20 government-run residential healthcare facilities available for older people in Thailand, which means it's really insufficient for the majority of older people, most of whom live in poverty. I really find it difficult to envision a promising future for Thailand in this regard.

Oros: I would summarize it in three words for a start: plan, plan, plan. It's easy to say this, but unfortunately, especially in democratic governments, the tendency is for politicians to focus on short-term urgent problems, and not to think as much about how to build a society that will be successful when a larger percentage of the population is older. Now, on the positive side, I do think that all of

our major countries that we've been discussing are doing some planning, but I'll use Japan as an example, as the first super-aged society in the world. There are essentially two simultaneous problems or challenges.

One is the immediate labor shortage or the immediate lack of students at universities. But the other is how you can address the declining birth rate so that Japan's population when it shrinks to 100 million doesn't keep shrinking further to 90 million and 80 million. So that's a longer-term challenge. The two sets of policy solutions are somewhat different. So I think, again, planning is very important. To give an example of that from US politics: as we all know, the current politics just about two months into the new Trump administration is quite chaotic. But one of the goals of the new Trump administration policies related to the government pension scheme, what Americans call social security, is being open to using technology better and in new ways, but it's difficult to buy into. In France, for example, there were riots in Paris in 2023 in response to raising the retirement age by just a few years, which already is much lower than it is in Japan or the US. In the US today there's likely to be very serious pushback to some of the policies that Elon Musk is trying to implement in our social security administration. So, in conclusion, what I would say is that, although your question is about the role of government, ultimately it's the people who matter. It's the people who have to be convinced that new policies are what is needed to address a challenge. In the US right now, that case hasn't been made in a way that the people are buying into it. In France, clearly, the people had not bought into that. And I'm expecting that the aging in Asia phenomenon is going to intensify significantly, with hundreds of millions of fewer people in the region as a result. Governments are going to need to explain to people why things need to be done differently. Governments are playing a very big role also in terms of supporting technology that will help with this transition. But they can't do it alone. They need the people's support.

Toyoda: I think different countries are facing different challenges, but to a considerable extent the challenges are common for all of us, and we can learn from each other. I think today's discussion has been very educational for many people. Thank you all very much. **JS**

Written by Naoyuki Haraoka, editor-in-chief of *Japan SPOTLIGHT*.