

# Trends and Topics 2006:



## Mega-Changes & Mega-Opportunities

by Dr. Andy Meeko

“There is nothing so powerful in this world as an idea whose time has come” wrote Victor Hugo, and this adage seems to hold its weight now as well—when times and ideas match, matchless things begin to happen. The time, year 2006, is being foretold by numerous trends that are opportunities for new ideas. Following are three trends poised to shake the future of Japan.

### Plummeting Population

The year 2006 will be the first year of Japan’s foretold population decline. Though much has been done trying to avert the situation, all has been to no avail. The problem of

*shoshika* (the trend of having few children) emerged in 1974, when the fertility rate fell short of 2.08 (the necessary number for the population level to be maintained).<sup>1</sup> It has been on the decline ever since, meaning that the percent of children making up society has dropped for a consecutive 30 years—Japan now possesses the fewest children per capita of any major country.<sup>2</sup>

Since 1974, the country has hit the “1.57 shock” of 1989, the “1.50 shock” in 1990, the “1.29 shock” in 2004,<sup>3</sup> and today Tokyo has an inconceivable 0.99 birthrate—Tokyo couples don’t even replace one of themselves. By 2050 the current 130 million popula-

tion will have dropped 30% to less than 90 million. Some estimates indicate that if Japan keeps up its current level of antipathy toward parenting, the population will be halved by 2100.<sup>4</sup> Already much of Japan has been experiencing declining population figures, with 25 of 47 prefectures in negative population growth mode.<sup>5</sup> Japan’s breeding habits, or lack thereof, are flirting with a sort of self-extinction.

Oddly, with parenting a seemingly unpopular pastime, childcare magazines like *Tamago Club* and *Hiyoko Club* are still hot, while most other magazine markets are challenged. But perhaps “unpopular pastime”

is too charitable of a description. In a survey conducted by *AERA* magazine in 2001, 45% of parents responded, “parenting is a drag.”<sup>6</sup> And a recent survey by Mainichi Shimbun showed that one in four don’t want children, and 23% of married women with children occasionally regret having children.<sup>7</sup> Parenting is stressful business nowadays, and people are already having a hard time managing stress. Parenting is also expensive business, with the expense of raising one child costing 16.1% of the average family’s income.<sup>8</sup>

Parenting is getting a bad name, and the government is perplexed about how to improve the situation.

Tama City has given us a good example of this predicament. Since 1988, the number of students in Tama public schools has halved. In the last decade six schools have closed, and more are soon to follow. During this downward spiral, Tama has adopted roughly 200 measures to support child-raising households—yet none of the steps have served to reverse the decline.<sup>9</sup> Going from bad to worse, there are estimates indicating that within the next 10 years, the number of universities nationally will need to be halved!<sup>10</sup> Of course, all this means less and less new blood entering the work force and a dire shortage of enterprisers and taxpayers. Meanwhile, Japan persists in the annihilation of its future, performing an estimated 400,000 abortions annually.<sup>11</sup>

The effects of the population plummet are huge. By 2014, one out of every four Japanese will be 65 or older,<sup>12</sup> and the rejuvenation of pension funds will take somewhat of a miracle. Japan’s future is burdened with caring for the elderly on a level that no society has faced in the history of this planet.

It is easy to foresee many outcomes of this trend. First should come major economic woe, and thus an increase in domestic stress. The question is—who will be helping people deal with increased domestic stress? Current helps are quite insufficient, and both the government and companies have begun cutting back support services already. What will increased stress and less support look like?

Another dynamic to be expected is

dishevelment. Think of massive vacancies in residential and office buildings, think of parks and streets with no maintenance; rust and overgrowth and abandonment. Some of this need can be addressed by robotics, but if people insist on not reproducing there is only

one other option; importing people. Japan has managed to keep its borders unwelcome to immigration (unless it is *yakuza*—gangsters—bringing in disadvantaged women), but now Japan has no choice aside from

opening its arms to Asia. Consider a huge influx from China, Korea, the Philippines and Southeast Asia—and the “pure” Yamato race will be redefined. Christian influences are already growing in rural areas thanks to the prevalence of brides from Korea and the Philippines; this will now be magnified. According to a UN report from 2000, Japan needs to bring in a massive 343,000 immigrants annually until 2050, simply to prevent population decline<sup>13</sup>—this would mean that by 2050, thirty percent of Japan’s population would be foreign immigrants or their descendents! Like it or not, Japanese society is on the verge of being essentially reinvented.

### **Mushrooming Military**

A little over two decades ago, the Japanese SDF (Self Defense Force) position was laughable. At the time, my brother Joe, a Lt. Colonel in the US Air Force, was teaching at the SDF Officers school in Ichigaya. Of course, the Soviet threat was still a serious consideration back then and the atmosphere was tense. At the time, Joe mentioned that if Japan was without US protection, and the Soviets decided to come down, Japan’s sov-

ereignty would come to a terse end. Within a mere twenty minutes the air force—and in a scant few hours the navy—would be thoroughly obliterated. By the end of two weeks, their ground forces would be gone as well. Japan would be decimated, and who in that part of the world would protest? After all, Japan was miserably short on friends.

But without much recognition, the Japanese military machine has steadily progressed. Interestingly, it has been encouraged to do so by friend and foe alike. The US has urged Japan to take a role in maintaining world peace that is proportionate to its status as the second wealthiest nation in the world. China and North Korea have blatantly antagonized, forcing Japan’s quiet development of military

might to become a matter of survival. For one thing, Japan Inc.’s lifeline of oil tankers are spaced every 20 miles or so from the Nippon Islands to the Arabian Sea. And of course this journey includes passing through the Taiwan Strait. In 1996, China “tested” ballistic missiles in the ocean off Taiwan and conveniently allowed a few to land near Japanese shipping lanes. China continues to remind the world of its “comprehensive national power” plan (here it might be better

to say “do let your imagination run wild”). More recently, in 2004, Chinese surveillance and reconnaissance vessels intruded into Japanese territorial waters 30 times<sup>14</sup>—a *Ni Hao Ma* in-your-face every ten days.

Meanwhile, the illogic and menace of North Korea is enough to dash anyone’s pacifism. Japan’s wild neighbor invaded Japanese shores in the 70’s and 80’s, abducting citizens at will. In 1998 it launched a Taepo Dong missile that flew over the main island of Honshu. And in recent years it has incessantly bragged and insinuated regarding its nuclear capacity.

But during these past twenty some years Japan has not been sheepishly gazing from its

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coastline; it has been at work. Today Japan has one of the largest military budgets in the world, spending an enormous \$1 billion dollars on missile defense alone, nine times what it spent from 1999 to 2003.<sup>15</sup> The missiles likely provide coverage all the way to Taiwan. And beyond that? Japan's military machine is now superb, boasting (in a recent research paper sponsored by MIT and referenced in Air Force Magazine) the world's fourth largest air force, after the US, Great Britain, and France. Japan also has the world's third largest fleet—in fact, the aforementioned research paper states “Britain and Japan probably vie for second place.” That is not even to mention the fact that Japan's P-3 aircraft could devastate any East Asian nation. Asia's superpower has arisen—Japan is locked and loaded.

Numerous strategic moves have also been taken to widen Japan's military tour reach. The SDF began to stretch its arms with peacekeeping missions in Cambodia and Malaysia, then the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea, and recently in Afghanistan and Iraq. Each of these moves brings bigger changes in mentality than can be seen on the surface; many boundary lines have been systematically crossed.

Gargantuan power sits basically dormant, but history and reason indicate that it is only a matter of time. Those powers will be unleashed.

Paired with the present situation, in the back of many minds are the problems of the past. Along with the absence of serious apology to other Asian nations for war crimes, there has been a steady stream of visits by prime ministers and cabinet members to Yasukuni Shrine, where 2.5 million war dead, including Class-A war criminals, are enshrined. Just meters from the prayer point stands the Yasukuni Shrine Museum, which

likely nauseates anyone remotely familiar with history. The loud and emotional message reverberates: “Japan's efforts in Asia were the noble attempt to save its Asian brothers from the threat of the West.” No responsible mention of the rape of Nanking, the

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slaughter of villagers in the Philippines, chemical/germ experiments conducted on innocent civilians, the 200,000 women forced into sexual slavery, the cowardly attack at Pearl Harbor... Most of the Imperial Forces criminals got away scot-free, re-entering the system, with many taking up important posts in industry, some even in politics. It is impossible to know how much of the arrogant racism that fed these historical events is still lurking in Japan—will it rear its head in the future? Admittedly, those who wax nostalgic for Japan's imperialistic, militaristic era are few, but it only took a few to steer the nation

into catastrophe in the past. The 60th anniversary of Japan's surrender was recently marked, and according to the *Mainichi Shimbun*, 43% think the war was inevitable.<sup>16</sup> Inevitable... inevitable usually arrives uninvited, when you least expect it.

When will Japan be going to war? Will its closest neighbors make some stupid move soon? Will crisis-level circumstances force overnight changes in the constitution? Some in Christian ministry in Japan have been hoping for big changes to

increase receptivity to the gospel, but could many of the freedoms presently enjoyed be lost? If our current situation is the best we will ever have, how can we maximize the times?

### **Unstuffed Closets**

Though the trend has already been going on for some time, a flurry of media attention surrounds the symptomatic traits of people avoiding *gaman* (endurance). People are frustrated with a system that fails to appreciate and reward them. For example, prevalent media topics in recent years have included *gakkyuhokai* (classroom chaos), *hikikomori* (agoraphobia, self-isolation, for which Japan leads the world), *tokokyohi* (aversion to school), and an assortment of mental ailments; especially *utsu* (depression).

*Utsu* is big. Not long ago it was being called *gendaibyo* (illness a la contemporain), but in an effort to address aversion to medication, one pharmaceutical company ran publicity calling it *kokoro no kaze* (common-cold of the heart). A five-year-old study by Gifu University, which still seems to be the standard information, puts the number suffering depression at one in seven, but with women between the ages of 18-34 it's an incredible 33%.<sup>17</sup> A recent study, by Hokkaido University, indicates one quarter of junior high students suffer “latent if not full-blown clinical depression,” and bemoans

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that, though teachers could be more help, too many of them are also depressed; in 2003 a record number of teachers took sick leave for psychological problems.<sup>18</sup> But who isn't having problems? Last year a record number of workers applied for workers compensation related to mental problems caused by overwork.<sup>19</sup> Depression is the result of poorly processing problems, and more problems are doubtless on the horizon. We are informed that “consultation centers across the country are filled with

people earnestly seeking help” for depression and difficulties.<sup>20</sup> So what will happen? After all, society seems at breakpoint already, closets seem on the brink of avalanche.

Tragically, many people with *utsu* head off the deep end. Suicide, another big media topic, is out of control. For eight years running the number has been over 30,000. It is Asia’s highest.

In the fall of 2005 I was sobered while speaking for a film shoot in *Aokigahara Jukai*, the “suicide forest” at the foot of Mt. Fuji. On average, someone commits suicide there every week of the year. Two years ago 100 victims were found. Locals are exhausted from participating in searches for bodies, and of recent, resist making the effort. In that thick and dark tangle, many more corpses likely lay undiscovered. And in every neighborhood, school, business, and train, nationwide; young and old, tired of stuffing, are looking for a way out.

One more obvious indication that people refuse to stuff stuff, is divorce.

Divorce has now climbed for 13 consecutive years,<sup>21</sup> and made a 45% increase in the last decade;<sup>22</sup> this means that of Japanese marriages today, nearly 40% will end in divorce.<sup>23</sup> Of course, many years back anyone could have seen this coming. Freedom and individuality were increasing in Japan, and the country had one of the highest marital dissatisfaction scores in the industrialized world.

Particularly troubling now is the fact that 1/3 of divorcees are those quitting during the first year of marriage.<sup>24</sup> In a land known for steel-tough fortitude, a generation has arrived who haven’t the stamina to hang in there for even one year, regardless of the fact that their parents dished out a possible 7,000,000 yen for wedding and fixings.

As is, people are not likely to stuff more into the closet; on the contrary, stuff will start to surface, all kinds of issues: hurts, insecurities, weaknesses, compulsions... and also dreams. While negative kickback is obvious,

such a scenario also brings potential for long-postponed emotional growth, and an assortment of good things. But who is going to be

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there to help people who are unstuffing? Trained counselors (*rinsho shinrishi*) are sparse; only 11,533 to be precise. (After all, despite the six years of degree-level and other training, the job is low status and the pay is poor. A counselor working in the public sector can get as little as 10,000 yen per day.)<sup>25</sup> Support groups are also hard to find. Take, for example, grief support groups for families of suicide victims. There are fewer than 20 nationwide. Professor Suzuki Yasuaki of Kokushikan Daigaku who organizes activities for the Tokyo Association for Death Education and Grief Counseling says, “People come from around the country to join our self-help group meetings...” There is no networking of such groups nationwide.<sup>26</sup> The question to us is clear: Who then will meet the needs of these people? They are looking for help—will we stand idly by while the self-help circuit, or the self-proclaimed psychics, or for that matter, the renewed flavors of Buddhism or Shintoism or New Religions that may evolve, all rush in?

The trend of unstuffing means a disruption to the social order. It will be an opportunity as society and individual lives are re-ordered. People are beginning to look for relief; they are opening up. Personally I have witnessed this in my seminars for emotional-relational growth. In every seminar where I give an opportunity to say “yes” to Jesus for the first time, people respond—in every seminar.

Yes, odds are good nowadays. The 2004 NHK survey (conducted every five years since 1973) showed that of those 16-19 years old, only 25% claim to be Shinto/Buddhist—the lowest figure since the survey began.<sup>27</sup> This means that 75% of youth are without anything. Also, the Elijah Conference (VIP Club) tells us that 8% of the population is interested in Christianity.<sup>28</sup> All things considered, if we Christians step up to

the plate, 2006 looks to be a really good year.  
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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> *Japan Times* “On the verge of decline” July 17, 2005
- <sup>2</sup> *Mainichi Shimbun* “Where Are All the Children” 5-5-04
- <sup>3</sup> *Japan Times* “House Husbands” 4-13-05
- <sup>4</sup> *Japan Times* 9-20-02 “Birthrate Hurt by Poor Workplace Support.”
- <sup>5</sup> *Mainichi Daily* online “Foreigners Wanted” 6-30-04
- <sup>6</sup> *AERA* website, 2001 survey. Specific words used, “*kosodate wa son.*”
- <sup>7</sup> *Mainichi Shimbun* “1 in 4 Childless Japanese Don’t Want Any” 1-10-05
- <sup>8</sup> *Japan Times* “Child-rearing Costs” 11-8-04
- <sup>9</sup> *Japan Times* “Tama’s Population Fall” 1-3-05
- <sup>10</sup> Charles Jannuzi and Bern Mulvey. “Japan’s Post-Secondary Educational System” at [www.eltnews.com](http://www.eltnews.com)
- <sup>11</sup> *Shukan Bunshun* 11-18-04
- <sup>12</sup> *Japan Times* 9-16-02 “One in Every 5.4 Japanese is 65 or Older.”
- <sup>13</sup> United Nations Population Division (2000), *Replacement Migration*, 2. in Julian Chapple “The Dilemma Posed by Japan’s Population Decline at HYPERLINK” <http://www.japanesestudies.org.uk>
- <sup>14</sup> James Kitfield “Dragon, Eagle, and Rising Sun” *Air Force Magazine* June 2005
- <sup>15</sup> Richard Lowry “Time for the Sun to Rise” *National Review* 7-4-05
- <sup>16</sup> *Washington Post* “In Japan, An Ambivalent Anniversary” 8-16-05
- <sup>17</sup> *Mainichi Daily* “Depressed Dodge Therapy” 1-10-00.
- <sup>18</sup> *Japan Times* “Even Kids Get the Blues” 1-10-05
- <sup>19</sup> *Mainichi Daily* “Mental Illness Strikes” 5-26-04
- <sup>20</sup> *Mainichi Daily* “Fighting for Life” 7-28-04
- <sup>21</sup> *Japan Times* “The Spying Game” 11-29-04
- <sup>22</sup> *Spa!* 9-7-04 in *Japan Times* “Marriage: The Beginning of the End” 9-14-04
- <sup>23</sup> *Time* “Getting Out” 4-5-04
- <sup>24</sup> *Mainichi Daily* “Easy Come, Easy Go” 9-4-04
- <sup>25</sup> *Japan Times* “Depression: Long-taboo ‘mood disorder’” 7-10-05
- <sup>26</sup> *Japan Times* “Support Said Vital” 3-19-05
- <sup>27</sup> *Sapio* 3-23-05 in *Japan Times* “New God’s” 3-28-05
- <sup>28</sup> *Japan Update* “Christian Literature in the Marketplace” #48 Fall 2004



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