ACTORS OF SOCIAL POLICY MAKING IN JAPAN: A LOOK AT THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

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1. Introduction

As other contributions in this volume show, low fertility in combination with increasing life expectancy has been a growing threat to basic systems that move Japanese society. Since the early 1990s, the political elite has agreed on the urgent need for effective political responses to this major socio-demographic problem and, since then, the goal of pro-natal policy has not been contested by any political party (cf. Cabinet Office 2009: 41–76). In spite of this unanimity, however, Japanese governments for the most part did not present the issue as a priority on their agenda; their policy output has not only failed to substantially reverse the trend, but also been produced with comparatively little determination.

Surely, opinion may be split regarding the political resolve underlying the efforts in the policy field. The 2009 White Book on a Society with Low Fertility published by the Cabinet Office (2009: 29) lists 17 initiatives from 1994 to 2009, presenting a comprehensive set of approaches to the problem. Studies that direct their attention exclusively towards these pro-natal policies often suggest that the Japanese government has been quite active in fighting low fertility (e.g. Coleman 2008). But when examined from a comparative perspective, it becomes obvious that in spite of the colourful White Books, the long list of policy approaches and the occasional media attention, low fertility has been sidelined on the political agenda for most of the last 20 years. For example, over the ten-year period of the coalition of LDP and Kōmeitō, only Jun’ichirō Koizumi became engaged in the policy field of low fertility. The other five Prime Ministers of the LDP neither mentioned low fertility in their campaigns for leadership nor did they declare it a central policy issue for their administrations.

1 Keizō Obuchi, Yoshirō Mori, Shinzō Abe, Yasuo Fukuda, Tarò Aso.
There is further evidence of the comparatively little attention low fertility was given by most LDP-governments. First of all, the departments in charge of fertility policy in the Cabinet Office and in the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) had considerably less staff than, for example, those dealing with long-term care insurance, health care or the pension system. Second, financial resources allotted to family policies (of which fertility policy is just one part) on average made up only 3.58 per cent of the total budget allotted to social expenditure over the period from 1990 to 2007. Third, and in contrast to other policy fields, fertility attracted almost no ‘tribe politicians’ (zoku giin); that is, lawmakers from the ruling parties who through their engagement in a policy field have acquired deeper knowledge and often represent the interests of a particular industry or lobby. Without zoku giin, the policy field lacked an important political driving force.

But even if these points fail to convince the reader, there should be agreement over the assumption that there was (and still is) not only considerable room for more political energy and financial resources to be applied to the fight against low birth rates, but also the political and social need to do so. The struggle against low fertility and the resulting ageing of society simply require more effort than Japan has seen so far.

One important question to be asked then is why pro-natal policy in Japan has taken this particular (underdeveloped) shape. There are social, historical, economic and political factors that need to be taken into consideration, many of which are examined in this volume. Among the political factors, however, there is one that has not attracted much attention: the individual policy makers. Although they are the ones who sign themselves as responsible for policies and are in positions to shape and implement them, an actor-centred approach that examines these individuals remains a gap to be filled in social science research. Among the many academic studies that deal with low fertility, only a smaller part touches upon these political actors. Those that

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2 Interview with Kumiko Bandō, Director General, Gender Equality Bureau, Cabinet Office (Tokyo, November 2007).
3 The lowest share was 3.3, the highest 4.1 per cent. In the year 2005 these figures were lower than those of the US (4.21%) and Germany (7.08%) (IPSS 2009).
4 Hrebenar described zoku giin as the “spearhead of pressure group politics” (2000: 139). In the policy arena of fertility, only LDP politicians who represented the interests of the cram school industry apparently pushed policies to improve work-life balance and to financially support the education of children (Interview with Yutaka Fukushima, Member of the House of Representatives for Kömeitō, Tokyo, September 2008).