

PART THREE

CULTURAL ASPECTS OF DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE

INTRODUCTION

The cultural effects of demographic change are addressed in this part of the *Handbook*. They are diverse and complex, ranging over the entire lifespan from the construction of generations to the meaning of death and the afterlife. In obvious and subtle ways social ageing transforms the very definition of human life and its cultural interpretation. This part of the *Handbook* concerns (1) the construction of age, (2) ethical and legal challenges of population ageing, (3) the reflection in language, literature and media use of ageing, (4) knowledge transfer and technology in the ageing society, and (6) life expectancy gains and what to do with them.

Age is a cultural domain, because in all cultures chronological age is subject to cultural formation. Stereotypes about age and what separates the young from the old and the middle aged vary across cultures. The progression of individuals through the life cycle is structured, relying on the categories that index life from birth to death in characteristic patterns that distinguish cultures one from another. There is order in the temporal flow of the life course. Anthropologists have uncovered that order in studies of age cohorts, cultural variation in ageing, and cultural values associated with age stratification. In Meiji-Japan the saying, *jinsei wazuka gojūnen* 'life, a mere fifty years,' was still understood quite literally. The fact that, today, reaching twice that age is not rare drastically alters conceptions of life, intergenerational relations and life plans, but we are only beginning to understand how.

Cultural anthropology is interested in the institutions members of the community have to negotiate. Age is a significant social marker associated with such institutions and highlighted by rites of passage. As an aspect of its Confucian heritage, Japanese culture is particularly sensitive to age divisions of the life cycle. However, from an anthropological point of view, age grades have usually been considered as stable entities moving through time. Changes in a community's age structure have only recently attracted attention. How are the institutions in which age differences are salient criteria for interaction and allocation of responsibilities adjusting to social ageing? The importance of seniority in Japanese kinship and employment is well-known, but age