Ageing Japan

# Riches make for longevity

*Tokyo*

THE life expectancy of both Japanese men and women is now the highest in the world, according to figures released by the Ministry of Health and Welfare just a couple of days after the 119th birthday of the world's oldest living person — Shigechiyo Izumi of Kagoshima, on the southern island of Kyushu. Life expectancy is now 78.8 years for women and 74.2 years for men: and if cancer, strokes and heart attacks could be overcome, then Japanese women could expect on average to live to 88.4 years and men to 83.8 years.

But a second report — the white paper on population — from the same ministry's Council of Population Problems, due to be officially released later this month, draws some wider and perhaps more worrying conclusions from current demographic trends. Japan's change in life expectancy has been so rapid — it did not reach 50 years until 1947, and 70 until 1971 — and the postwar decline in population growth so sudden, that the nation is now well on the way to becoming the first "geriatric society". At present, there are 7.5 "workers" (people between 15 and 64) for each person over 65; in the year 2000 there will be only 4.9 and in 2025 2.9 workers for each "old" person.

At present Japan is still a "young" society and several Western nations are already approaching the proportions of old people that Japan will have in 2000. What is so worrying is the speed with which Japan is ageing — some two to four times faster than Western nations — and the consequences this will have for a nation increasingly dependent on high technology and the ability to take up new ideas commonly associated with youth. Already the government is taking the long-term future into account by changing health insurance and pension laws so that it is not left in twenty years with bills it cannot pay. But there are no concrete proposals on how the huge numbers of people in their 60s, 70s and 80s are to play the active part in society the white paper calls for.

The white paper is in part aimed at the United Nations conference on population in Mexico next month. There, it is hoped that Japan's change from a high-birth high-death society to a low-birth low-death society in a very short space of time will be held up as an example to nations with rapidly increasing populations. Japan's population growth rate is now down to 0.7 per cent annually and is still declining. Population should continue to grow from the present 119 million to 130 million by the end of the century and then slowly fall again to the present level. The report also charts, for the first time in Japan, the strong relationship between life expectancy and income levels.

The changes in Japanese life expectancy have, of course, largely been attained by reduction of stillbirths and of deaths during birth and the early years of life, so that the gains in life expectancy for those who survive these dangerous years, compared, say, with somebody living a hundred years ago, are not as great as might first appear. Nevertheless, putting the life expectancy figures together with the average age of marriage given in the report — 25.3 years for women and 28.9 for men — shows that the average couple can look forward to nearly 48 years of married life — surely the most convincing argument there could be for the practice of "serial monogamy".

**Alun Anderson**

Polish science

# Administration changes afoot

POLAND is likely to acquire two new high-level bodies dealing with the administration of science — a State Committee for Science and Technical Progress and a Council for Fundamental Research. New legislation on science and on the role of the Polish Academy of Sciences is now under way, and although no official announcement has yet been made, an extensive interview with Dr Jan Karol Kostrzewski, the new president of the academy, in the weekly *Polityka* last month gives a strong hint of how the decision will go.

Poland is unique in the Socialist bloc in having no State Committee for Science. Such a committee did, at one time, exist,

Chinese research administration

# Relics of cultural revolution

CHINA'S reinstatement of intellectuals victimized during the Cultural Revolution has sometimes encountered unexpected snags. Although the Chinese press often refers to people trained in university or technical colleges who encounter prejudice among the industrial work-force, odd traces of the Cultural Revolution still remain within the academic establishment itself.

Last month it was revealed that, until May this year the Tianjin Internal Combustion Engine Research Institute was still being run by a "revolutionary committee" whose members had for the most part been appointed during the Cultural Revolution. These people, Beijing radio reported, were "seriously factionalist" in outlook and "despised intellectuals". Talented scientists and technologists found it impossible to carry out their research properly, and were "despised and expelled". There was no proper financial accounting of the institute's budget, and much valuable equipment was carelessly destroyed.

This "state of chaos", the commentator explained, had been allowed to continue because of a bureaucratic muddle about responsibility. Originally, the institute had been under the joint jurisdiction of Tianjin University and the Tianjin Municipal First Machine-Building Industry Bureau, neither of which "attended to its task". In 1978, the Ministry of Machine Building decided unilaterally to take over the institute, but the Ministry of Education objected.

In the following year, Tianjin municipality decided to make it a part of the university, but the Tianjin Municipal Science and Technology Commission objected.

A prolonged period of haggling ensued between the educational establishment and the industrial administrators, neither being willing to let the institute go to the other. In February 1982, the state of affairs came to the attention of "leading comrades" in Beijing, who instructed the departments concerned to stop haggling and to sort out the chaos at the institute. Nothing was done, however, and the haggling continued.

At the end of April, Beijing finally intervened. The State Scientific and Technological Commission, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of the Machine-Building Industry and the Tianjin Municipal Party Committee were ordered to start direct consultations and given a deadline for solving the problem.

On 5 May, it was announced that the institute had been transferred to the Ministry of Education and would be "managed" by Tianjin University.

Finally, on 8 May, the university sent in "capable cadres" to run the institute and, on 17 May, the new administration of the institute and the branch Party committee were announced.

The institute will now be run by a five-member council, four members of which are academics. The new director of the institute is Shi Shaoxi, president of Tianjin University and a member of the Learned Council of the Chinese Academy of Science.

Although the "18 years of chaos" in the institute has now been resolved, there are clearly high-level fears that this is not an isolated case. The radio reports of the affair included an appeal to all Chinese newspapers to publish the story prominently on their front pages. No reason for this request was given, but in a Chinese context it suggests that such reports are meant to prick the consciences of other bureaucrats who might have neglected the institutes under their control. For how many more years these relics will persist is anybody's guess.

**Vera Rich**