

**THE COMING SUPER-AGEING SOCIETY
IN CHINA: LESSONS FROM JAPAN**

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Executive Summary

1. With a declining birth rate and the globe's biggest elderly population, the Chinese authorities are concerned that urban life pressures could be making it worse with vaunted traditions of filial responsibility for aged parents disappearing. The government projects that by 2050 retirees will make up 33% of China's population and elderly care will take up 25% of China's annual gross domestic product (GDP).
2. According to CGTN, South Korea took only 18 years (from 2000 to 2018) to be an aged society, while Japan took 22 years from 1971 to 1995 and China is expected to take 22 years from 2000 to 2022 according to UN estimates.
3. China's neighbour, Japan, is one of the world's fastest super-ageing society with the elderly aged 65 and above making up more than 28% of its overall population. Many studies in East Asia take reference from the impact of super-ageing on Japan's economy and society.
4. What Japan is experiencing may befall China as early as 2035. Zheng Gongcheng, head of the China Association of Social Security, mentioned in 2017 that China's elderly population is estimated to reach approximately 400 million by end-2035 when it becomes a super-ageing society, with 22.3% elderly aged 65 and above, and in 2050 peaking at 27.9% of the population.
5. China is ramping up its elderly care services by increasing social participation and professional nursing personnel to manage 240 million Chinese above 60 years while the legal system carry out reform work to protect elderly rights.
6. Elderly care could overtake real estate as China's largest industry within the next 15 years, with health officials projecting total elderly care costs to go from about seven per cent of GDP to more than a quarter by 2050.
7. Ensuring that premature ageing does not disrupt national modernisation plans and sustainable economic maturity to a developed economy, China's policymakers

pegged pension promises to very modest levels to avoid burdening national finances for succeeding generations of taxpayers.

8. The target is to have 90% of China's elderly taken care of at home with some China analysts like Sofya Bakhta at Daxue Consulting opining that policies to bring about mindset changes are needed too: "The implication is a return to filial piety in China which took a break, particularly in cities, over the last 30 years".
9. Some Chinese peripheral counties and cities are showing signs of super-ageing, two (Rudong county and Rugao county-level city) are under the jurisdiction of Nantong city and Nantong comes under Jiangsu provincial government.
10. Rudong, with 20% of its population 65 years old and above, is one of the first Chinese counties to be categorised as "super-elderly" (over-65 individuals constituting more than 20% of overall population) and a pioneer in family planning. Rugao is now perceived in the mass media as a showcase of strong elderly population management.

THE COMING SUPER-AGEING SOCIETY IN CHINA: LESSONS FROM JAPAN

LIM Tai Wei*

Ageing in China

- 1.1 According to United Nations' *World Population Prospects: The 2019 Revision*, by 2050, individuals 80 years old and above are projected to increase from 143 million to 426 million.¹ By global standards, a country or region is an "ageing society" when the elderly aged 65 or over make up 7-14% of the overall population and, when that number goes beyond 14%, the country becomes an "aged" society, and when over 21%, it is a "super ageing society".² More than 80% of global GDP is generated by states with accelerated ageing demographics³ (see Table 1 for projections of China's ageing until 2050).
- 1.2 According to *CGTN*, South Korea took the shortest time of 18 years (from 2000 to 2018) to be an aged society (Japan took 22 years from 1971 to 1995) while China is expected to take 22 years (from 2000 to 2022 according to UN estimates, see Table 2).⁴ In comparison, it took a respective 115 and 85 years for France and Sweden to

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¹ Airth, Johanna, "What the Japanese can teach us about super-ageing gracefully" dated 30 March 2020 in BBC News [downloaded on 30 March 2020], available at <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200327-what-the-japanese-can-teach-about-super-ageing-gracefully>.

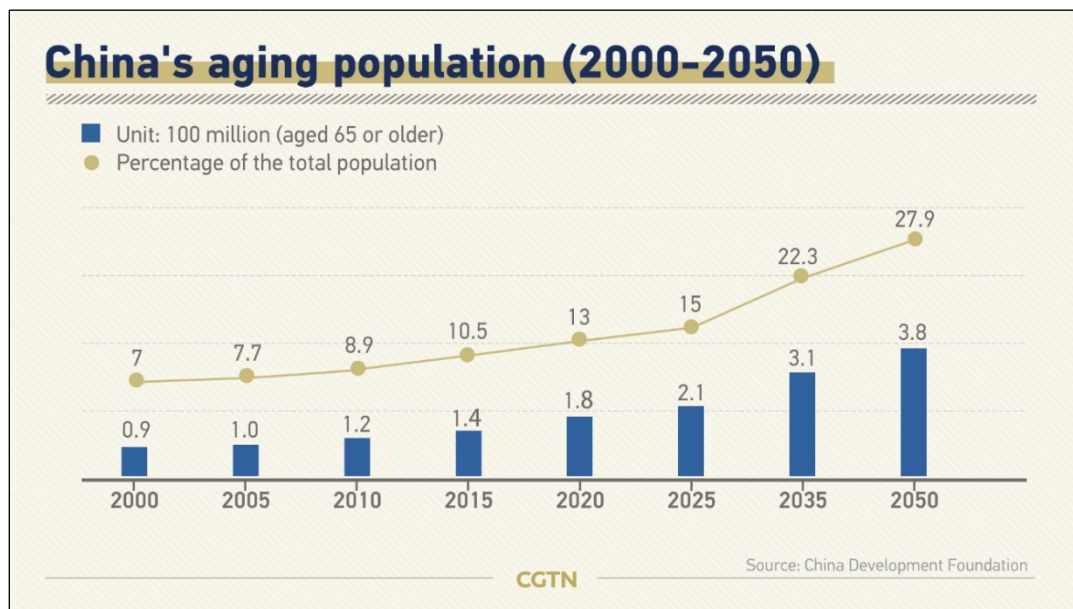
² *Xinhua*, "Nation on road to be 'super aging society'" dated 30 October 2017 in China Daily [downloaded on 1 January 2020], available at <https://www.youtube.com/> and CGTN, "Aging fast: Over 17% of Beijing's population aged 60 or over" dated 18 October 2020 in CGTN [downloaded on 18 October 2020], available at <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-10-18/Beijing-s-now-an-aging-city-with-over-17-aged-65-or-over-UGBuo7HT9u/index.html>.

³ Johnston, Lauren, "What fast-ageing countries such as China tell us about our economic future" dated 1 October 2019 in World Economic Forum (WEF) [downloaded on 1 October 2019], available at <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/10/what-ageing-china-and-japan-teach-us-about-our-economies/>.

⁴ Zhou, Minxi, "Live long and prosper: Challenges and lessons in aging Asia" dated 18 April 2021 in CGTN [downloaded on 18 April 2021], available at <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-04-18/Live-long-and-prosper-Challenges-and-lessons-in-aging-Asia-Zz0WiPhdbW/index.html>.

become an ‘aged society’, while China only used 22 years to transition from an “ageing society (7% aged 65 and above)” to an “aged society” (14% aged 65 and above). By 2035, China is projected to be a ‘super-aged society’ in 2035 with 22.3% elderly aged 65 and above, and in 2050 to peak at 27.9%.⁵ When the one-child policy ceased in 2015 after more than three decades of implementation, China exhibited below-replacement level fertility rates similar to those in Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore even while it stays as a largely developing/emerging economy⁶ (see Table 3 for breakdown of age groups in China).

TABLE 1 CHINA’S AGEING POPULATION (2000-2050)



Source: China Development Foundation, “China’s aging population (2000-2050)” dated 18 October 2020 [downloaded on 18 October 2020], available at <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-10-18/Beijing-s-now-an-aging-city-with-over-17-aged-65-or-over-UGBuo7HT9u/index.html>.

⁵ CGTN, “Aging fast: Over 17% of Beijing’s population aged 60 or over” dated 18 October 2020 in CGTN [downloaded on 18 October 2020], available at <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-10-18/Beijing-s-now-an-aging-city-with-over-17-aged-65-or-over-UGBuo7HT9u/index.html>.

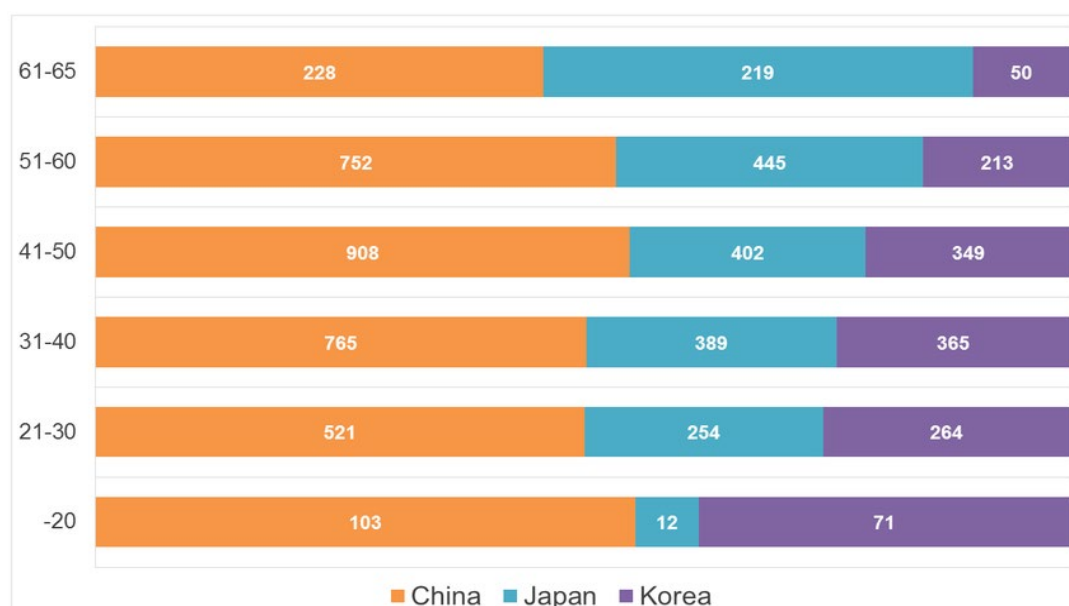
⁶ Johnston, Lauren, “What fast-ageing countries such as China tell us about our economic future”.

TABLE 2 HOW LONG IT TAKES FOR COUNTRIES TO TRANSITION FROM AGEING TO AGED SOCIETY

Country	Year to enter aging society	GDP per capita (USD present value)	Year to become a aged society	GDP per capita (USD present value)	Number of years in between
U.S.	1942	14,870	2014	55,033	72
Russia	1967	7943	2017	10,751	50
Japan	1971	2272	1995	43,440	24
South Korea	2000	12,257	2018	31,363	18
China	2000	959	2022 (UN estimate)	10,276 (2019)	22

Source: UN, World Bank, CEIC, National Bureau of Statistics of China, Angus Maddison, CGTN and Zhou, Minxi, “Live long and prosper: Challenges and lessons in aging Asia” dated 18 April 2021 in CGTN [downloaded on 18 April 2021], available at <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-04-18/Live-long-and-prosper-Challenges-and-lessons-in-aging-Asia-Zz0WiPhdbW/index.html>.

TABLE 3 COMPARATIVE AGE STRUCTURES IN CHINA, JAPAN AND KOREA



Note: Comparative Age Structures in China, Japan and Korea. In the 10-year age groups, the “younger than 20 (-20)” in Japan includes only those who are 20. Numbers in bars indicate corresponding numbers of observation.

Source: Fu, Rong and Haruko Noguchi, “Comparative Age Structures in China, Japan, and Korea” dated February 2016 [downloaded on 1 January 2021], available at https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Comparative-Age-Structures-in-China-Japan-and-Korea-10-year-age-groups-in-which_fig2_293826993.

- 1.3 The declining birth rate, the globe’s biggest elderly population and urban life pressures are making it worse with vaunted traditions of filial responsibility for aged parents disappearing (an interpretation by some in the international media). This was

a grave concern for the authorities as, by 2050, the state projects retirees to make up 33% of China's population and taking care of them will need 25% of the country's annual gross domestic product (GDP).⁷ On the other hand, the prevailing view in China appears to hold that filial piety remains strong in China, even though in modified forms. For example, daughters are playing no less important roles than sons in caring for their parents. It is hence not the eroding filial piety, but the changing family structure/size that is of concern.

1.4 According to China Global Television Network (CGTN), there is longevity in the concept of *Xiao* (filial piety) as a component of traditional Chinese values is still strong and remains an important pillar of Chinese family structures and an important concept of Confucianism.⁸ From the Chinese interpretation, rather than dissipating, filial piety is adopting a new interpretation in contemporary Chinese society while keeping certain aspects of it unchanged, something explained by Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences sociologist Lu Zhen as filial piety arising from the survival need of an agricultural society where parents are responsible for production and supporting their offspring: "In return, children carry their parents when they are old. It is based upon blood relations, and is fundamentally different from western individualism".⁹ Lu argues that, regardless of how Chinese society evolves, filial piety stays as the pillar of Chinese family structure and a "balance between family and individual, and filial piety is that stabilizer".¹⁰

1.5 The one-child policy accelerated a rapidly ageing population and a declining workforce, exerting pressure on working couples to care for two sets of parents while urbanisation, long working hours, high property prices and non-traditional cosmopolitan mindsets make taking care of the elderly challenging.¹¹

⁷ Channelnewsasia, "City of centenarians points the way for China's ageing future" dated 12 May 2021 in Channelnewsasia [downloaded on 12 May 2021], available at <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/malaysia-mulls-shutdown-selangor-covid-19-surge-mco-14827074>.

⁸ Cui, Hui'ao and You Siyuan, "Filial piety still valued in contemporary China" dated 3 July 2018 in CGTN [downloaded on 1 January 2020], available at https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d514e3151544e78457a6333566d54/share_p.html.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Channelnewsasia, "City of centenarians points the way for China's ageing future".

- 1.6 A May 2021 census data indicated that China's elderly population over 60 (retiree population) is more than 264 million (five per cent increase over 2010-2020), turning super-ageing Chinese cities like Rugao into a testbed for Chinese management of the national ageing population in the coming future.¹² China is ramping up its elderly care services to manage an ageing population by emphasising social participation and training professional nursing personnel while the legal system carry out reform work to protect elderly rights.¹³ With longer life expectancy, China's retirement age is relatively low at 55 for females and 60 for males; consequently, it now also has the biggest retiree population in the world.¹⁴
- 1.7 Even China's mega cities are ageing fast. Beijing's population of seniors aged 60 and above increased to 3.71 million by end-2019, making up 17.2% of its overall population (female seniors is five per cent higher than males); between 2015 and 2019, Beijing added 308,800 elderly to reach 3.4 million people aged 60 or above with estimated average life expectancy of 82.31 in 2019.¹⁵ The dependency rate (ratio of older to younger individuals) is increasing to 44.3% and an average of 2.3 working-age individuals have to take care of one elder in Beijing.¹⁶ The metropolitan city of Beijing is not the only ageing region in China. The northeastern Chinese province of Liaoning had nearly 25% of its population aged 60 or older. Shandong, Chongqing, Jiangsu and Zhejiang had more than 14% of its population aged 65 or older, while five other provinces had more than 13% of its population in this age group in 2019, almost meeting the definition of an "aged society".¹⁷

Super-Ageing, the Japan Case

- 2.1 Next door to China is one of the world's fastest super-ageing society. Japan is a "super-aged" society with the elderly aged 65 and above, making up more than 28%

¹² Ibid.

¹³ *Xinhua*, "Nation on road to be 'super aging society'".

¹⁴ Johnston, Lauren, "What fast-ageing countries such as China tell us about our economic future".

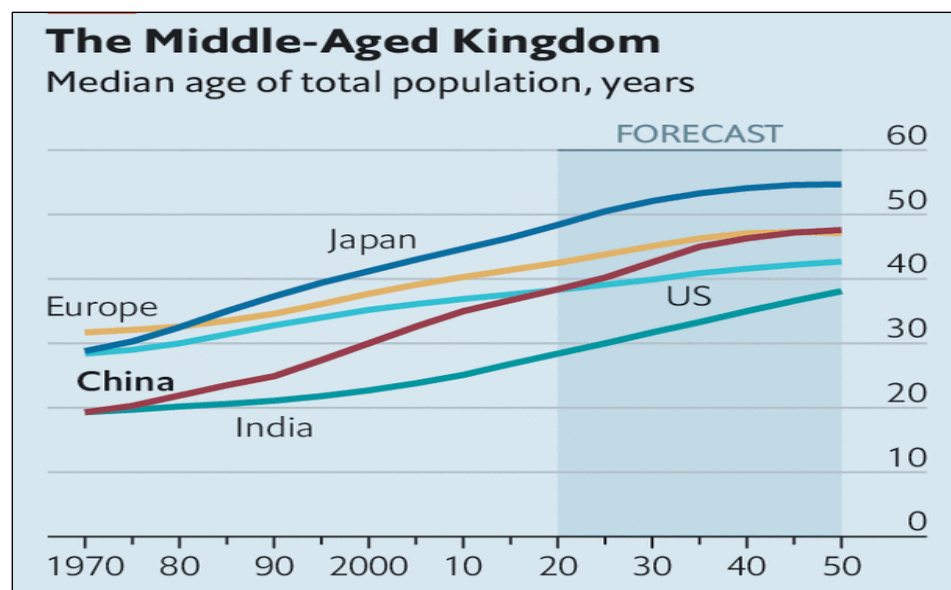
¹⁵ CGTN, "Aging fast: Over 17% of Beijing's population aged 60 or over".

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

of its overall population.¹⁸ Many in East Asia are drawing lessons from the impact of super-ageing on Japan's economy and society. Japan is home to the oldest population among the high-income G7 economies while China has the globe's biggest elderly population exhibiting rapid ageing; the two countries display a traditional disinclination for immigrants as a solution to their ageing population problem.¹⁹ Culturally, one of Japan's social values when it comes to ageing is the fear of being burdensome to society and family members (the concept of *meiwaku*, or "being a nuisance"); Japan's guilt-laden philosophy overpowers the fear of death itself and no-*meiwaku*-ism motivates Japanese to be independent (financially and mentally) as they age²⁰ (see Table 4 for projections of median age in Japan by 2035).

TABLE 4 MEDIAN AGE OF TOTAL POPULATION, YEARS IN CHINA AND JAPAN



Source: *The Economist*, "Median age of total population, years" dated 2 November 2019 [downloaded on 2 November 2019], available at <https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2019/10/31/chinas-median-age-will-soon-overtake-americas>.

2.2 Economically, the Japanese Cabinet Office's *Annual Report On The Aging Society* indicated 70% of Japanese between 60 and 69 years old and approximately 50% of Japanese 70 years old and above are working or engaged in volunteering activities,

¹⁸ Airth, Johanna, "What the Japanese can teach us about super-ageing gracefully".

¹⁹ Johnston, Lauren, "What fast-ageing countries such as China tell us about our economic future".

²⁰ Airth, Johanna, "What the Japanese can teach us about super-ageing gracefully".

community activities and hobbies; as a result, 70% of Japanese companies have raised the retirement age to hire more seniors (especially from 2010 to 2020).²¹ These individuals are still needed as they are able to perform valuable functions in society even though they may not have any need for income. Japanese senior citizens also volunteer in local school activities and public facilities (e.g. national zoo volunteer groups that assist tourists with directions).²² There are yet others who turn to technology in their old age. Kimiko Nishimoto, the 90-year-old “Insta-gran” with more than 220,000 Instagram followers, took up photography lessons and lives with her robot companion “Pepper”.²³

- 2.3 The Japanese Cabinet Office’s *Annual Report On The Aging Society* indicates that the Japanese elderly have a higher cognitive ability compared to the rest of the world because of what Associate Professor Yuko Oguma in Health Management Research at the Keio Sports Medicine Research Centre argued as: “Light exercise, whether stretching, walking daily, working out at the local community center, is effective...Not only for cognitive functions but from a social aspect as well. Compared to 10 years ago, the Japanese seniors are healthier, and have a higher quality of living. This is thought to be a combination of better medical aid and understanding of our bodies. Recently, there has been evidence that muscles can continue to strengthen, even in old age, which is contrary to what we believed in. We believed muscles deteriorate with age, but research is finding that not only can we still train and strengthen our muscles, but that it is important...Often it is the senior citizens themselves that put together programs within the community. They work among themselves to provide activities, to be more fit or to be included socially. It is this pro-activeness that strengthens them”.²⁴

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

If and When China Becomes a Super-ageing Society

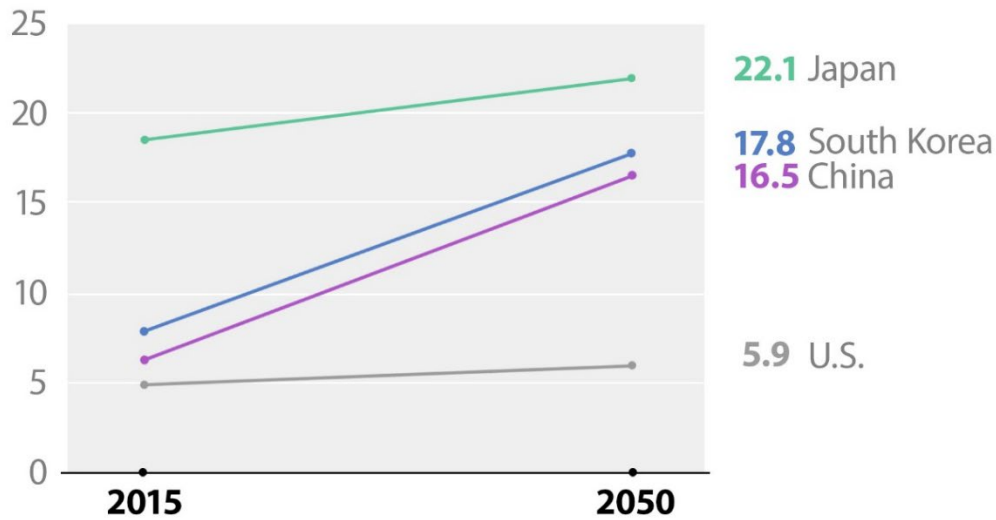
- 3.1 What Japan is experiencing may befall China as fast as 2035. Zheng Gongcheng, head of the China Association of Social Security, mentioned in 2017 that China's elderly population is estimated to reach approximately 400 million by end-2035 (when it becomes a 'super ageing society'), with the elderly bracket increasing annually by 10 million from 2000 (the year that China defined itself as an 'ageing society').²⁵ In the Japanese case, this process started with the rural areas and towns before spreading to the metropolitan cities. While the situation in Yubari city is super-accelerated, even Japanese metropolitan cities like Tokyo are facing depopulation with up to 85% of Japan's municipalities shrinking and above 50% of them are "at risk of extinction" by 2040 unless Japanese have more babies (by 2060, the population will decrease by 33%, from 127 million to 88 million individuals)²⁶ See Table 3 for breakdown of age groups in Japan and Table 4 for projections of median age in China by 2035.
- 3.2 An issue that will increase in importance with super-ageing is providing resources for caregiving. The shortage in elderly care facilities appear to be glaring at the moment. Kyle Freeman (partner, Dezan Shira and Associates Consultancy) pointed out: "Government-run institutions are in high demand and typically have long waiting lists...[In contrast, expensive private facilities are mostly below capacity]... [elderly care could overtake real estate as China's largest industry within the next fifteen years, with health officials projecting total elderly care costs could go from about seven percent of GDP to more than a quarter by 2050]".²⁷ See Table 5 on public spending on the elderly in terms of percentage of GDP in China and Japan.

²⁵ *Xinhua*, "Nation on road to be 'super aging society'".

²⁶ Lloyd, George, "Yubari may offer Japan a taste of things to come" dated 8 March 2021 in Japan Today [downloaded on 8 March 2021], available at <https://japantoday.com/category/features/lifestyle/yubari-may-offer-japan-a-taste-of-things-to-come>.

²⁷ Channelnewsasia, "City of centenarians points the way for China's ageing future".

TABLE 5 PUBLIC SPENDING ON THE ELDERLY
(in per cent of GDP)



Source: S&P Global, "Live long and prosper: Challenges and lessons in aging Asia" dated 18 April 2021 in CGTN [downloaded on 18 April 2021], available at <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-04-18/Live-long-and-prosper-Challenges-and-lessons-in-aging-Asia-Zz0WiPhdbW/index.html>.

3.3 Some Chinese peripheral counties and cities are showing signs of super-ageing. Rudong, with 20% of its population 65 years old and above, is one of the first Chinese counties to be categorised as "super-elderly" (over-65 individuals constituting more than 20% of overall population).²⁸ It was a pioneer in family planning with 28% of its population (approximately 300,000 individuals) aged 60 or older. However, because of its family planning success, Rudong reached this stage two decades faster than other parts of the country.²⁹ It has become a national case study for Chinese demographers and policymakers. In Japan, Yubari is a world-renowned case study on advanced super-ageing societies in this aspect. The Yubari population currently has 8,600 residents and is projected to decline by an additional 60% over the next two decades; eventually, the last residents will either perish or move out, bringing the existence of the town to a nought.³⁰

²⁸ *Southern Weekly*, "Flagship family planning policy county ages in fast forward" dated 10 December 2014 in Global Times [downloaded on 1 January 2020], available at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/896056.shtml>.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Lloyd, George, "Yubari may offer Japan a taste of things to come".

Comparative Case Studies of China and Japan's Super-ageing Cities: Rudong/Rugao (in Nantong region) and Yubari (in Hokkaido Japan)

- 4.1 The case studies of Rudong and Rugao are different. Rudong is a county while Rugao is a county-level city, though both are under Nantong city's jurisdiction which in turn is under the Jiangsu provincial government. See Appendix 1 for a map of both locations within Nantong city. Rudong was an exemplary city in implementing the birth control policy (during the era of one child policy) while Rugao is now perceived in the mass media as a showcase of strong elderly population management.

The case study of super-ageing Rudong county in China

- 4.2 In the 1990s, Rudong county in Nantong Jiangsu province was well-known in two areas: heavy cotton yield and excellent enforcement of family planning policy.³¹ Rudong lowered its population growth rate to 0.5% from two per cent within three years; in 1986, Rudong was cited by the State Council for its outstanding implementation of family planning policy (conservative state projections indicated Rudong helped avoided half a million births in 1974-2014).³²
- 4.3 In 2020, Rugao city (200km from Shanghai within Nantong city in east Jiangsu province) recorded 500 centenarians after an annual surge of 84 centenarians (according to its municipal working commission on ageing); out of the 16 centenarians aged 105 and above as of 1 January 2020, the oldest person was 110 years old.³³ The surge in the elderly population and the challenges it presents brought attention to the authorities. Rugao is nicknamed China's "longevity city" for its super senior population with 78,000 individuals between 80 and 99 years old out of 1.4 million residents (and another 525 denizens over 100 years old); they are

³¹ *Southern Weekly*, "Flagship family planning policy county ages in fast forward".

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Xinhua*, "China's "longevity city" records 500 centenarians" dated 8 January 2020 in Xinhuanet [downloaded on 8 January 2020], available at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-01/08/c_138687853.htm.

feted with local community pride, commemorative statues (including a 50-metre *Shouxingong* (God of Longevity) and living subsidies in the city.³⁴

4.4 Similarly, like Rudong, Japan's Yubari used to have a thriving economy in commodities and was the capital of the Japanese coal industry which declined when Japan turned to postwar foreign oil imports. Yubari's population shrank from 120,000 in 1960 to 21,000 in 1990 when the remaining coal mine was shut.³⁵ Since the 1990s, Yubari's population has halved as the remaining residents grew old and passed away.³⁶ Like Rudong and Rugao, Yubari is in advanced stages of managing a surge in super-elderlies. At an average age of 65, Yubari has more residents over 80 years old than under 40 years old, making it the globe's first pensioner-majority town/city; approximately a dozen people die in Yubari for every single child born.³⁷ The significant difference between Rudong/Rugao and Yubari is that the former two aged because of the imposition of state birth control policies while the latter was mainly due to a declining coal mine industry.

4.5 Along with an ageing population, the sense of solitude and loss among the Rudong elderly was increasingly visible with less young faces around the neighbourhood.³⁸ The county is also coping with a brain drain of young people who left for other cities after college/university graduation in search of work (leaving behind their parents/grandparents), something dramatically highlighted by Deputy Director Xu Jinzhang of Rudong human resources and social security bureau: "In 30 or 40 years, when these elderly residents pass away, the village will be totally deserted".³⁹

4.6 Rudong county's student numbers are also declining with three local high schools ceasing new student recruitment in 2014; factories/industries that invested in plants

³⁴ Channelnewsasia, "City of centenarians points the way for China's ageing future".

³⁵ Lloyd, George, "Yubari may offer Japan a taste of things to come".

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ *Southern Weekly*, "Flagship family planning policy county ages in fast forward".

³⁹ Ibid.

in Rudong found it challenging to recruit staff.⁴⁰ Likewise, super-ageing Yubari is beyond any hope of filling its tertiary education institutions, given the difficulties they faced in finding students in the pre-tertiary education sector. Yubari schools have been merged and consolidated into a single elementary, junior high and high school; the majority of the schools were shut down since barely one in 20 people living in the city are below 15 years old.⁴¹

4.7 Yubari and the whole of Japan have been experiencing a decline in young faces in the last 40 years.⁴² The Japanese believe that Japan will look like a Yubari on a national scale in 2060, especially its rural areas and small towns as younger residents depopulate them and move to metropolitan cities like Tokyo, Osaka and Fukuoka in the last four decades.⁴³

4.8 Despite the decline, Yubari does have some success in attracting industries and is even a national champion in one of them. In the agricultural sector, Yubari's beautiful natural environment has produced Japan's most branded musk cantaloupe melons.⁴⁴ The local Yubari souvenir industry, retail shops and emporium has designed a city mascot, the Melon Bear, with a trademark snarl and bulging veins related to the kawaii (cuteness) genre that Japanese popular culture is famous for, to promote its melon industry and peddle soft cultural power to draw tourism to the city.⁴⁵ Jobs were generated when a Chinese herbal medicine factory invested in the city in the 2010s while the Yubari cantaloupe melon industry is nationally famous for its products which were sold for as high as S\$28,336 for a pair of them while 50% discounted versions at the airport cost S\$21 each, making the premium melon farmers well-off.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Hendy, Richard, "Yubari, Japan: a city learns how to die" dated 15 August 2014 in The Guardian [downloaded on 1 January 2020], available at <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2014/aug/15/yubari-japan-city-learns-die-lost-population-detroit>.

⁴² Lloyd, George, "Yubari may offer Japan a taste of things to come."

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Hendy, Richard, "Yubari, Japan: a city learns how to die".

⁴⁶ Ibid.

- 4.9 To foster viable showcase industries, Pan Jinhuan, a retired Rudong county legislator and a researcher on the ageing issue opined that Rudong should retain its young residents before they depart for other cities because, from 2004 to 2014, almost 60,000 high school graduates were accepted by the Institutes of Higher Learning in other parts of China but fewer than 20,000 returned; there is hence a need for the local government to focus on local vocational education as Pan argued: “Train more industrial and technical talent, help them work and stay in the county, which would not only improve investment environment but also relieve the problems caused by aging”.⁴⁷
- 4.10 Pan may have a good point about workers’ training for Rudong, which is needed for its Yangkou Port located at the confluence of the Yangtze River and the Yellow Sea in eastern Jiangsu province, the most economically developed northern area of Yangtze River Delta within 1.5-hour travel in the Shanghainese economic circle.⁴⁸ It is considered an industrial port integrating petrochemical engineering, chemical new material, clean energy utilisation, equipment manufacturing, metallurgy, warehousing and stone building material industry.⁴⁹ Rudong’s Yangkou Port region’s “4+1+N” industrial system entails four industries (petrochemical, stone, new energy and new materials), 1 warehouse logistics and N industries (equipment manufacturing, metallurgy and general aviation). Rudong’s industrial hinterland is China’s main market for petrochemicals, stone, new energy, new materials and heavy machinery/equipment.⁵⁰
- 4.11 While Pan is lending his veteran experience and expertise to Rudong, Japan’s Yubari has produced similarly emphatic politicians who care about the ageing city and seeking to turn it around. Interesting, Yubari’s ageing challenges have produced rising political stars. In 2011, the city elected the country’s youngest mayor (at 30 years old) in the charismatic, handsome and energetic, Naomichi Suzuki. Suzuki

⁴⁷ *Southern Weekly*, “Flagship family planning policy county ages in fast forward”.

⁴⁸ Jiangsu Rudong Yangkou Port Economic Development Zone, “Jiangsu Yangkou Port Economic Development Zone” dated 16 November 2020 in Nantong China government website [downloaded on 16 November 2020], available at http://en.nantong.gov.cn/yangkouport/2020-11/16/c_563902.htm.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

honed his political skills by selling a super-ageing city as well as its products to the world, in effect a mayor cum salesperson.⁵¹ Suzuki did more than a reasonable job as after serving two terms as the mayor from 2011 to 2019, he was elected governor of the entire sprawling prefecture of Hokkaido.

Case study of elder-friendly Rugao county-level city in China

4.12 At the same time as concerns emerged about Rugao's ageing city, the anxieties were counterbalanced by positive aspects that Rugao offers. Other than a beautiful natural environment, healthy diets and sleeping habits have contributed to longevity in Rugao.⁵² Likewise, there are similar charms about Yubari as well that led to the longevity of its residents. In 2020, Yubari experienced less than one crime of any description weekly.⁵³ There is no graffiti, no vandalism and not even a single felony in most years.⁵⁴ It is a very peaceful crime-free oasis with a perfectly harmonious society which makes the environment very elder-friendly, safe and secure.

4.13 Rugao also has an elder-friendly environment. Rugao's cultural inclination towards the elderly is one of respect and Rugao Longevity Research Centre director She Minggao reiterated the city's reverence for the elderly: "Our ethos here is to respect the elderly... We believe that to have an elderly person in a family is like having a treasure".⁵⁵ Likewise, Yubari has an elder-friendly environment too. For example, in the northernmost prefecture of snowy Hokkaido, if a resident is too old or/and financially strapped, the local council will dispatch a staff to shovel the snow away for free during winter time.⁵⁶ The Northeast Asian cultural tradition of respect for the elders seem to be strong in these case studies.

⁵¹ Hendy, Richard, "Yubari, Japan: a city learns how to die".

⁵² Xinhua, "China's "longevity city" records 500 centenarians".

⁵³ Lloyd, George, "Yubari may offer Japan a taste of things to come".

⁵⁴ Hendy, Richard, "Yubari, Japan: a city learns how to die".

⁵⁵ Channelnewsasia, "City of centenarians points the way for China's ageing future".

⁵⁶ Lloyd, George, "Yubari may offer Japan a taste of things to come".

- 4.14 Rugao life remains spiritually rich. Temples are full of elderly worshippers making offerings, while parks are filled with physically active seniors dancing or tai chi practising; seniors are out and about cobblestone paved riverside streets and public spaces are culturally vibrant with elderly singing songs.⁵⁷ Even the physical environment of Rugao is made for seniors. Fields of green/yellow crops and well-designed canals correlate with a local belief that its natural environment contributed to longevity.⁵⁸ The Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) researchers even go as far as to suggest in a report that high levels of selenium mineral in the soil may prolong the life expectancy of its denizens.⁵⁹
- 4.15 Rugao's nature may have much to look forward to if it follows the trend of what happened to super-ageing Yubari. Charmingly tame Sika deers and stonechat birds wander around Yubari city freely as Mother Nature reclaims what used to be human habitation while an abandoned primary school is converted into a nature academy where urban children can kayak down the beautiful clean rivers, hike Upper Yubari valley hillsides and catch stag beetles.⁶⁰ This was a far cry from the dirty polluted Yubari city of the past with its thriving coal mine industry and industrial complex. The pristine nature is a plus point in the ageing process for the remaining residents. The local government in Yubari did a good job of cleaning up the city from its coal mining days.
- 4.16 Besides the physical environment, the lifestyles of the denizens of those environments are just as important when it comes to mitigating super-ageing. An example of an active Rugao superaged resident points the way towards active ageing in that city. Gu Bin, born in 1918 during Republican Nationalist China, is a self-taught on the use of the internet in his 90s who managed to maintain connections with the external world through the information superhighway.⁶¹ He was awarded a medal for city centenarians who completed a hundred-metre walk and a certificate

⁵⁷ Channelnewsasia, "City of centenarians points the way for China's ageing future".

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Hendy, Richard, "Yubari, Japan: a city learns how to die".

⁶¹ Channelnewsasia, "City of centenarians points the way for China's ageing future".

dated 1951 for fighting in China's People's Liberation Army.⁶² Gu even commented on US politics when interviewed by AFP, wisecracking jokingly that "Biden is just too old to be president...He's not as old as me, but he's also not as smart.....In the past China was poor, we owned nothing. Now I have a place to live, food to eat and my clothes are warm...Life is good".⁶³

4.17 There are many other examples of active super-ageing seniors in Rugao. Great-grandfather Yu Fuxi (103 years old) still rides a scooter around the city, cleans his own bedsheets and cooks for his grandchildren.⁶⁴ He said: "I still work...I sweep the floor every day and like everything clean and tidy. I go to the market on my scooter and buy what I want".⁶⁵ In another part of the city, Qian Zuhua (101 years old) is working at his son's screw manufacturing plant pairing off metallic nuts and bolts with his nimble fingers while living with his son, grandson and great-granddaughter, remarking: "I'm 101 and my health is good".⁶⁶

4.18 Even though Rugao elderly appear to take good care of themselves and there are natural advantages like a green environment, availability of healthy foods and vibrant religious spirituality that the city offers to the elderly, the local authorities are still turning to policy to ensure the city's elderly are well taken care of. Rugao local officials rolled out subsidised or free door-to-door services for the elderly like routine health checks, haircuts, massage, pension top-ups that increase with seniority and subsidies for elderly care expenditure.⁶⁷ There are similarities between Rugao and Yubari. Both locales are determined to keep public services going. Yubari's government is not giving up on funding basic essential services for the town as a dozen post offices remain, while the fire engines in the fire station are

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Channelnewsasia, "City of centenarians points the way for China's ageing future".

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

well-polished to react to emergencies and even public coin phones continue to exist for the elderly population.⁶⁸

- 4.19 Rugao city officials are also active in economic planning and industrialisation. Rugao Economic and Technological Development Zone (RETDZ), established in September 1992, spans 150.4 square km.⁶⁹ With a population of 167,500, it is the main socio-economic concept behind the development of Rugao and one of the first 13 provincial development zones in Jiangsu province before its upgrade to a national economic and technological development zone on 17 January 2013.⁷⁰
- 4.20 RETDZ oversees 39 villages and communities and its major industries have attained the ISO9001:2015 quality certification.⁷¹ It is located at the geometric centre of the Yangtze River Delta economic circle, with a niche industry in hydrogen fuel cells as the permanent venue of the International Hydrogen Fuel Cell Vehicle Congress, Hydrogen Economy Demonstration City of United Nations Development Programme, Rugao New Energy Vehicle Characteristic Industry Base of the National Torch Programme and Hydrogen Characteristic Town of Jiangsu province.⁷²
- 4.21 The Rugao local government is facilitating technological advancement, equipment upgrading and branding of traditional firms such as textiles/garment companies, longevity food, green ecology, attraction of national talents. Deloitte's study shows that business costs in Rugao Economic and Technological Development Zone is a mere 25% of Shanghai, while office rentals are approximately 10% of Shanghai and 20% of Nanjing and Hangzhou.⁷³

⁶⁸ Lloyd, George, "Yubari may offer Japan a taste of things to come".

⁶⁹ The Administrative Committee of Rugao Economic and Technological Development Zone, "Overview of Rugao Economic and Technological Development Zone" dated 16 March 2021 in Nantong China Rugao Economic and Technological Development Zone [downloaded on 16 March 2021], available at http://en.nantong.gov.cn/RGETDZ/2021-03/16/c_523939.htm.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

- 4.22 There are also reversals of previous demographic policies that were seen as over-effective in neighbouring Rudong county. Officials who were previously successful in controlling Rudong's population with forced sterilisation and abortion in the age of the one-child family planning policy are now struggling to persuade more young couples to have a second child since the mid-2010s.⁷⁴ Rudong officials are concerned about the implications of fewer people paying taxes for the county's coffers, while Shen Xiaojun, Rudong county's pension fund bureau director, is more anxious about a pension fund shortage with the ratio of pension fund payers to pension fund recipients in Rudong at 2.74:1 (below the official ratio of 4:1).⁷⁵ He speculated that "[a]s the aging accelerates and the need for pension payments rises, the burden on companies and insurance personnel will be greater".⁷⁶
- 4.23 Yubari also has similar worries about its tax revenues for funding public initiatives and services. As there are few working individuals in Yubari, tax revenue is low, compelling the town to declare bankruptcy in 2007. Its residents have the highest level of debt per head in Japan and its municipal workers such as the bureaucrats and mayor (approximately S\$34,001 for the mayor) draw the lowest pay in the country,⁷⁷ while per capita taxable income fell by nearly a third between 1998 and 2012.⁷⁸
- 4.24 To provide community-based services for the elderly, it would need funding to boost the 7,456 beds in Rudong nursing homes when supply could not meet demand.⁷⁹ Sang Shengfu, family planning policy worker for 28 years in Rudong,⁸⁰ opined that the authorities should provide finances to Rudong for its contribution to national

⁷⁴ *Southern Weekly*, "Flagship family planning policy county ages in fast forward".

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Lloyd, George, "Yubari may offer Japan a taste of things to come". dated 8 March 2021 in Japan Today [downloaded on 8 March 2021], available at <https://japantoday.com/category/features/lifestyle/yubari-may-offer-japan-a-taste-of-things-to-come>

⁷⁸ Hendy, Richard, "Yubari, Japan: a city learns how to die".

⁷⁹ *Southern Weekly*, "Flagship family planning policy county ages in fast forward".

⁸⁰ Ibid.

birth control policy, declaring that “[t]he financial difficulty in other areas which had poorer enforcement of the policy are not as serious as ours”.⁸¹

- 4.25 Super-ageing Yubari has revved up such elder-friendly housing since the mid-2010s. Two tracts of land for senior-friendly single-storey public housing were constructed to house the elderly who may not be able to climb the stairs.⁸² There are also subsidised two-bedroom public housing for rental at only S\$283 a month and 40 sheltered housing units for seniors for below S\$57 a month.⁸³ The upside of Yubari is that 33% of its public housing is unoccupied so prices are very affordable, with a two-bedroom rental apartment situated in a spanking well-maintained block.⁸⁴
- 4.26 Like Yubari, Rugao has set up care facilities for those who can afford it. Wang Yingmei (85 years old) lives with her husband in a Rugao elderly care home: “My son is working in Beijing, so we are the empty nesters...It’s actually more cosy than our home, because there is nobody else at home but us”.⁸⁵ However, the cost of such an accommodation is not cheap at RMB4,000 (US\$600) a month, which is equivalent to the average monthly pay of a city resident in China and more than double the rural worker’s income.⁸⁶

Current Chinese Policies to Manage the Future

- 5.1 To prevent premature ageing from disrupting national modernisation and sustainable economic maturity plans to its economy, China’s policymakers peg pension promises to very modest levels to avoid burdening national finances for succeeding generations of taxpayers.⁸⁷ In the meantime, upcoming generations of

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Hendy, Richard, “Yubari, Japan: a city learns how to die” dated 15 August 2014 in The Guardian [downloaded on 1 January 2020], available at <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2014/aug/15/yubari-japan-citylearns-die-lost-population-detroit>.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Lloyd, George, “Yubari may offer Japan a taste of things to come”.

⁸⁵ Channelnewsasia, “City of centenarians points the way for China’s ageing future”.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Johnston, Lauren, “What fast-ageing countries such as China tell us about our economic future”.

Chinese workers are better trained/educated/skilled to increase productivity and move on to higher value-added economic sectors with higher salaries.⁸⁸ China is credited with putting in place an economic demography strategy to deal with the intertwining economic and demographic shifts, The strategy may even become a model for others to study from, especially through its policies of shifting incentives to the service, high-tech and research and development (R&D) sectors. Some like Lauren Johnston, research associate of SOAS China Institute, even argue that China is the founder of the economic demography transition approach to policymaking and national development.⁸⁹

5.2 The policy targets 90% of the Chinese elderly to be taken care of at home, with some China analysts like Sofya Bakhta at Daxue Consulting opining that policies to bring about mindset changes are needed too: “The implication is a return to filial piety in China which took a break, particularly in cities, over the last 30 years”.⁹⁰ Some Rudong natives are taking this idea literally. Liu Xinyu (20 years old), a university graduate from a university in the provincial capital Nanjing approximately 200 km from Rudong, has a large family with parents, grandparents and great-grand parents in toll.⁹¹ He insists that “filial piety” will be his primary condition for his future girlfriend.⁹² There are also worries about the future when there is not enough young to take care of the old. Rudong county officials are reversing their previously successful population controls.⁹³

5.3 Sang Shengfu (58 years old) has been an award-winning family planning policy worker for 28 years in Rudong county for applying the national birth control policy vigorously in the 1980s in Nantong (a pioneering unit in this area) a decade even before the authorities fully implemented it.⁹⁴ Sang’s duties in that era was bringing

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Channelnewsasia, “City of centenarians points the way for China’s ageing future”.

⁹¹ *Southern Weekly*, “Flagship family planning policy county ages in fast forward”.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

couples to the hospital for sterilisation surgeries after their first birth, monitoring pregnant females with extra babies, compelling them to induce labour prematurely in hospitals.⁹⁵

- 5.4 Through Rudong county, one can spot the evolution of China's coping mechanisms for managing demographics over time that aligns with the economic development of China, from a highly successful one-child policy that was so successful that led to an ageing and then super-aging society. With greater affluence, accent is now refocused on managing large numbers of elderly, keeping them active and/or employed while encouraging pro-creation amongst the youths, alongside the removal of the one-child policy.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

Appendix 1 Map of Rudong County and Rugao County-level City in Nantong City and Nantong City's Position in Jiangsu



Source: Cheng, Yeqing, "The Location and Jurisdiction of Nantong (figure 1)" dated March 2014 in Researchgate [downloaded on 1 January 2021], available at https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-Location-and-Jurisdiction-of-Nantong_fig1_265721860.