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## Editorial

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**Biographical notes:** Ian G. Cook is Emeritus Professor of Human Geography, Liverpool John Moores University. An experienced Teacher, Researcher, Doctoral Supervisor and Examiner, he has been variously the Head of Geography, the Head of the Centre for Pacific Rim Studies, and Chair, Faculty of Media Arts and Social Science Faculty Graduate Research Committee. His main research interests are on the linkages between ageing, urbanisation, health and environment in China, and related aspects of social gerontology globally. Recent publications include co-edited volumes on *New perspectives on China and aging* (2007) and *Aging in Asia* (2009), both for Nova Science Publishers, New York, plus articles in such journals as *Health Policy, Social Science and Medicine* and the *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*.

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Notwithstanding the many problems that humanity faced in the 20th century, including two World Wars, environmental pressures, international terrorism and rapid social and technological change, and despite the health risks associated with these, the new century began with unprecedented prognoses for the longevity of the human species. For example, "In Italy and in Japan, where extraordinary low fertility is persisting, projections indicate that by 2050 there will be three times as many people over age 80 as children under age 5" [Uhlenberg, (2009), p.1]. Japan's society is becoming one in which the 'oldest-old' aged 85 years or more is becoming a significant element in the demographic profile, raising many questions about the future shape of the Japanese society and economy. Across the globe, even in many less developed societies not previously associated with an ageing population, there is widespread population ageing. Although the United Nations argues that this population ageing has gone too far to be reversed, the three articles in this special section of the journal focus on the linkages between longevity and health, disease and environment to bring an element of caution to this assumption that human ageing is irreversible. For example, Dummer, Halsall and Cook build on previous work by Cook and Dummer (2009) that analyses longevity in Asia to discuss Malthusian and Neo-Malthusian checks to longevity, particularly those associated with global environmental change. The authors suggest that disasters such as the Asian Tsunami of 2004 or the Sichuan earthquake of 2008 pose a significant threat to longevity gains, and support this overview via a case study analysis of Hurricane Katrina (2005) and the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. Policy makers and others need to be aware that longevity gains, while significant, are not yet a 'done deal', in that environmental disasters coupled with related socioeconomic and political instability can still threaten the demographic advances of recent times.

Another area of threat to human society is identified by Gorobets as chronic diseases and mental disorders that diminish the quality of life of human populations. Linked to

interrelated issues of lack of physical health, obesity, rise in diabetes, and the stress of modern life (in which suicide, e.g., is now a major cause of death to young as well as old populations), Gorobets calls for a range of educational, cultural and institutional responses to enrich human life, and help to combat the threats of materialistic consumer culture.

Finally, Parker and Pant (2009) build upon their work on Aging in Nepal, groundbreaking because ageing is such a recent phenomenon in this poor nation that has only just emerged from a deadly civil war, to highlight the social pressures that ageing is giving rise to, and the linkages to gender discrimination and health concerns. With emigration of younger people, particularly from rural to urban areas, or overseas, older populations are left potentially vulnerable to 'empty nest syndrome', in which traditional family support is no longer available. The authors argue that there will be many challenges ahead as communities, wider society or the government are increasingly required to intervene to provide support for vulnerable older people. Research will be required to monitor the situation of older people, and to ensure that resources are effectively targeted to this growing element of the population.

These three papers, I suggest, are of great relevance to ageing populations across the globe as the 21st century unfolds.

## References

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