

Demographic Transition in Eastern Asia: A Comparative Perspective

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While Japan achieved replacement level fertility in the 1950s, the first demographic transition of the Republic of Korea (Korea), the Republic of China (Taiwan) and the People's Republic of China (China) completed thirty or forty years later. Historical events such as the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and economic reformation had significant impact on China's fertility decline.

While Japan's lowest TFR value of 1.26 is around the average of Southern and Eastern Europe, those of 1.08 in Korea and 0.895 in Taiwan are among the lowest in the world. The TFR value of 1.19 in Chinese census of 2010 is assumed to be under-estimated. It can be shown that acute fertility decline in Korea and Taiwan was accompanied by acute nuptiality decline. While the governmental family planning campaign had a significant socio-psychological impact in Korea, the decline in demand for children was rather moderate in Taiwan. Thus, it is difficult to assert that extremely low fertility in the second demographic transition is the result of extremely acute decline in the first transition.

High college enrollment and female labor force participation are often referred to as the reasons of low fertility. It is true that college enrollment rate rose more rapidly in Korea and Taiwan than in Japan in the 1990s, although the trend stagnated or even reversed recently. The M-shaped curve in female labor force participation still can be observed in Japan and Korea in 2010 censuses.

It is difficult to evaluate gender equity in Eastern Asia. While China shows high gender equity in political and economic sectors, Japan and Korea have high scores in educational and health sectors. As the result, synthetic scores by the UNDP and the WEF give contradictory pictures. According to the own calculation by the DGBAS, gender equity of Taiwan is higher than other Eastern Asian countries. However, it is suggested that the gender equity within family in Taiwan is lower than other Eastern Asian countries. Since the traditional Confucian family values are most effectively preserved in Taiwan, the discrepancy between gender equity in the family sector and that in non-family sectors is largest there. According to McDonald's theory, this situation results in very low fertility.

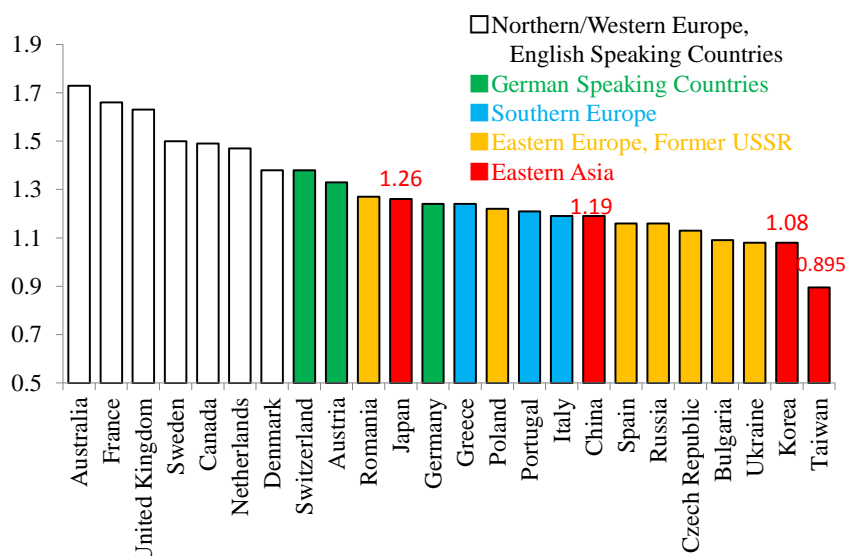
The compressed modernity theory emphasizes the impact of acute social, economic, and political changes in Korea and Taiwan. However, the theory does not

explain why Korea and Taiwan have lower fertility than Eastern European and the former USSR countries that experienced much more drastic transition from socialism to liberalism, or from planned to market economy.

Another ad-hoc interpretation is cultural determinism that Confucian societies experiences more serious contradiction between rapidly changing social, economic, and political system and slowly changing family system. Because industrialization and post-industrialization have been led by Anglo-Saxon societies, English-speaking countries with Anglo-Saxon family pattern are most advantageous in adapting to post-modern changes. French-speaking, Dutch speaking, and German-speaking countries are more advantageous than Southern/Eastern Europe and Japan because family patterns in the former group are closer to Anglo-Saxon pattern than in the latter group. Confucian countries are more difficult to adapt than Southern/Eastern Europe or Japan because the Confucian family pattern is more distant from Anglo-Saxon pattern. Thus, fertility in Korea and Taiwan declined to the lowest level in the world. Taiwan's TFR is lower than Korea because of the Confucian family pattern is more intact.

The current level of China's fertility is controversial. Assuming that the UN estimate of 1.55 in 2010–15 is correct, China may not experience as low value of TFR as Korea or Taiwan without arriving at the developmental level in Asia NIEs. If the census value of 1.19 in 2010 is correct, it implies that very low fertility was achieved without maturity and stagnation of economy. In such a case, China may suffer from extremely low fertility that is even lower than Taiwan.

Recorded Lowest TFR



OECD Family Database, Eurostat, Guo&Gu (2014), 行政院主計總處