

# Fertility Decline in East Asia: A Comparative Analysis of Japan, South Korea, and China

東アジアの出生力低下：日本と韓国と中国の比較分析

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This presentation looks at the trends, patterns, underlying factors, and policy implications of fertility declines in three East Asian countries: Japan, South Korea (referred to as “Korea” hereafter), and mainland China. In contrast to many Western countries (and some other Asian countries) that have also experienced or been experiencing fertility reductions to below-replacement levels, these three East Asian countries are most notable in the rapidity and sheer magnitude of their declines.

After a rapid decline shortly after World War II in which fertility was cut by more than half in one decade, from a Total Fertility Rate (TFR) of 4.5 per woman 1947 to 2.1 in 1957, Japan's fertility started to decline to below-replacement levels in the mid-1970s, thereby reaching the "lowest-low" level—a TFR of 1.3 per woman according to Kohler, Billari, and Ortega (2002)—in the early 2000s. Korea experienced one of the most spectacular declines ever recorded, with fertility falling continuously from a very high (a TFR of 6.0 per woman) to a below-replacement level (1.6 per woman) from the early 1960s to mid-1980s. In 2005 Korea's fertility dropped to a TFR of 1.1 per woman, the lowest in the world at that time. Similarly, after a dramatic decline from a very high to a little above the replacement level from the early 1970s to the early 1980s, China's fertility has also entered its below-replacement era in the early 1990s. By 2005, its TFR reached around 1.5 per woman. From the late-2000s to the early 2010s, fertility in these three East Asian countries has been below or near the “lowest-low” level: a TFR of 1.3 to 1.4 per woman in Japan, 1.1 to 1.2 in Korea, and around 1.2 to 1.5 in China.

Despite differences in the timing, tempo, and scale of fertility declines in these three countries, dramatic reductions in fertility to well below-replacement levels have resulted in extremely rapid population aging and foreshadow long-term population declines in all of them. With the proportion of population aged 65 and above at 25 percent in 2013, Japan is one of the most aged countries in the world, and its population aging is projected to accelerate further, with the proportion of the elderly reaching 40 percent in 2060 (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research 2015: 30–31). Japan's population also started to decline in the late 2000s. With the pace of population decline projected to accelerate during the first half of the current century, Japan's population is estimated to shrink by almost one-third from

approximately 128 million in 2010 to 88 million in 2060 (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research 2013: 65). With the proportion of the elderly (those aged 65 and above) being 13 percent in 2014 (Statistics Korea 2015: 59), Korea's population is projected to age rapidly—to 40 percent in 2060—and start shrinking in size in 2030 (Statistics Korea 2011). While the proportion of those aged 65 and above is projected to quadruple from around 8 percent in 2010 to 33 percent in 2060, China's population is estimated to start declining at the end of the 2020s (United Nations 2015: 93, 238–239).

Similarities among these three East Asian countries in their very low levels of fertility in recent years in comparison to other parts of the world and differences in the processes of their fertility declines motivate our study. The main objectives of this presentation are to provide a systematic summary and comparison of the three East Asian countries in their patterns of fertility transitions, to discuss the policy implications of below-replacement fertility, and to speculate the economic, social, and cultural factors that may account for similarities as well as differences in their fertility declines. After an overview of cultural backgrounds, economic transformations, and the evolution of population and family policies of the three countries under study, we look at their fertility trends and changes in the age patterns of fertility. We then examine changes in the age patterns of marriage and marital fertility, the two major direct determinants of fertility in populations where childbearing outside marriage is negligible as in the case of these East Asian countries. Next, we look at the social and economic factors underlying fertility and nuptiality changes, such as education, women's employment, and gender relations at home.

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