

Very Low Fertility in Eastern Asia and Europe: Trends, Determinants and Policy Responses

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Lowest-low fertility that appeared in Southern and Eastern Europe in the 1990s spread in Eastern Asian advanced countries after the turn of century. No demographic theory could predict such emergent changes. In attempting ad-hoc interpretation, this paper classifies four cultural regions; Northern-Western Europe that includes English speaking non-European countries but excludes German speaking countries, other European societies such as German speaking countries, Southern Europe and Eastern Europe, Japan, and Confucian societies including China, Korea and Taiwan.

Modernization and post-modernization were led by countries with Northern-Western European traditions, especially Anglo-Saxon societies. Thus, it is supposed that family patterns in such countries were more adaptable to post-modern changes than in late-comer countries. Such family patterns as weak family ties, early home-leaving and high gender equity are assumed to be the characteristics that prevented fertility to decline to the lowest-low level. Southern and Eastern European societies with strong familism and patriarchal features lack such characteristics and the conflict between rapidly changing socio-economic system and slowly changing family system was severer and fertility declined lower than the forerunners. While the Japanese family pattern with feudal tradition is closer to Southern and Eastern European families, the Confucian family pattern is even more distant from the Northern-Western European pattern. Thus, the discrepancy between the socio-economic system and the family system became larger and fertility dropped more drastically in Korea and Taiwan than in Japan.

While Japan adopted pro-natal policy in the early 1990s, Korea and Taiwan adopted such policy transition after 2006. However, the governmental expenditure on the family policy in Eastern Asia including Japan is much smaller than European welfare societies, due to the neo-liberalistic political climate and difficulty to find a new source of revenue. The condition suggests that lowest-low fertility in Korea and Taiwan may last longer than in the case of Southern and Eastern European countries.