

Japan in the Post-demographic Transition Period: Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives on the Long-term Population Dynamics

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In the early twenty first century, the total population of Japan began to decline, after reaching its maximum of 128 million in 2008. Japan's total fertility rate has been below the replacement level since the middle of the 1970s and its life expectancy at birth has been the highest in the world since the middle of the 1980s, now exceeding 86 years for females and 80 years for males. Along with the societal change, it is evident that this country has shifted to a new population regime in the post-demographic transition period, which we term in this paper a new demographic transition. This second demographic transition conceptualizes a transformation of both demographic and socioeconomic factors. The concept of the new or second demographic transition is parallel to the Second Demographic Transition model first proposed by Dirk van de Kaa and Ron Lesthaeghe in 1986, which refers to changes in partnership, family formation, and fertility behavior witnessed since the late 1960s in Western and Northern Europe. But the term here refers to the comprehensive demographic changes including longevity shift which has been observed in the society of Japan.

We first give a definition of the post-demographic transition period and "the new demographic transition" in Japan. This involves rethinking the classical theories of the demographic transition, which anticipated the fertility settling down at the replacement level and the total population returning to the stationary one after the transition completed. Second, we present demographic indicators that describe when and how Japan entered this new regime. By examining the changes in population growth rates, fertility patterns and mortality patterns, we can conclude that the shift into the second demographic transition in Japan occurred between the middle of the 1970s and the late 2000s. This shift in the demographic regime is closely associated with socioeconomic, cultural, and political changes in Japan. We will discuss these issues in our subsequent paper to appear in this journal. The study of the post-demographic transition period of Japan from both theoretical and empirical perspectives is imperative because the other Asian countries seem to follow the same dynamics.

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