

Historical Roots of Contemporary Population Issues in Eastern Asia

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This paper discusses the historical roots of contemporary population issues including extremely low fertility, rapid population aging, compressed urbanization, and increasing cross-border migration in Eastern Asia. The Confucian family pattern of China and Korea is contrasted with the feudal family pattern of Japan. Extremely low fertility in Korea and Taiwan is interpreted from a larger gap between family and nonfamily systems than in other developed countries. Cultural disorders in Confucian societies include a gender inequity within the family, a strong parent-child tie, a notion of mother's monopolistic role, an intensive focus on education, and a lower prestige for manual labor. It is possible that fertility of China will fall into an extremely low level if China can reach the developmental level of Korea and Taiwan.

China's early aging problem resulted from a failure to synchronize demographic and economic developments. Such a failure is a reappearance of China's experience in the nineteenth century. While Japan succeeded at industrialization after opening the country, China could not because its population growth started too early to learn the Western model.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the concentration of population due to urbanization took place only in Japan. Different modes of agriculture in Korea and Taiwan resulted in varied mobility and distribution of population. While Koreans under Japanese rule experienced the largest diaspora, the Taiwanese were the least mobile people in Eastern Asia. After WWII, urbanization in the Republic of Korea was more compressed than that in Taiwan. Although there was a partial relocation of the capital in Korea, it is projected that the population share of Seoul capital area will continue to grow until 2045.

The percentage of the foreign population in Korea and Taiwan is already higher than that in Japan due to more active policies that invite foreign workers. Although Japan used to show the lowest level of fertility and mortality, the highest level of urbanization, and the highest percentage of foreign population, other Eastern Asian societies have already overridden Japan in those aspects. This implies that economic development strongly determines the demographic regime in the early stage but non-economic determinants, such as cultural disorders, modes of agriculture, and migration policies, show their influences since the late twentieth century.