

Demographic Transitions in East Asia: Cultural Contexts, Contemporary Problems, and Strategic Solutions

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Abstract

This study examines the demographic transitions in East Asia, focusing on the dual challenges of ultra-low fertility and rapid population aging. It aims to analyze the cultural, historical, and socioeconomic factors underpinning these shifts and evaluate policy responses to address them. A qualitative research approach was employed, synthesizing secondary data from demographic reports, policy documents, and scholarly literature. Case studies from China, Japan, and South Korea were used to illustrate how Confucian traditions, state interventions, and modernization processes have shaped fertility and aging patterns. Comparative analysis was conducted to highlight similarities and divergences in policy strategies across the region. Findings indicate that persistent Confucian cultural norms—particularly gendered family roles and strong filial obligations—interact with economic pressures such as high housing, education, and childcare costs to reinforce ultra-low fertility trends. At the same time, healthcare advancements and historical baby booms have fueled unprecedented population aging. Policy measures, including pronatalist incentives, workplace reforms, eldercare programs, and technological innovations, demonstrate mixed effectiveness. Monetary incentives alone have proven insufficient; structural barriers in gender equity, labor practices, and cultural expectations remain central obstacles. The rapid aging of rural populations and rising dependency ratios further underscore the urgency of integrated social and economic reforms. East Asia's demographic trajectory reflects both resilience and vulnerability. The region's experience illustrates that sustainable demographic strategies require comprehensive, multidimensional approaches—combining financial support, cultural adaptation, and institutional innovation. As the first region to face extreme aging alongside persistent low fertility, East Asia provides vital lessons for global population policy and long-term social sustainability.

Keywords: Low fertility, Population aging, Cultural norms, Family policy, Demographic transition

Introduction

Demographic trends in East Asia are inseparable from the region's rich cultural and historical foundations. Confucian ideals and family structures, in particular, have profoundly shaped perspectives on marriage, fertility, and aging (Cheng, 2020). Traditional East Asian societies placed strong emphasis on large, patriarchal

households, where children were morally obligated to provide care for elderly parents—a practice rooted in the principle of filial piety. These norms historically encouraged high marriage rates and reinforced a preference for sons to continue family lineages. Even with modernization, elements of this familism persisted across East Asia. Well into the late twentieth century, families in China, Korea, and Japan continued to uphold expectations that women should devote themselves primarily to childcare and domestic duties, while adult children were responsible for supporting their aging parents (Cheng, 2020). Such cultural frameworks shaped demographic patterns over time, fostering early marriage, higher fertility, and the prevalence of multi-generational households. Yet, these cultural legacies have also become constraints in contemporary contexts. Confucian patriarchal values, which idealize women's domestic roles and emphasize heavy parental investment in children's education ("credentialism"), are often cited as key contributors to East Asia's extremely low fertility (Cheng, 2020). As women pursue higher education and expand their participation in the labor market, the traditional expectation that they shoulder primary responsibility for childcare and eldercare has rendered marriage and motherhood less attractive or even unfeasible. This tension between enduring cultural norms and evolving individual aspirations is reflected in rising ages at first marriage, increasing rates of childlessness, and shrinking family sizes across the region.

Cultural perspectives on longevity provide another important legacy shaping demographic patterns. Advances in healthcare and healthy living practices have produced some of the world's highest life expectancies in East Asia. Japan, in particular, is internationally recognized for exceptional longevity. Research on Japanese centenarians suggests remarkably high limits to human lifespan; Hanayama and Sibuya (2016), for example, estimated a potential upper limit of around 126 years, highlighting Japan's unique survival outcomes. Respect for elders remains a deeply ingrained value, with older adults traditionally occupying honored roles within families. This reverence, coupled with low mortality, has fueled rapid population aging.

Historical developments have also shaped the region's demographic profile. The post-World War II baby boom created large cohorts now entering retirement. In South Korea, for instance, the retirement of nearly seven million "baby boomers" born in the 1950s and early 1960s has accelerated aging since the 2010s, with significant consequences for life expectancy, dependency ratios, and overall age structure (Hwang & Jeong, 2011). In China, the legacy of past population policies—most notably the one-child policy (1980–2015)—has profoundly shaped demographic behavior, leaving behind a culture of smaller families and a distorted sex ratio at birth driven by son preference. The long-term consequences of these policies are now becoming increasingly visible.

More broadly, East Asia's demographic landscape reflects the interplay of its cultural foundations and historical experiences. Strong familial norms and obligations fostered cohesive family structures and deep respect for elders, contributing to social stability and improvements in health that lengthened life expectancy. At the same time, these

enduring legacies have interacted with rapid modernization in complex ways, sometimes slowing adjustment to emerging demographic realities.

Statement of the Problem

East Asia is undergoing a profound demographic transformation marked by two interconnected phenomena: persistently ultra-low fertility and rapid population aging. Despite economic prosperity, advanced healthcare, and modernization, fertility rates in countries such as Japan, South Korea, and China have fallen far below replacement levels, while the proportion of elderly individuals continues to rise sharply. This dual demographic challenge poses critical threats to labor supply, economic productivity, and the sustainability of social welfare systems.

Cultural traditions rooted in Confucian values—such as strong filial piety, patriarchal family structures, and gendered expectations of caregiving—have compounded the effects of modernization, delaying marriage and discouraging childbearing among younger generations. At the same time, shrinking family sizes and urban migration have weakened traditional care networks, leaving older adults increasingly dependent on strained public support systems.

Although governments across the region have introduced pronatalist policies, financial incentives, and eldercare programs, these measures have yielded limited success due to deep-seated cultural and structural barriers. The persistence of gender inequality in work and family life, high living costs, and rigid labor practices continue to deter family formation and childrearing.

Thus, the central problem lies in East Asia's struggle to balance economic modernization with cultural adaptation and social policy reform. The failure to effectively address ultra-low fertility and accelerated aging risks undermining long-term social stability, economic growth, and intergenerational cohesion across the region.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to analyze the causes and consequences of demographic transitions in East Asia, focusing on ultra-low fertility and rapid population aging.

Specific Objectives

1. To explore the cultural and socioeconomic factors influencing fertility and aging patterns.
2. To assess the impacts of these demographic shifts on labor, family, and social systems.
3. To evaluate government policies addressing fertility decline and aging populations.
4. To suggest integrated strategies for sustainable demographic management in East Asia.

Limitations of the Study

This study is primarily based on secondary data drawn from demographic reports, policy documents, and scholarly literature; therefore, it may lack the depth of primary field evidence. The analysis focuses mainly on selected East Asian countries—China,

Japan, and South Korea—so its findings may not fully represent the entire region's diversity. Cultural interpretations are context-dependent, and variations within each society may not be fully captured. Furthermore, demographic trends are dynamic, and recent changes in fertility or aging patterns might not be reflected in the available data. Hence, the conclusions should be understood within the scope of qualitative interpretation and comparative analysis.

Hypothesis of the Study

1. **H₁:** Cultural traditions rooted in Confucian values significantly influence fertility behavior and attitudes toward family and aging in East Asia.
2. **H₂:** Socioeconomic factors such as high living costs, urbanization, and gender inequality contribute to persistently low fertility rates in East Asian countries.
3. **H₃:** Governmental pronatalist and aging policies have limited effectiveness due to deep-seated cultural norms and structural barriers.
4. **H₄:** Integrated social, economic, and cultural policy reforms are essential for achieving sustainable demographic balance in East Asia.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to analyze the demographic transitions in East Asia, emphasizing the interrelation between cultural values, fertility decline, and population aging.

Research Design

A descriptive and comparative research design was used to explore demographic patterns and policy responses in three major East Asian countries—China, Japan, and South Korea. These countries were purposefully selected as representative cases due to their shared Confucian heritage and advanced stages of demographic transition.

Sample and Sample Size

The study covers a sample of three countries—China, Japan, and South Korea. These cases provide sufficient diversity to compare cultural, social, and policy variations within the East Asian context. Each country serves as one analytical unit in the comparative framework.

Data Sources

The research is based on secondary data, including:

- National census and demographic reports.
- Policy documents and government publications.
- Scholarly journals, books, and institutional databases (e.g., UN DESA, World Bank, National Bureau of Statistics of China, Statistics Korea, and Japan's Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications).

Data Analysis

A thematic and comparative analysis was conducted to identify common patterns, differences, and policy implications related to fertility decline and aging. The study also examined how Confucian cultural norms and modernization interact in shaping demographic behaviors and policy effectiveness.

Scope and Delimitation

The research is limited to the East Asian region, focusing only on the three selected countries. Findings may not fully represent other nations in the broader Asia-Pacific context. The study is interpretive rather than statistical, emphasizing patterns and qualitative understanding rather than quantitative measurement.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in three interrelated theories—**Demographic Transition Theory**, **Cultural Modernization Theory**, and the **Confucian Familism Framework**—to explain East Asia’s unique demographic patterns.

Demographic Transition Theory explains how industrialization and modernization reduce fertility and mortality. However, East Asia’s experience of ultra-low fertility and rapid aging extends beyond the classic model, indicating the influence of deeper cultural factors.

Cultural Modernization Theory suggests that economic progress shifts values toward individualism, career orientation, and delayed family formation, leading to declining fertility despite prosperity.

Confucian Familism emphasizes filial piety and gendered family roles. While these values once supported large families, they now restrict women’s participation in both work and family life, discouraging marriage and childbearing.

Together, these theories form an integrated framework showing that East Asia’s demographic crisis results from the interaction between **modern economic change** and **traditional cultural norms**, highlighting the need for policies that combine economic reform with cultural adaptation and gender equality.

Global Population Challenges: Fewer Births, More Elderly

East Asia is undergoing an unprecedented demographic transformation characterized by extremely low fertility rates and rapidly aging populations. After reaching population peaks around the early 21st century, many East Asian nations have experienced stagnation or outright population decline. Policymakers, economists, and scholars are increasingly concerned about the long-term social and economic consequences of shrinking and aging populations.

A defining feature of this transformation is fertility collapse to levels far below the replacement threshold of 2.1 children per woman. Advanced economies such as South Korea, Japan, China, Hong Kong, and Singapore are now experiencing what demographers call “lowest-low fertility.” Among these, South Korea represents an extreme case, with a total fertility rate (TFR) of 0.75 in 2024, the lowest in the world (Park, 2024). This suggests that the average Korean woman will have fewer than one child in her lifetime, reflecting a “birth strike” driven by economic stress, high housing costs, demanding work cultures, and changing social values. The rapid decline from stable levels in the early 2000s to global outlier status within two decades is unprecedented.

China, the world’s most populous nation, faces a similar challenge. Despite ending the one-child policy in 2015 and introducing pro-natalist incentives, fertility remains far

below replacement, with a TFR of 1.15 in 2024. China has recorded its third consecutive year of negative population growth, highlighting the persistence of low fertility over more than three decades (Qiao, 2023). Japan, too, demonstrates structural persistence of low fertility, with TFR fluctuating between 1.2 and 1.4. Even small city-states like Hong Kong and Singapore report fertility near 1.0, indicating that governance models, economic development, or cultural contexts alone cannot prevent fertility decline.

The decline in fertility is driven by complex social, economic, and cultural factors. Rapid economic growth and urbanization have increased the costs of raising children, including housing, education, and childcare. Consequently, younger adults prioritize career development and financial stability over family expansion. Traditional gender roles have not adapted to accommodate dual-income households, resulting in work-family conflicts that discourage childbearing. Rising educational attainment and career aspirations delay marriage and family formation, with many adults remaining unmarried into their 30s, further reducing fertility windows. Changing personal values emphasizing autonomy and self-fulfillment reinforce these trends, creating a “low-fertility trap” where social norms, economic pressures, and cultural expectations mutually reinforce small family sizes. Once established, this cycle is difficult to reverse. Alongside low fertility, East Asia is experiencing rapid population aging, among the fastest globally. Aging post-war cohorts and improved life expectancy have accelerated this trend. Japan exemplifies this shift: by 2023, 29.1% of its population was aged 65 or older, the highest globally, and the country officially entered “super-aged society” status, surpassing 30% elderly in 2024 (Liu et al., 2024; UN DESA, 2024). Population aging poses significant social and economic challenges, including shrinking labor forces, increased demand for healthcare and pensions, and strains on intergenerational support systems.

South Korea is rapidly approaching similar demographics, with 19.2% of its population aged 65 or older in 2024, up from 17.5% in 2022, and projections indicate the country will surpass 30% elderly by 2036. This aging trajectory is occurring over just a few decades, far faster than the century-long transitions seen in Europe (Hwang & Jeong, 2011; UN DESA, 2024). China, having been surpassed by India in population size in 2023, has seen its population fall to 1.408 billion in 2024, declining for three consecutive years. Although births increased modestly to 9.54 million, deaths remained higher at 10.93 million (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2025). The share of individuals aged 65 and above rose from 13.5% in 2020 to 14.11% in 2023, and is projected to double by 2040, reflecting a rapid transition to an aging society (Qiao, 2024; UN DESA, 2024). This demographic evolution is compounded by persistently low fertility, leading to shrinking working-age populations and increasing retirees, which strain labor supply, pensions, and healthcare systems.

East Asia thus faces a dual demographic challenge: ultra-low fertility and accelerating aging. The labor force is shrinking while the elderly population grows, generating substantial fiscal and social pressures. Public pension schemes, healthcare, and social

services—designed for younger populations—are increasingly stressed. Japan's public spending on pensions and healthcare has risen dramatically over the past two decades (Liu et al., 2024). South Korea experiences one of the fastest aging trajectories globally, sharply increasing old-age dependency ratios (Park, 2024). China, after reaching workforce peak around 2015, risks losing hundreds of millions of workers by 2050 if current trends continue (Qiao, 2024). These shifts threaten economic productivity, innovation, and the fiscal sustainability of social support systems.

Demographic pressures are pronounced at local and community levels. Rural areas are aging faster than urban centers, as younger adults migrate to cities for education and employment, resulting in depopulated villages, school closures, and concentrated care needs for remaining elderly populations. Traditional family-based care models are increasingly inadequate, as smaller family sizes leave fewer children to care for aging parents, and geographical separation complicates caregiving. These dynamics intensify social challenges, leaving local communities struggling to support the elderly.

The imbalance of too few births and too many seniors is driven by economic development, urbanization, educational pressures, and evolving social norms. East Asia's success in improving life expectancy, expanding education and employment opportunities, and fostering economic growth has inadvertently contributed to these demographic pressures. Long-standing cultural patterns, including filial responsibility expectations and persistent gender roles, intersect with modern economic realities to exacerbate low fertility and rapid aging.

Governments and societies are responding with policy measures and social reforms, such as financial incentives for childbearing, support for work-life balance, eldercare infrastructure investment, and encouragement of longer workforce participation among older adults. However, the effectiveness of these interventions remains uncertain. While policies may mitigate some pressures, fundamental economic and social factors—urbanization, changing gender norms, and individual aspirations—continue to drive fertility decline and population aging.

East Asia's experience offers critical insights into how demographic transitions interact with socioeconomic structures and cultural norms. Persistently low fertility combined with rapid aging presents profound challenges for labor markets, social welfare systems, and local communities. Addressing this dual demographic crisis requires innovative policy approaches and social adaptation to sustain economic productivity and societal well-being in the decades ahead.

Adaptive Approaches and Policy Solutions in East Asia

East Asian nations are confronting pressing demographic challenges, including persistently low fertility and rapidly aging populations. In response, governments have implemented strategic measures aimed at encouraging childbearing and addressing the needs of an aging society. However, the effectiveness of these policies varies, as cultural norms, social expectations, and structural constraints shape their impact. Financial incentives alone are insufficient to reverse demographic trends, highlighting

the need for comprehensive approaches that integrate social, economic, and cultural dimensions.

Pronatalist policies have been the most visible response to low fertility. Over the past two decades, countries with the lowest birth rates have introduced programs designed to encourage couples to have more children. These include financial incentives such as one-time birth bonuses, monthly child allowances, tax breaks, and subsidized childcare. In South Korea, family-oriented spending has expanded since the mid-2000s to include parental leave benefits, childcare facilities, direct payments, and early childhood education support. Despite these measures, South Korea's fertility rate reached a record low in 2024, demonstrating that monetary support cannot fully overcome deeper social and structural barriers to childbearing (Park, 2024).

Japan illustrates the limits of pronatalist interventions. Since the 1990s, the government introduced family reforms including expanded childcare provision and child allowances, which helped prevent a sharper fertility decline, keeping the TFR around 1.3. However, these measures did not substantially increase fertility, largely due to workplace culture constraints such as long working hours and limited career flexibility for parents. Similarly, Singapore and Hong Kong have offered generous incentives—including baby bonuses, subsidized housing, and tax relief—but fertility rates remain near 1.0, showing that entrenched social norms and expectations regarding parenting, career trade-offs, and family structures significantly influence reproductive decisions. The experiences of East Asian countries highlight the importance of multi-faceted strategies. Beyond financial incentives, policies must address workplace reforms, gender equity in domestic and professional responsibilities, and the broader cultural context in which reproductive decisions are made. Successful interventions require integrating social dimensions with economic support to produce meaningful effects on fertility trends, offering lessons for other low-fertility societies worldwide.

Structural reforms promoting work-life balance and gender equality are increasingly recognized as central to fertility policy. Policies supporting dual-earner households aim to reduce childcare and domestic burdens traditionally borne by women. Parental leave reforms have been a key strategy. In South Korea, paid maternity leave has been extended to one of the longest durations globally, alongside initiatives to encourage paternity leave uptake. The goal is to protect women's employment while promoting shared childcare responsibility. Japan has similarly expanded parental leave, encouraging fathers' active involvement. Complementary workplace reforms, including campaigns to reduce long working hours and promote flexible arrangements, aim to ease tensions between professional and family commitments. Public messaging campaigns, like Singapore's promotion of earlier marriage and childbearing, also seek to influence social norms.

While boosting fertility is a priority, East Asian governments simultaneously address the challenges of population aging. Pension and healthcare reforms are central, as rising life expectancy necessitates reevaluation of retirement ages and benefits. Japan has

raised the retirement age to 65, with discussions of further increases to encourage older adults' continued economic participation. South Korea is considering phased increases in pension eligibility. Fostering senior labor-force participation is another key goal, with Japan gradually rehiring retirees in mentorship and advisory roles, reflecting a shift from viewing the elderly solely as dependents to recognizing them as productive societal contributors. Lifelong learning and skills retraining programs are expanding to help older adults adapt to labor market demands, maintaining social and economic engagement.

Investing in eldercare infrastructure is a priority across East Asia. Long-term care insurance systems provide professional support for aging populations and alleviate family caregiver burdens. Japan introduced such insurance in 2000, followed by South Korea in 2008, offering home-based services, institutional care, and rehabilitation programs. Community-based care and age-friendly urban planning are promoted to enable independent living for seniors, enhancing quality of life while reducing family pressures. Japan leverages technological innovation, including companion robots, AI health monitoring, and smart homes, to address caregiver shortages. Programs fostering social inclusion, such as volunteerism and intergenerational engagement, help seniors maintain active societal participation. Silver Human Resource Centers, for instance, facilitate part-time work and community service, supporting financial independence and social integration (Liu et al., 2024).

Some countries are cautiously exploring immigration to address labor shortages and demographic imbalances. Traditionally restrictive policies are gradually adapting: Japan has relaxed certain visa rules to attract foreign care workers and skilled professionals, while South Korea has expanded opportunities for migrant workers and multicultural families. Immigration is considered a complementary measure requiring careful integration to maintain social cohesion in largely homogeneous societies.

Overall, East Asia's demographic strategies are evolving, and their long-term effectiveness remains uncertain. Evidence shows that financial incentives alone have limited influence on fertility without accompanying structural and cultural reforms. Simultaneously, adapting to an aging population requires ongoing policy, technological, and community innovations. Countries in the region are learning from each other in real time: Singapore's baby bonus programs inform policy debates in Seoul and Tokyo, while Japan's eldercare models guide China's emerging senior-care industry.

East Asia, as the first region to experience extreme aging following rapid fertility decline, serves as a living laboratory for demographic policy innovation. Its experience illustrates the importance of combining financial incentives with workplace reforms, gender equality initiatives, eldercare investments, and technological solutions. These integrated strategies underscore the interconnectedness of fertility and aging policies, offering valuable lessons for societies worldwide confronting similar demographic transitions.

Conclusion

Demographic change in East Asia is unfolding on an unprecedented scale, creating a complex interplay of cultural traditions, contemporary challenges, and the urgent need for strategic foresight. The region's cultural foundations—strong family bonds, respect for elders, and a deep emphasis on education—played a pivotal role in facilitating remarkable social and economic development throughout the 20th century. These values underpinned social cohesion, encouraged intergenerational cooperation, and helped sustain rapid industrialization and modernization. However, in the 21st century, these same cultural norms are being tested by entirely new demographic realities. Ultra-low fertility rates and rapidly aging populations, phenomena virtually unknown to previous generations, are prompting societies to rethink long-held assumptions about family life, gender roles, and intergenerational responsibilities.

East Asian countries are now at the forefront of a global demographic turning point. The challenges they face illustrate that effective policy interventions must be comprehensive, addressing economic considerations, social supports, and cultural adaptation simultaneously. Economic measures include reducing the high costs of childrearing, ensuring retirement security, and providing financial incentives to support families. Social support systems must facilitate work-family balance, access to quality healthcare for the elderly, and community-based care that integrates seniors into society. Cultural adaptation is equally critical, requiring promotion of gender equality, shared caregiving responsibilities, and changes in social expectations that have historically constrained reproductive and caregiving choices.

Despite significant policy experimentation, outcomes remain mixed. No East Asian society has yet succeeded in reversing fertility decline sustainably, and all are contending with growing aging burdens that will intensify over the coming decades. Nonetheless, governments are laying important groundwork. Policymakers increasingly recognize that demographic issues intersect with every sector of society—from labor markets and education systems to healthcare infrastructure and social norms—and that innovation is required in how people work, live, and form families. By approaching demographic change holistically, these societies are seeking to align population policy with broader goals of social stability, economic productivity, and collective well-being. The implications of East Asia's demographic strategies extend far beyond the region. Successful adaptation—whether by forging social contracts that maintain productivity among older populations or by creating environments in which families feel confident having children—could provide a model for other countries experiencing low fertility and population aging. Conversely, failure to respond effectively could result in economic stagnation, labor shortages, and social strain, serving as a cautionary tale for the global community. The demographic trajectory East Asia is navigating has no historical precedent, making its approach inherently experimental and of immense scholarly and policy interest.

Central to the region's challenge is the double-edged nature of cultural legacy. On one hand, longstanding values of familial cohesion and elder respect provide resilience, social cohesion, and a moral framework for collective problem-solving. On the other hand, these same traditions can impede necessary changes in gender roles, work-life balance, and family planning behaviors. The success of East Asia's demographic strategy will depend on its ability to balance cultural continuity with openness to redefining norms in response to pressing demographic imperatives.

While Nepal does not yet face the extreme demographic conditions seen in East Asia, such as ultra-low fertility and super-aged societies, emerging trends suggest that similar challenges may arise if proactive measures are not taken. Nepal's fertility rate has declined significantly over the past decades, reaching near replacement levels, and urbanization is accelerating. Cultural norms rooted in patriarchy and filial responsibility—similar to Confucian traditions in East Asia—continue to influence family structures and gender roles. Women's increasing participation in education and the workforce, coupled with persistent expectations of domestic caregiving, mirrors the tension observed in East Asian societies. Moreover, rural depopulation due to youth migration and the growing elderly population in villages are early signs of demographic imbalance. These patterns highlight the need for Nepal to adopt integrated policy approaches that promote gender equity, support work-life balance, and invest in eldercare infrastructure. Learning from East Asia's experience, Nepal can anticipate and mitigate future demographic pressures by aligning cultural adaptation with socioeconomic reforms.

In confronting these challenges, East Asian countries are increasingly prioritizing strategies aligned with the principles of harmonious development and societal well-being. Policies supporting childbearing, dignifying old age, and integrating seniors into productive social roles reflect a commitment to managing demographic change without compromising social stability or prosperity. Significantly, the focus has shifted from concerns about population size to issues of population structure and quality. Instead of simply controlling growth, governments are now managing decline, fostering sustainable population trajectories, and preparing societies for the realities of aging. This represents a profound paradigm shift, one that East Asia is pioneering, with lessons that the world is closely observing. The region's demographic future will test humanity's capacity to adapt creatively and humanely to the limits of population change, marking it as one of the most consequential developments of our time.

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