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Asia's new family values

Europe shows how Asia's demographic crisis might correct itself

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MENTION “demographic crisis”, and most people think of countries where women each have six children and struggle to feed them. Much of Asia has the opposite problem: low fertility and an upside-down family structure (four grandparents, two parents, one child). Three-quarters of all the people in countries with exceptionally low fertility live in East and South-East Asia. Prosperous Japan, South Korea and Taiwan have fertility rates of 1.4 or below. The fertility rate is the number of children a woman can expect to have during her lifetime. A rate of 2.1 implies stability: the population is replacing itself. Demographers refer to rates of 1.4 or less as “ultra low”.

The difference between 2.1 and 1.4 may not sound like much. But consider what it has meant for Japan. In the early 1970s the country had a fertility rate of 2.1, with 2m children born every year. Four decades later the number of births has halved, with the fertility rate down to 1.4. Or take an even more dramatic example, China. In 1995 some 245m Chinese were in their 20s. By 2025, on current trends, there will be only 159m, a decline within a single generation of 86m. This will

reduce by more than a third the segment of the population that is best educated, most technologically astute and most open to new ideas.

Demographic trends like this are often thought to be irreversible, implying that East Asia will be stuck in an endless cycle of decline. But history suggests that is far from certain. At the beginning of the 20th century much of Europe also had very low fertility rates. These then rose for decades, peaking in the baby-boom years of the 1950s and 1960s. Europe's historical experience, argue two American demographers, Thomas Anderson of the University of Pennsylvania and Hans-Peter Kohler of the University of California, Berkeley, helps explain East Asia's problems now—and suggests what could be done about them.

When the first wave of industrialisation swept through northern and western Europe, women started to go to school and then to look for jobs. In France in 1900 almost half of adult women were employed. And not just as domestic servants or milkmaids on family farms, as before: they also started to work in industry. Their new jobs were typically low-status clerical occupations which did not improve their bargaining power much, or change the basic social norm which held that husbands should earn most of the money and wives look after the children. At the time, an American sociologist, William Ogburn, coined the term “cultural lag” to describe the mismatch between the material conditions of life, which change quickly, and behaviour and attitudes, which are more resistant to change.

East Asia is experiencing a cultural lag even more extreme than the one that affected Europe in 1900. Female literacy is nearly universal, and in Japan and South Korea female college graduates outnumber male ones. Female labour-force participation is also high. But women are still treated in the old ways. Until recently Japanese women were expected to give up work on having children. Working or not, Japanese and South Korean women do at least three more hours of housework a day than their men.

Such cultural lags are associated with ultra-low fertility because if you force women to choose between family and career, then many will choose their career. In Tokyo, Bangkok and other Asian cities, rates of childlessness are sky-high. Women are refusing to marry. And if they do marry, they are getting hitched later in life, in practice reducing their likelihood of ever bearing children (births out of wedlock remain taboo and rare in Asia).

In Europe the cultural lag closed eventually. Social norms began to shift in the 1960s and have changed more rapidly in the past 20 years. Child care became more widely available. Men started to help with the laundry and the school run. Women therefore found it easier to have both a career and rugrats. In places where this process has gone furthest—France, Scandinavia, Britain—fertility rates are almost back up to the replacement level. In those where traditional male breadwinner/female homemaker roles have lingered, such as Germany and Italy, fertility rates remain low. Mr Anderson and Mr Kohler call the recovery in fertility the “gender equity dividend”.

Culture v the law of supply and demand

It is common to say that Asia will not reap such a dividend because traditional norms of family and marriage are more deeply entrenched there than in Europe. It is true that industrialisation took place much faster in Asia than in the old continent, so attitudes have more catching up to do.

Yet Asia is changing faster than traditionalists think and may change faster still. The age of first marriage in Japan and Korea has risen from 24-25 in 1970 to almost 30 now—an exceptionally big shift. High rates of childlessness and delayed marriage show that Asian women are dissatisfied with the choices on offer. No less important, there is a mechanism which may increase their scope to secure more palatable outcomes.

Everywhere, men marry women younger than themselves, and Asia is no exception. But in societies such as Asian ones where fertility is falling, older cohorts of the population are by definition larger than younger ones. So there are more men of, say, 25-30 wanting to marry than there are women of 20-25. Over time, small imbalances in the marriage market build up to create enormous pressure for change. By some estimates, by 2070 in some Asian countries there will be 160 men seeking a wife for every 100 women seeking a husband. Men will have to compete much harder if they want to attract a mate, and that surely means doing more housework. (Those who insist on old-fashioned gender roles will doom themselves to bachelorhood.) With more supportive husbands, women will find it easier to combine motherhood and career, so they will have more babies. Asian culture will adapt to reality, just like any other.