

Converge or Diverge? Examining changes in fertility, family structure, and female employment in
Asia through an extension of data from the OECD Family Database

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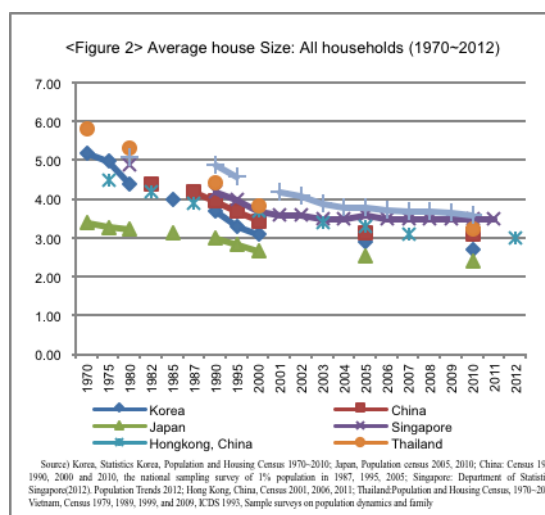
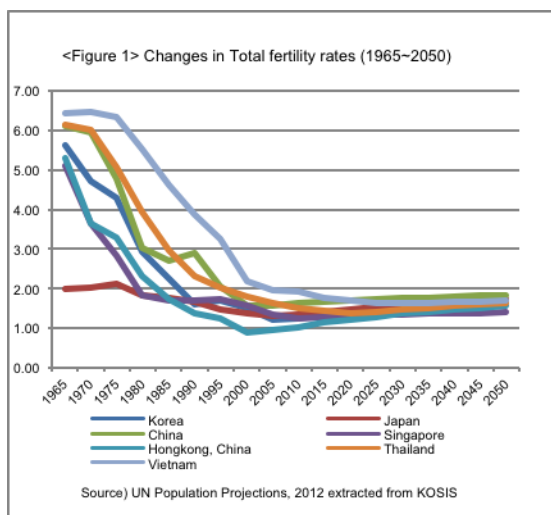
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1. Introduction

Most Asian countries have seen their fertility rates decline, although in different degrees. Features related with childbirths such as the age at first birth, structure of family, and female employment develop with different degrees. Those distinctive features depend on the level of socio-economic status, labor market condition and family and gender norms. However, rigorous comparative analysis in the region is often lacking. The main reason for this is the dearth of adequate comparable data beyond that of the UN compare to, for example, member states of the European Union and the OECD who are able to draw upon member-state surveys and statistical data. In this study, we set out to extend selected indicators of the OECD Family Database to seven low-fertility settings in Asia, namely Korea, Japan, China, Singapore, Hong Kong SAR, Thailand, and Vietnam. The main results show that ages at first birth and marriage are currently increasing in China, Thailand, and Vietnam just like they did in the past in Korea, Japan, Singapore, and Hong-Kong China. Though the proportion of extended families varies across different countries, the average number of household is decreasing for all countries. Trends of female employment rates pose the issues of work-and-family balance for developed countries. For developing countries gender gap in employment is a challenge. Age specific female employment rates differ according to the gender roles and labor market condition of each country. This study addresses whether these changes in the Asia diverge or converge into some patterns.

2. Fertility and structure of family in East Asia

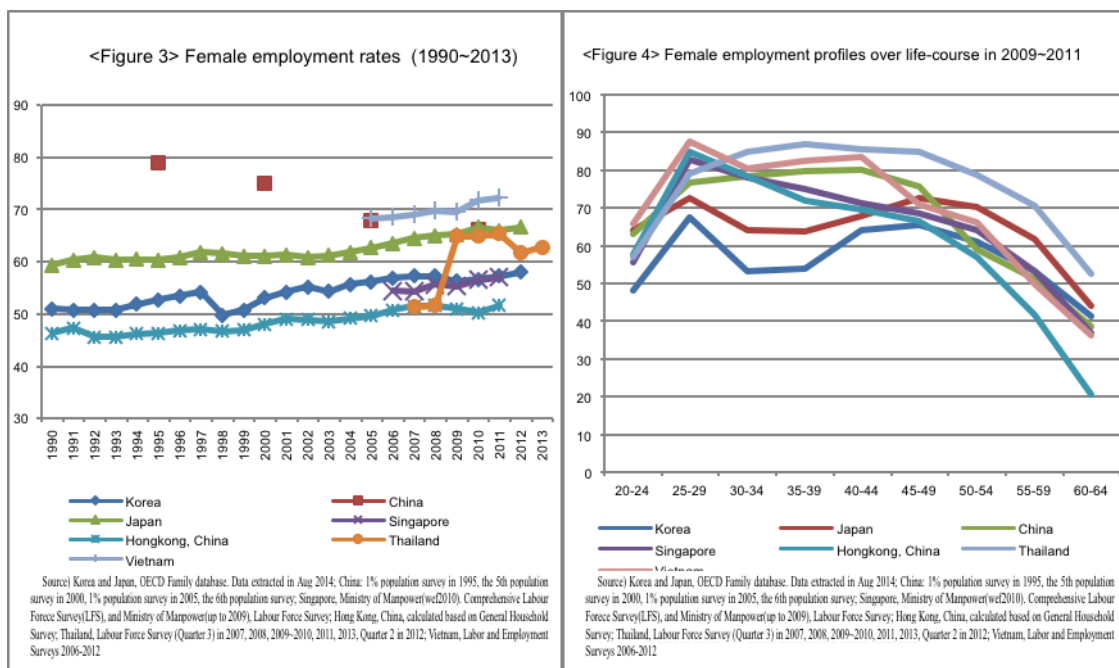
Transition of fertility rates has taken place in different periods across Asia (<Figure 1>). Japan was the first to show fertility rates below the replacement level in the 1970s', followed by Hong-Kong China, Singapore, and Korea. Fertility rates rapidly decreased to the replacement level in Thailand and China in the 1990s', it declined to the replacement level in Vietnam in 2000s'. The age at first birth has already risen to around 30 years old in Korea, Japan, Singapore, and Hong Kong SAR; it is around 25 years old in China, Thailand, and Vietnam. The levels of those indicators are currently increasing in China, Thailand, and Vietnam implying that the fertility rates might further decrease. In most Asian countries the ideal number of children is around 2 and the real number of children is significantly lower. Yet the ideal number of children is still decreasing, and it is already less than 2 in Hong Kong SAR and Thailand (Basten 2012). The average household size is reduced in the all of the territories (<Figure 2>). In China, Thailand, Vietnam the proportion of extended family are relatively higher than in other countries. The proportion of single person household, most of them are elderly persons, is expanding in Korea, Japan, and Hong Kong SAR where population aging has already progressed to a large extent.



3. Characteristics of female employment

During the period of fertility transition female employment rates improved to some degree in Korea, Japan, Hong Kong SAR and Singapore (<Figure 3>). The negative relationship between female employment and fertility rate implies that there is a lack of balance between work and family life exist in

those countries. Female employment rates are decreasing in China after economic liberalization, and it is increasing in Vietnam and Thailand at a slower pace than male employment rates (<Figure 3>). Thus the gender gaps in employment are growing in China, Thailand, and Vietnam, posing new gender issues in those countries. All of these East Asian countries show different shapes of age specific female employment rates (<Figure 4>). These trends can be grouped into three types: First, Korea, Japan, and Singapore have M-shaped curve, which implies that there are obstacles with maintaining job for women during the time of marriage or child births. Second, Singaporean and women from Hong Kong SAR often drop out of the labor market at the time of marriage and child birth and hardly re-enter the labor market. Third, female employment rates in China and Thailand are maintained until women reach the age of retirement.



4. Family policy in East Asia

This study reviews family policy in terms of cash benefits, child-related leave, and childcare and preschool education. Each country has initiated and implemented family policy according to their unique welfare system. Coverage of family policy has expanded in Japan, Korea, and Singapore as

government initiated strategies to deal with the population issues. Some territories have integrated family policy measures into a population policy formulation, while others (such as Hong Kong SAR) have defined a population policy first (primarily based upon migration) with relatively weak support for families. Other countries such as China, Thailand, and Vietnam currently still focus on health issues as family policy.