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## DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS AND THEIR SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

**ABSTRACT.** This paper examines the major features of demographic transition that Korea experienced during the 20th century in association with changing political, economic, and social conditions. The major demographic changes examined include a population explosion, aging, international migration, urbanization, and changes in the family. The social implications of these changes for the 21st century in Korea are also discussed. The demographic trends of North Korea are sketched in order to provide a lead-in for the population situation on the Korean peninsula as a whole.

### INTRODUCTION

Korean society has been subject to a continuous process of transformation during the 20th century. Demographic transition was a major component of this change. It started with a decline in mortality in the early years of the century. Fertility began to vary from its usual level in the early 1960s, and fell to a level below population replacement in the mid 1980s. This whole process of demographic transition took about 60–70 years, including the 20–25 years of fertility transition. The direct outcome of this change was a rapid growth in population. There were about 17.4 million Koreans in 1910 on the entire Korean peninsula, and the population increased to 25.1 million as of 1944. Between 1945–2000, population on the southern half of the peninsula almost tripled, increasing from 16.1 million to 46.1 million (Kwon et al., 1975: p. 7; NSO, 2001b). In the 21st century, the pattern of population growth is expected to change. Population is expected to increase slowly to a maximum of 51 million around 2020, and will enter a stage of negative growth at that point. The population is expected to decrease to about 30 million in 2080, if the current demographic conditions persist.

Population growth usually brings about changes in its composition, which, in turn, is known to have vital implications for society



as well as its economy. Age structure can be translated into demographic conditions regulating the patterns in the supply of the labor force and economic dependency. From age structure, we can also construct patterns of aging. Korean censuses provide extensive information on family structure and living arrangements, and thus enable us to discuss family related issues in association with demographic changes. These are major areas of concern in this paper. We will first review the trends and issues regarding population growth in the 20th century, and we will then proceed to look into the future.

North Korea will be a troublesome factor in assessing demographic conditions in the coming years in South Korea. The reunification of Korea; a free labor exchange between the two parts; or a large flow of refugees into the South, would drastically alter the demographic pictures of both South and North Korea. So, this paper tries to review briefly the trends in population growth and demographic issues in North Korea. On the basis of all of this, we may be able to get a handle on the overall population situation on the Korean peninsula.

## DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSITION IN THE 20TH CENTURY

### *The Colonial Period (1910–45)*

The Korean mortality rate began to decline during the early years of Japanese colonial rule as a response to the introduction of western health measures and its medical system, which began in the late 19th century. The transition of mortality from a high traditional level to a low modern level had progressed without a change in living standard during the colonial period. In other words, the tempo of population growth was accelerated without economic betterment, and accordingly, population pressure on land resources increased.

The life expectancy at birth was 37–38 years during 1925–30, but rose to 43 years in the early part of the 1940s. Most affected were infants and children,<sup>1</sup> and this resulted in a growing proportion of the number of children, as indicated by the change of youth dependency ratio (or the ratio of population at ages 0–14 to population aged 15–64) from 39.7 to 43.2 between 1925 and 1944. The structure of the family had changed little, but a significant difference in the average size of a household began to be noticed between urban and

rural areas. For example, family size was 4.7 in cities and 5.3 in villages in 1930 (GGK, 1934: p. T60). Rural to urban migration is considered to have been the major cause of this. Due partly to migration and more to a change in the number of cities and city boundaries, the proportion of population residing in urban areas grew markedly during the entire colonial period. The proportion was 4.8 percent in 1925, but changed to 16.0 percent in 1940, and the number of cities increased from 12 to 20 during this 15-year period.

### *The Period of Turmoil (1945–60)*

The liberation of Korea from Japanese rule in 1945; the division of the country into the American occupied South and the Soviet occupied North; and the Korean War, between 1950–53, disrupted the demographic process completely. During this period of instability and hardship, South Korea experienced a population explosion. The population of the southern half of the Korean peninsula was estimated to be 16136000 at the time of liberation, but it increased to 20167000 in 1949, and 24982000 in 1960, showing a gain of 8.75 million people during 1945–60 (see Table I). Due to a heavy inflow of repatriates from Japan and Manchuria as well as refugees from North Korea, which totaled about 2.5 million, the population of South Korea recorded an unprecedented high growth rate of 6.1 percent during 1945–49. Urban areas experienced a particularly marked growth of population owing to the concentration of incoming migrants in cities all over the country.

The Korean War also caused mass movements of Koreans within and across national boundaries. After the war, migration across national boundaries ceased, and the rate of mortality continued its decline. Population growth subsided during the war years, but a baby boom took place in South Korea during the second half of the 1950s. As a result, South Korea recorded a 2.9 percent annual population growth between 1955–60, the highest rate in the history of Korean demography except for 1945–49, and this occurred without any influx of people from foreign countries, including North Korea. There also was an important change in the age at which one married in this post-liberation era, signaling a departure from traditional marriage. The mean age at first marriage was 21.8 for men

TABLE I  
Selected Population Indicators, 1910-1955

	Unit	Whole Korea					South Korea			
		1900	1925	1940	1944	1945	1949	1955		
Population	In 000	17082	19020	23547	16136	20167	21502			
Crude birth rate*	%	3.5-4.0	4.2	4.4	4.2		4.2	4.0		
Crude death rate*	%	3.3-3.8	3.0	2.3	2.3		2.3	3.3		
Natural growth rate*	%	0.2	1.2	2.1	1.9		1.9	0.8		
Immigration rate*	%		-0.18	-0.89	-0.22		4.19	0.66		
Growth rate*	%	0.2	1.02	1.17	1.80		6.08	1.45		
Total fertility rate	Person		6.0	6.2	6.1		6.0	5.6		
Life expectancy at birth	Year		37.5	41.5	42.5			49.7		
Proportion of urban pop.	%		4.8	16.0			17.1	24.4		
Age at marriage: Male			21.1	21.8				24.7		
Age at marriage: Female			16.6	17.8				20.5		
Youth dependency ratio	%		70.38	76.79	81.60		75.70	74.35		
Aged dependency ratio	%		6.90	6.68	7.32		5.89	5.98		
Total dependency ratio	%		7.28	83.47	88.92		81.59	80.33		
Index of aging	%		9.81	8.69	8.97		7.78	8.05		

\*The reference period refers to each intercensal period ending in the given year except for 1900.  
Source: Kwon et al. (1975).

and 17.8 for women in 1940, but rose to 25.4 and 21.5, respectively, in 1960.

### *The Period of Fertility Transition (1960–2000)*

A change in the fertility rate started in the early 1960s as a societal response to significant population pressure. The major mechanism for this change was the national family planning program, which was adopted in 1962 as an integral part of the first five-year economic development plan. The pace of the reduction in the fertility rate was quite rapid, and it reached a level below that of replacement in about 25 years. This development was accompanied by heavy rural-to-urban migration; rapid urbanization; and the continued extension of life expectancy at birth. As shown in Table II, the proportion of urban population increased from 28.0 to 79.7 percent, between 1960 and 2000, and life expectancy at birth for both sexes increased from 55.3 to 75.5 years during 1960–99. These demographic processes resulted in the slowing of population growth; population reduction in rural villages; and changes in family composition.

The average size of family<sup>2</sup> has declined from 5.7 persons in 1960, to 3.5 in 2000 (see Table II). The proportion of three or more generation families decreased from 29.2 percent in 1960, to 10.0 percent in 2000. In rural villages, extended families frequently dissolved due to migration of the children's family, and as a result the proportion of one-person households and couple-only families greatly increased. According to the population censuses, the proportion of one-person households grew 3.7 times, from 4.2 to 15.5 percent during 1975–2000, and that of couple-only families increased from 5.4 to 14.7 percent during 1970–2000 (NSO, 1998: p. 119, 2001c). These changes were much more salient in rural areas and among the elderly. For example, 10.3 percent of elderly persons aged 65 or higher were reported to be living alone in cities in 1995, whereas the equivalent figure for villages was 18.2 percent (NSO, 1998: p. 127).

Sex selective abortion began to be noticed in the mid 1980s, producing a severe sex imbalance among newly born babies in a new age of low fertility. According to vital registration data, the sex ratio at birth for all parities was normal, 105.3 in 1980, but

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