

Thirty Years of Demographic Change in Korea: Implications for a Very Different Future

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1. Introduction

This paper is by nature a broad brush sweep of several ideas related to Korean demographic changes of the last 30 years. The paper summarizes recent birth and migration trends in Korea, emphasizing the rapidity of change, and that the very rapidly of change (for which Korea has become noted) has created some very special circumstances which, in turn, will have profound impacts on Korean society and economics in the not-so-distant future.

This paper is about Korean demographic change and its implications. Its insight derives from the author's academic research in various aspects of population geography continuously over the last 20 years combined with his two-year experience in the early 1970s in Korea as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Chunchon Middle School. In August he came here for a second extended stay in Korea as a professor at Seoul National University's Department of Geography. In a way this presents a special window of opportunity: extensive experience in Korea in the early 1970s, and again close scrutiny in 2003. Most geographers in Korea, indeed good scholars, have seen Korea's changes continually, whereas the discontinuity of these observations may perhaps allow the change of three decades to come into sharper focus.

2. Rapid Change: A Familiar Korean Theme

Talking of the rapid economic change in Korea is to invite clichés. Speaking of Korea as the country that became most "wired" so quickly is to repeat a now old story. Discussing the country's quest for globalization also strikes one as rather banal. Indeed, rapid change is

recent Korea's story. In 1970 we went to the tearoom to put a 10-won piece in a box to make a phone call. More recently, in contrast, the hand-phone swept through this country in less than 10 years to the point now more than 2/3s of the Korean people are equipped with a cell phone (Huh, 2002).

From the standpoint of modern Korean history (of the last 100 years or so), short periods of very rapid change have been frequent. A quick historical glance reveals the few years after the Tongak Revolt of 1894 truly turned Korean society upside down. The years from 1937 to 1945 brought massive movements of 5.1 million southern Koreans to northern Korea, Manchuria and Japan (Cummings, 1997). The Koreans are not newcomers to dramatic social change!

3. Migration of Koreans

Population Geographers closely monitor the three components of demographic change: births, deaths and migration. Only these can influence population change. Of these, both migration and fertility have had profound influences on modern Korea. Two to three decades from now Korea will demographically be a very different place. It will need to respond to demographic shifts as profound as the magnitude of its rapid economic change. This paper first reviews the well known changes in migration and fertility patterns in Korea. It then explores the less-thought-about implications of some of these demographic trends and what they portend for the future.

The experience of such massive migrations like those during the late years of the Japanese occupation and the post-World War II era perhaps facilitated the population movements that have accommodated Korea's drive for modernization. Two movement patterns have been noteworthy: First, Korea has gone from an overwhelmingly rural agrarian country of one-story farmhouses to an urban state of concrete high-rise apartments. This massive rural exodus combined with the impressive centralizing forces of the Capital Metropolitan region, has relatively marginalized the population shares of provinces like Kangwon and Cholla. It is spurred on by a real and sometimes almost mythical belief in Seoul as a Mecca of education, economic and political opportunity. Its greatest extreme can be seen in the rising property market and apartment-building frenzy in Gangnam, the ultimate location for educational and career success.

The attraction of Seoul, and particularly the South Han residential areas, has coincided with the growing realization that globalization and good English skills will be critical in the next two decades in Korea. In the quest to get ahead in a densely populated and highly competitive setting, both middle class and especially better educated Koreans have taken the additional demographic step to migrate out of the pressures of the Seoul Metropolitan Area, over the last three decades growing to more than a million strong in the U.S. More recently, Koreans have taken to other English-language countries for their children's education and permanent residence. Indeed, the Korea Times (September 18, 2003) reported a survey that 72% of the Korean respondents, who were in their 20s and 30s were planning to emigrate, primarily to Canada, the U.S. and Australia. Certainly all people's intentions do not become reality, but this increasingly taken path of leaving the country is a plausible demographic response to local conditions. Loss of more and more of the middle-class and the better educated could be ruinous to Korea's export-led economy's needing to be on the cutting edge of world technology. In turn, Korea will be left with an overwhelmingly dominant globalized mega-city interacting with the global community, surrounded by an increasingly marginalized national hinterland. In addition, out-of-reach housing prices, increasing auto congestion and pollution and other negative externalities of high population density living may encourage even more Seoulites to seek their life goals outside the country.

4. Demographic Consequences of Rapid Fertility Decline.

The total fertility rate of Korea has plummeted since 1970. The average number of lifetime births per woman has gone from 5.0 to its present 1.3 children. This decline in the birth rate has been so precipitous that it has bequeathed Korea not a "baby boom" generation, but a similar group of peoples more numerous than those coming after them. The twenty-first century is bringing an increasingly aging population, one where the population with each passing year will become increasing older. The most serious consequences of this will be a bloating of the retired population to be supported by the economy and a continually diminishing labor force. Combined with the forces of out-migration of especially better educated Koreans, the country may lose the vital force that has contributed to their past successes, the Korean labor force.

5. A Demographic Future

Indeed, this prognostication is only one possible scenario, but one that carries many elements of truth. There is already, and there will be much further, exacerbation of the problems of the over centralization of Seoul, the out-migration of the better-educated and the declining share of the Korean population of the productive working ages. Many other factors will determine the extent of what occurs, but the process is presently very much underway. The effects of the lowered birth rate, indeed to levels approaching the lowest in the world, cannot be quickly reversed. Already, commencing in the mid-1980s lower wage labor has been increasingly allowed into the country to absorb jobs local Korean labor will not do. Migrants from Russia, the Philippines, Vietnam and other Asian countries have turned Korea full circle from a labor-exporting country in the 1970s to a major labor-importing country in the 1990s. Aside from the social problems increasingly evident in this demographic change, perhaps the new Seoul of the 21st century will fit Robert Kaplan's (2002) description of the world of vast metroplexes, with their own adjacent hinterlands ...overshadowing nations in political importance. How Seoul fits into that world is still subject to speculation.

■ References

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