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# Should a Second Demographic Transition Follow the First? Demographic Contrasts: Canada and South Korea

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**Should a Second Demographic Transition  
Follow the First? Demographic Contrasts:  
Canada and South Korea**

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"East is East, and West is West,  
and never the twain shall meet.  
....But there is neither East nor West,  
border, nor breed, nor birth  
When two strong men stand face to face,  
though they come from the ends of the earth!"  
(Rudyard Kipling)

## **Introduction**

The main explanation for the fertility decline all over the world is the Demographic Transition theory. From a regime of high levels of mortality and fertility, countries have moved on to a situation of low levels of mortality and fertility as they developed economically and as social and cultural props supporting the pre-transition regimes weakened. In some countries like South Korea, the decline was so steep and so fast that their fertility levels now match that of the West (Coale, Cho and Goldman, 1980; Choe and Kim, 1995). And, over the years since its inception, the Demographic Transition theory has been modified, refined, and quantified (Freedman, R.; 1979, 1982; Caldwell, 1976; Easterlin, 1983). We are still in the process of fully understanding the factors that bring about the transition (Mason, 1992; Burch, 1996).

In the meantime, the Western countries where the first demographic transition started more than a century ago have moved on to their second demographic transition (van de Kaa, 1987; Lesthaeghe, 1995) implying a further decline in fertility to below replacement level, a rise in mean age at marriage of both men and women, and a rise in rates of divorce and extra-marital births. Van de Kaa (1987) describes the sequences of changes toward the second demographic transition in European countries essentially as consisting of: (1) a shift "from preventive contraception to self-fulfilling conception", that is, contraception is used not merely to prevent unwanted births but to have children as an expression of self-fulfilment; (2) a shift "from golden age of marriage to dawn of cohabitation"; (3) a shift "from era of the king-child with parents to that of the king-pair with a child"; and, (4) a shift "from uniform to pluralistic families and households". Canada is one such country, even though the transition under consideration has set in somewhat later than in other countries.

This paper compares and contrasts the demographic situations in Canada and South Korea. Using a few familiar indicators, similarities and differences in demographic changes between the two countries are highlighted. In particular, the questions addressed in this paper are: Given that South Korea went through its first demographic transition quite rapidly, would it then undergo the second demographic transition also? If yes, would its features be similar to those of Canada (or to any other Western nation)? What factors would influence such a transition?

### **Similarities: Fertility and Nuptiality**

The main indicators of the second demographic transition in the West are: decline in fertility to below replacement level, rise in mean age at marriage of both men and women, and rise in rates of divorce and extra-marital births (Lesthaeghe, 1995). Of these indicators, those of fertility and nuptiality in Canada and South Korea have great similarities in the nineties; but all other indicators (of divorce, cohabitation, and extra-marital births) show substantial differences.

The total fertility rate (TFR) in Korea was still at a high pre-transition level (6.0) in 1960, whereas in Canada it had already reached a low of 3.8 (Figure 1). From 1960 to mid seventies, both countries experienced a steep decline in fertility rates such that the TFR of Korea dropped to 3.6 and that of Canada to a below replacement level of 1.8. Since then, Canada's TFR has remained at about the same level whereas that of Korea declined further to reach a below replacement level of fertility (1.6) by 1987. Since then, the TFR in both countries have remained at below replacement levels although slightly higher than in 1987.

The similarity between the two countries in total fertility rates masks the variations that exist in their age-specific fertility rates. As Table 1 reveals, fertility in Korea is more highly concentrated among women aged 20 to 29, whereas among Canadian women fertility is more spread out from age 15 to 39.

There is also a similarity between the two countries in their nuptiality process: The mean ages at first

marriage of both men and women are high.<sup>1</sup> In the case of women, the mean ages at first marriage in both countries were almost identical at about 24.7 in the mid eighties. However, the trends leading toward that convergence were somewhat different since 1960 (Figure 2). In Canada, the mean age was 23 years in 1960, declined to 22.6 in 1966 and remained static for about a decade before increasing gradually to 27 years by 1995 - an increment of 4 years from 1960. In contrast, the mean age at first marriage of Korean women rose continually from 21.6 in 1960 to 26 in 1995, also an increase of about 4 years.

Among men, the mean ages at first marriage in both countries have reached a very high level of 29 years by the nineties. They were almost the same in the sixties (25.8 in Canada and 25.4 in South Korea). In Canada it slightly declined until the mid seventies, then gradually increased in the eighties. The mean age for Korean men increased between the sixties and seventies, remained about the same for a decade before increasing again to such a high level in the nineties.

These two demographic features of below replacement fertility and high age at first marriage are viewed in the literature as first signs of the second demographic transition. They definitely point to the rapid onset of the first demographic transition in Korea, but the other (and more 'radical') signs of the second transition have not yet been observed. However, the first signs are so dramatic that they may also be pointing toward a hastening of other signs as well. The next section contrasts Canada and Korea in this respect.

### **Dissimilarities: Divorce, Extra-Marital Births, and Cohabitation**

In contrast to fertility and nuptiality, the levels of divorce and extra-marital births differ in the two countries. Divorce rates in Canada have steadily increased in the past twenty years -- from 1.4 per

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<sup>1</sup> The mean ages at first marriage shown here have been computed from different data sources in the two countries. Vital registration data were used for Canada. The census data were used for South Korea to compute the singulate mean ages at marriage (SMAM). In periods of rising age at marriage, SMAM may underestimate the average ages, possibly by as much as half a year for the periods referred to in this section. Thus, the better estimates of the mean ages at marriage for Korean men and women may be even higher than those shown here.

thousand population in 1970 to 2.9 in 1990 and 2.7 in 1994 (Figure 3). And, extra-marital births have more than doubled within two decades: the percentage of live births to single women increased from 9.8% in 1977 to 22.8% in 1990. Correspondingly, the percentage of live births to married women decreased from 88.7% in 1977 to 75.5% in 1990.

In Korea some drastic changes have occurred but the levels remain much lower than those of Canada. The divorce rates doubled from 0.4 per thousand population in 1970 to 1.1 in 1990 and increased again to 1.5 in 1994, but this level is only about half that of Canada (Figure 3). Regretably, we do not have data on rates of extra-marital births for South Korea, but our guess is that they are lower than that of Canada.

Another phenomenon that has become prominent in Canada in recent years, but not in Korea, is the rise in rates of cohabitation.<sup>2</sup> Among Canadian women aged 25-29, for example, 7% were cohabiting in 1981. This doubled to 14% in 1991. Further, the high rates of divorce, cohabitation, and extra-marital births have led to an increase in percentage of one-parent households. In 1961, 8.4% of families in Canada were one-parent families. In 1991, 13% of families were one-parent families, of which 85% were headed by women.

In South Korea, Mason (1986) estimates that in 1980, 77% were intact households, about 16% were single headed households (of which 5% were headed by males and 11% were headed by females), and 7% were non-family households. Thus, the proportions of one-parent families do not seem to be too different in the two countries. However, in Canada one-parent families arise mainly from divorce, cohabitation, and extra-marital births, while Mason (p.39) notes that in South Korea, "the rise in headship rates for men and women is primarily a consequence of mortality among spouses". This is no doubt a consequence too of the relatively low rates of remarriage in South Korea. Mason's

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<sup>2</sup> The rise in rates of cohabitation together with further increases in extramarital births, high percentage of one-parent households, and rise in fertility among those aged 30 and over are identified by Lesthaeghe (1995) as more recent (seventies to nineties) features of the second demographic transition in Western countries.

projection to the year 2000 shows very little change in the types of households.

The similarities in fertility and nuptiality and the dissimilarities in all other demographic indices examined here between the two countries clearly show that South Korea has indeed undergone the first demographic transition, but not the second.

Using van de Kaa's (1987) sequence of changes toward the second demographic transition in European countries, it is clearly seen that in South Korea the "shift from preventive contraception to self-fulfilling conception" has occurred; that is, contraception is being used not merely to prevent unwanted births but to have precisely the number of children couples desire. According to the 1994 National Family Health and Fertility Survey, 11.8% of users are practicing contraception to space births, while 85.9% of women are contracepting to stop getting pregnant. With this information, and given the very low level of fertility in Korea, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the "shift from preventive contraception to self-fulfilling conception" has indeed happened.

On the other hand, the low rates of divorce, cohabitation, and extramarital births in Korea suggest that the three other "shifts" that van de Kaa enumerates have not happened. Whether or not these shifts will *ever* occur in Korea is difficult to say now. However, it may be helpful to view the influences leading toward the second demographic transition and examine what is happening in Korea.

## **Intermediate Influences**

### **a) Women's Education**

As with the first demographic transition, the second is also brought about by economic and cultural factors. These factors help bring about demographic changes through such intermediate variables as women's education, labour force participation, and political emancipation, and through changes in values, specifically, from materialism to post-materialism (Lesthaeghe, 1995). We will discuss here the education and labor force participation of women as well as the change in values. For lack data, we leave out women's political emancipation.

The education of women in both countries have increased over the past few decades. According to the 1955 census, almost all Korean women (97%) aged 25 and over had only a primary level of schooling (Table 2). A mere 3% went to middle and high school, and 0.3% moved on further to college education. But, by 1990, the percentage with primary education decreased to 43%, while almost 50% were in the middle or high school levels, and 8% in college level.

In contrast, the levels of education of Canadian women were high even during the fifties. The 1951 census showed that 51% percent of women aged 25 and over had elementary schooling and 48% had high school education. However, as in Korea, only 1% of them had college education. Over the next few decades, the schooling of Canadian women increased phenomenally such that by 1991, only 17% had elementary education, 41% reached the secondary level, and 43% got postsecondary education (with 11% going for university degrees).

### **b) Labor Force Participation**

The labour force participation of women has also dramatically increased in the past two decades in both countries, with a much higher rate for Canadian women. By the early seventies, for example, the labour force participation rates were almost the same in both countries (37% for Canada and 39% for Korea). By 1990, Korea's participation rate reached 47% while that of Canada increased even higher to 54% (Figure 4). The differences were greater among women aged 20-24. In the sixties, the gap was just about 6% (50% among Canadians and 43% among Koreans). In 1990, the difference has increased to 17% (82% in Canada and 65% in Korea).

### **c) Value Changes**

Following Inglehart (1977, 1990), Lesthaeghe (1995) shows that the effect of economic development and culture on demographic changes is also mediated through value change from materialism to post-materialism.<sup>3</sup> The post-materialists are less likely to adhere to traditional societal norms and

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<sup>3</sup> Inglehart starts off with Maslow's hierarchy of needs; that is, with the satisfaction of physiological and safety needs, the needs for love, esteem, and belonging (or self-actualization needs) come to the fore. Inglehart thinks that during the decades of prosperity and peace



have more permissive attitudes towards abortion, divorce and extramarital affairs. Because of their past experience of economic and physical security, postmaterialists tend to take for granted the economic viability of single parenthood and are more willing to bear the financial and emotional costs of divorce. And, the high priority they place on self-actualization makes them favour careers over childrearing as a means of self-fulfilment among women. It also makes them less tolerant of unsatisfactory marriages (Inglehart, 1990).

Through the World Values Survey conducted in 1990-91, Abramson and Inglehart (1995) found that the South Korean society is on the path to post-materialism in a similar way experienced by the Western countries. South Korea has experienced a very rapid economic growth since the mid-sixties, as a result of which "the youngest South Koreans show a clear preponderance of Postmaterialist values, with the trend line rising so steeply that this youngest cohort actually converges with its American counterpart" (Abramson and Inglehart, 1995, p.133). The older cohorts of Koreans included in the survey, however, still showed predominantly materialist values leading to an overall low level of postmaterialism in Korea. On the scale of post-materialism developed by Abramson and Inglehart (1995:124-5), Canada gets a score of 32 whereas South Korea has a score of 4.

The above comparison of the three variables mediating the effects of economic development and culture on demographic changes shows that in Korea women's levels of education and labour force participation are still lower and that postmaterialism is less widespread. However, changes are occurring fast. Whether these changes would lead to levels equal to those of Canada and whether such changes would correspondingly lead to demographic similarities undoubtedly depend on the primary sources of change: economic development and culture.

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following the end of the second world war, Western societies have had their economic and safety needs adequately met and have moved toward the satisfaction of their higher self-actualization needs. He further hypothesizes that values acquired during a person's formative years are carried through adulthood.

## **Economic and Cultural Factors**

A comparison of economic growth rate between Canada and South Korea shows a difference in timing: whereas Canada's economy was strong in the fifties and sixties and slowed down from the mid seventies, that of South Korea started growing from the mid sixties and has continued strongly into the nineties (Figure 5). Since there is usually a lag of time before economic growth translates itself into benefits for women (such as higher education and labour force participation) and into value changes among younger cohorts, the indicators seen above assure that it would just be a matter of time before South Korea's levels equal those of Canada.

In terms of change in values, some might argue as do Abramson and Inglehart (1995) that it will just be a matter of time before the level of postmaterialism in South Korea catches up with the West. Post-materialist values once acquired are expected to persist through adulthood. Succeeding younger cohorts of Koreans are getting used to periods of high level of economic development and high levels of growth. This would lead to taking for granted their economic well-being and physical security and to placing more value on self actualization, needs of love, esteem, and belonging. **The overall societal shift from materialism to postmaterialism would then come about mainly through cohort replacement.**

Or, perhaps, the shift may never take place, given the cultural and religious contexts in South Korea. While the shift to postmaterialism may be inevitable in one sense with cohort replacement, South Korea's traditional culture would determine how long that shift would take and what changes in social structure would the shift to post-materialism bring about. While the emergence of postmaterialism is a phenomenon mainly of advanced industrial societies (Abramson and Inglehart, 1995), religion and culture certainly come into the picture. In Western countries, Inglehart (1977, 1990) showed that Protestantism was a major factor in the timing of the shift to postmaterialism. Lesthaeghe (1995) too found a link between the predominance of Protestantism in the advent of the second demographic transition.

An important determinant of demographic and social changes in South Korea is its Confucian culture

through its direct effects on demographic behaviour as well as its indirect effects through the intermediate variables of women's education and labour force participation.

In general, the ideological underpinning of Confucianism subordinates females to males. The well-known saying of Confucius is unambiguous regarding the roles of men and women: "Man is to woman as the sun is to moon; he leads, she follows; thus, harmony reigns." And, as Deuchler (1992:231) says, "In cosmological terms, heaven (yan) dominates earth (yin); and correspondingly, male has precedence over female. The clear hierarchical order between the sexes is thus cosmologically sanctioned and is imperative for the proper functioning of the human order."

Ancestor worship is one of the essential characteristics of the traditional Confucian family in that it implies a strength of ties that bind its members even beyond the grave. Such an essential cultural practice excludes women on the basis of interdependent patrilineal system from lineal succession and ritual heirship. Only the oldest son of the primary wife can succeed his father. Women's only means of participation in this system is by marrying and having a son.

Thus, in Confucian societies, one of the family strategies for economic upward mobility is to invest in sons' education and training, in most cases with the support of daughters' earnings and, if necessary, at the expense of daughters' education. Greenhalgh (1985) found that in Taiwan there are disparities by sex in the distribution of benefits accruing from economic progress, in particular, in terms of higher education and better occupation. She hypothesized that the same was true in other Confucian countries like South Korea. It is no surprise therefore that the gap in the percentages of college educated men and women is rather wide. In 1990, for example, only 8% of Korean women aged 25 or over had college education as compared to 20% of men, or a difference of 12%. In contrast, the percentage difference in Canada between men and women with post-secondary education and higher in 1991 was just 3% (46% among men and 43% among women).

The clear division of responsibilities for women in charge of domestic functions and childrearing is based on Confucian ideology as well (Deuchler, 1992). In recent times, a mother's duty has

included the demanding task of seeing to the successful education of children, particularly of sons. This domestic task is taken so seriously that recent data<sup>4</sup> in 1995 reveal that even among females only 25% favour female employment under any conditions, whereas 63% favour women's employment only before marriage, after maturity of children, or both before marriage and after children's maturity. The other 12% prefer housekeeping role only. The corresponding figures for men favouring women's employment are lower still - only 17% favour women's employment under any conditions, 20% think that women should be housekeepers, while 63% favour women's employment only when they are not involved in childrearing<sup>5</sup>. This attitude would have most likely translated into a behaviour noted above - childbearing more concentrated in the age groups 20-29 - in order to maximize the number of years acceptable for women to be in gainful employment. And, this greater emphasis on women's domestic and childrearing roles must be a reason why the levels of employment of Korean women are lower than in Canada.

In addition to these cultural effects on women's education and labour force participation, Confucianism impacts directly on demographic behaviour, in particular, on the indices that we have examined above, namely, fertility, nuptiality, divorce, cohabitation and extramarital births.

**1. Fertility.** One of the cultural implications of ancestor worship and the patrilineal system is son preference. Even quite recent studies seem to point to a prevailing preference for sons in Korea (Choe and Kim, 1995). A decade ago, Greenhalgh (1985) hypothesized that son preference would be a barrier to decreasing fertility. But as shown above, this has not hindered the decrease in fertility to below replacement level. In a climate of declining fertility, Choe and Kim (1995) showed that son preference had the effect of shifting the decision-making regarding additional children to lower

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<sup>4</sup> Results from the Social Statistics Survey conducted by the National Statistical Office in 1995.

<sup>5</sup> In an analysis of married women's attitude towards work based on the 1989 Survey on Family Life Cycle, Choe et. al (1994) found that "majority of married women felt that women should work anytime, regardless of marital status or the presences of children." The authors noted however that this attitude did not translate to practice in that the actual pattern of female labor force participation in fact depended on marital status and presence of children.

parities and that son preference led to higher mortality of female children. Another strategy that is being used to get the desired number and sex of children is sex selective abortion. Table 3 shows the sex ratio at birth and presents a clear evidence of sex selective abortion in South Korea. This indirectly confirms the strong influence of Confucianism on fertility behaviour.

**2. Nuptiality.** According to Deuchler (1992), among the consequences of Confucianism's emphasis on the patrilineal kinship system are the strict gender role division, with women being subordinate to men, and the greater priority given to father-son relationship than to conjugal relationship. Throughout her married life, a woman's existence revolves around the male members of her family, and she remains economically dependent on them. Ritually, as discussed earlier, a married woman's role is marginal.<sup>6</sup>

With no substantial changes in their subordinate roles, marriage may not be an attractive prospect for many women. What has been observed in the case of Japan may be said of Korea as well. A combination of non-compulsory assumption of adult family roles and non-substantial changes in gender roles may indeed be the driving force behind the very low fertility and high age at marriage in Japan (Tsuya and Mason, 1995). There is no reason why this cannot be true for South Korea. As shown above, neither the education level nor the labour force participation of Korean women match those of Canadian women. Yet, the average ages at marriage are not too different in the two countries. Could it be that the situation of married women in South Korea is less attractive such that even with limited alternatives, women choose to delay marriage anyway?

**3. Divorce.** The reasons why women may wish to delay marriage are the very same ones that would make them stick to it once married. As Deuchler (1992: 273) notes: "For a woman who received recognition and social standing in society only through marriage, the threat of being expelled from her husband's family and the social stigma attached to remarriage were effective means of keeping her obedient and submissive. Since Confucian ideology attributed the ultimate responsibility for

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<sup>6</sup> It may be noted that women's subordination to and their dependency on men is common to most traditional societies and is by no means exclusive to Confucian societies.

keeping peace in the domestic sphere to the morally superior husband rather than to the naturally inferior wife, the censors generally treated a husband harshly if he expelled his wife without weighty reason".

Once married, a woman is exclusively attached to her husband's descent group. For this reason, remarriage even of widows was negatively viewed by Confucians. Children of second marriages were also disadvantageously treated.

This combination of difficulty in getting divorced and the social stigma attached to remarriage are plausible explanations for the lower divorce rates in South Korea compared to that of Canada.

**4. Cohabitation.** In South Korea, primary and secondary marriages were once institutionalized. Secondary wives were subordinated to the primary wife and were treated at great disadvantage. In general, secondary wives came from lower social classes; the unions were mainly for women's economic support; and they were generally entered into without formal ceremony. Children of second marriages were not treated as legitimate members of the father's descent group.

Given these traditions, it is easy to understand why cohabitation (as now known in the West) would be very much unacceptable in Korea. In Canada, for example, cohabitation is mainly differentiated from marriage by lack of legal ceremony, is entered into by couples regardless of social class, and the children from such a union are not legally different from those of legally married couples. In Korea, casual unions of this sort may be taken as akin to "secondary" marriage with greater adverse consequences for women and children.

**5. Extra-marital births.** The social stigma attached to secondary marriages and to remarriages would certainly apply, and with greater force, to extramarital births. With a strong emphasis on descent line in a Confucian society, social acceptance of births outside of marriage would be difficult to come about.

## Conclusions

In sum, even though industrialization and economic development may lead to shift in values from materialism to post-materialism and to increases in other intermediate variables like women's education and labour force participation, it seems to us that long established Confucian traditions in South Korea would lead to demographic changes that are different from those in Canada or in the West. Would these changes imply a second demographic transition as understood in the West, or would they imply something else? Our discussion in this paper points to the more important role of culture and religion in the second transition than in the first. As long as these two dimensions play a decisive role in men's and women's lives particularly in the ancient cultural and religious societies, we see little chance of the Western style of second demographic transition taking place soon in these societies. What Kipling observed may be no truer than in this context. The developed countries in the Asian continent take pride in having developed the "Asian way". The East Asian economies running at full throttle with no sign of major slowdown no longer take their cues from the West, either in running their economy or in changing their lifestyles and value systems. The latter is certainly a *sine qua non* for the second demographic transition.

But, if we were to predict in any meaningful manner, there is a clue to the possibility of onset of the second transition in those countries that have already experienced the first. That is the changing values from cohort to cohort. Even now, value changes may be manifesting themselves in some other ways in countries like South Korea. In Japan, for example, a value change regarding marriage is reflected in what is referred to as "new single concept", that is, "the enjoyment of single life without pressure to get married" and the social acceptance of premarital sex (Retherford, Ogawa, and Sakamoto, 1994). To these authors, these are indications of the "new wave of independence and individualism among Japanese women". While we think that cultural traditions would keep some indicators of the Western type of second demographic transition (such as the rates of divorce, cohabitation, and extramarital births) low for some time to come in South Korea, attitude and behaviour regarding marriage, children, and family life may already be changing. That is, the second demographic transition may already be underway but in a uniquely "Eastern" manner. It may just be a matter of knowing where to look for and of detecting such changes as they occur.

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