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The Silent Crises: The Future of Population in East Asia's Leading Economies

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ABSTRACT

Declining fertility has become one of the most significant demographic challenges facing advanced economies in East Asia. This article examines the dynamics of declining birth rates in China, Japan, and South Korea and their implications for long-term economic sustainability and social stability from a Non-Traditional Security perspective. This study employs a comparative qualitative approach using secondary data derived from international reports, national statistics, and relevant academic literature. The findings suggest that declining fertility in these countries is driven by a combination of economic pressures, shifting social values, and the limited effectiveness of pro-natalist policies. In the long term, persistent low fertility is likely to accelerate population ageing, reduce the size of the labour force, and increase pressure on welfare systems. Therefore, the fertility crisis in East Asia should be understood as a multidimensional challenge that requires comprehensive and long-term policy responses.

KEYWORDS

Low fertility, population ageing, East Asia, demographic policy, non-traditional security.

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1. Introduction

Declining birth rates (low fertility) have become one of the major non-traditional security challenges. According to World Fertility 2024, published by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), the global fertility rate declined to 2.2 births per woman in 2024. This trend has occurred worldwide, although the magnitude of the decline varies across countries and regions. More than half of the countries and territories worldwide, collectively accounting for more than two-thirds of the global population, have fertility rates below 2.1 births per woman, with the majority of these cases occurring in large economies. (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2025)

According to the World Fertility 2024 report, Asia has become the epicentre of the declining birth rate phenomenon, with countries such as South Korea recording a record-low fertility rate of 0.72 births per woman in 2023, while China and Japan each recorded a fertility rate of 1.2 births per woman in 2023 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2025). This situation places these three major East Asian economies among the countries with the lowest fertility rates in the world.

Historically, these three countries have experienced different demographic dynamics. In China, the decline in birth rates cannot be separated from the implementation of the One-Child

Policy in 1979. This policy was introduced to curb population growth in China during the 1970s, when rapid population growth was considered likely to hinder economic development and place substantial pressure on national resources.

The One-Child Policy proved effective in reducing population growth. However, in the long term, its success gave rise to a series of structural consequences that later emerged as new demographic challenges in China. The One-Child Policy accelerated the decline in the labour force, created an imbalance in the age structure, accelerated population ageing, and resulted in a gender imbalance. Although the Chinese government abolished the One-Child Policy and replaced it with the Two-Child Policy in 2016 and the Three-Child Policy in 2021, the declining fertility trend in China has yet to improve.

Japan is among the earliest countries in East Asia to experience declining birth rates. This trend has continued since the early 1990s, following the economic stagnation that began in 1991, compounded by rising living costs and changes in the social structure that have led an increasing number of couples to postpone marriage or choose not to have children. In 2022, Japan recorded 799,728 births, which declined to 758,631 in 2023 (Nippon, 2024). This situation confirms that Japan's fertility rate has remained stagnant at 1.2 births per woman, one of the lowest in the world.

Meanwhile, South Korea has become the country with the lowest fertility rate in the world. In 2023, South Korea's fertility rate fell below 1, reaching 0.72 births per woman, down from 0.78 in 2022 (Kyodo News, 2024). This situation indicates that the problem of declining birth rates in South Korea is more severe than in China and Japan, placing the country in the most extreme position among the three.

Although the phenomenon of declining birth rates in East Asia has been widely examined in previous literature, these studies generally focus on an in-depth analysis of a single country and frame fertility issues within the context of domestic policies and internal social dynamics. For example, the study by Arif Daffi et al. highlights the phenomenon of shoushika in Japan by emphasising factors such as economic stagnation, rising living costs, gender inequality, and the failure of pro-natalist policies. Meanwhile, the study by Faradha Aulia and Frisca Alexandra focuses on South Korea by emphasising the limitations of the Moon Jae-in administration's policies in addressing structural factors such as housing prices, long working hours, and labour market pressures.

However, these studies have not explicitly linked declining birth rates to the strategic positions of Japan, South Korea, and China as major economies in East Asia, nor have they discussed their implications for non-traditional security, long-term economic development, and global dynamics. In fact, changes in the demographic structure characterised by low fertility and accelerated population ageing have the potential to affect labour force availability, the sustainability of the social welfare system, and the economic competitiveness of these countries within the international system.

Based on this research gap, this study raises the following main research question: How can the phenomenon of declining birth rates in China, Japan, and South Korea be understood as a non-traditional security issue that affects the economic sustainability and the strategic position of these three countries in East Asia and the international system?

The novelty of this study lies in its cross-country comparative approach, which integrates demographic analysis with the perspective of international relations, and in its effort to position the fertility crisis not merely as a domestic social issue but as a structural challenge with strategic implications for the major economies of East Asia.

Therefore, understanding the dynamics of declining birth rates in these three countries is important not only as a demographic phenomenon but also as an indicator of social

transformation. This study aims to further examine the factors contributing to declining birth rates, their policy implications, and the future direction of population trends in China, Japan, and South Korea within the context of the increasingly alarming global fertility crisis.

2. Analytical Framework

Over the past few decades, security studies have undergone a significant expansion in meaning. During the Cold War, security was primarily understood in terms of military affairs and national defence. However, developments in the post-Cold War era have broadened the concept to encompass a range of non-military dimensions. This perspective, known as Non-Traditional Security, emphasises that threats to state stability originate not only from armed conflict but also from social, economic, environmental, and demographic factors that may affect the sustainability of development and public welfare.

The non-traditional security approach places issues such as climate change, pandemics, food crises, migration, and demographic dynamics within the spectrum of contemporary security threats. This concept was developed primarily by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver within the framework of Securitisation Theory, which explains how a non-military issue can be treated as a security threat when it has significant implications for the stability of the state and society. In this context, changes in the demographic structure can be understood as having long-term security implications.

Demographic change, particularly declining birth rates and population ageing, is increasingly regarded as a strategic challenge with broad implications for economic development and social stability. To understand this dynamic from a theoretical perspective, this study also draws on Demographic Transition Theory, which explains changes in birth and death rates alongside economic and social modernisation. In the later stages of the demographic transition, countries with high levels of development tend to experience a significant decline in fertility rates, ultimately leading to an ageing population and slowing, or even declining, population growth.

This phenomenon is clearly evident in several developed East Asian countries, such as Japan, South Korea, and China. These three countries have experienced a sharp decline in fertility rates over the past few decades, resulting in significant changes in their population age structure. The proportion of older adults has increased rapidly, while the working-age population has declined. This condition has created various structural challenges, particularly regarding the sustainability of economic systems, labour markets, and social welfare programs.

In addition, this study also considers the Low Fertility Trap Theory developed by Wolfgang Lutz. This theory explains that when a country's fertility rate falls below the replacement level for an extended period, social and economic mechanisms emerge that further reinforce the downward trend. Factors such as rising child-rearing costs, changing family values, and economic uncertainty may make subsequent generations increasingly reluctant to have more children. As a result, a country may become trapped in a low-fertility condition that is difficult to reverse without significant policy intervention.

On the other hand, the implications of demographic change can also be analysed through the framework of Human Security. This concept emphasises that security is not only about protecting the state but also about protecting individuals from economic, social, and health-related vulnerabilities. In this context, population ageing and declining birth rates may affect human security by increasing pressure on social welfare systems, exacerbating unequal access to healthcare services, and increasing the vulnerability of elderly populations.

By integrating the perspectives of Non-Traditional Security, Demographic Transition Theory, Low Fertility Trap Theory, and the Human Security framework, this study argues that the dynamics of declining birth rates in Japan, South Korea, and China are not merely a demographic

phenomenon, but also a multidimensional challenge related to economic stability, the sustainability of social welfare systems, and the overall well-being of society. This conceptual approach enables a more comprehensive analysis of how changes in the demographic structure may affect states' capacity to sustain economic development and maintain long-term social stability.

3. Research Method

This study is an explanatory study employing a comparative qualitative approach aimed at explaining the factors contributing to the decline in birth rates in the three major economies of East Asia, namely China, Japan, and South Korea, as well as analysing the relationship between demographic policies, socio-economic conditions, and changes in social values affecting fertility trends in the region.

The main objective of this study is to identify common patterns and country-specific characteristics of the low-fertility phenomenon, while also assessing its implications as a non-traditional security issue affecting economic sustainability and state capacity. This study uses secondary data obtained from official reports of international organisations, such as the World Fertility Report and World Population Prospects published by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), national statistical data from the official agencies of each country, as well as relevant scientific journal publications and policy reports. The data were analysed using descriptive and comparative qualitative analysis to interpret the relationship between policies and demographic dynamics. This approach enables the study to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of declining birth rates in East Asia.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1. Analysis of the Cause of Declining Birth Rates

In general, several factors have contributed to the decline in birth rates in Japan, China, and South Korea. These three countries are among the advanced economies in East Asia. However, economic factors, such as rising living costs, high housing prices, high education costs, and people's increasing focus on career stability, have become major drivers of declining birth rates.

Following Japan's defeat in World War II, under the leadership of Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida, the country began to focus on rebuilding its economy, particularly through technological development and industrialisation. This policy later became known as the Yoshida Doctrine. During the 1950s, Japan entered a period known as the Japanese economic miracle. Its peak occurred during the 1980s, when Japan entered the golden era of its economy and further strengthened its position as one of the world's leading technology-based industrialised countries.

The collapse of Japan's bubble economy in the early 1990s marked an important turning point in the country's socio-economic dynamics and had long-term implications for its population's demographic behaviour. The economic crisis, followed by prolonged economic stagnation known as the Lost Decades, created uncertainty in the labour market, increased the prevalence of non-regular employment, and led to stagnant real incomes, particularly among the younger generation.

These conditions contributed to the postponement of marriage and childbearing, as perceptions of economic risk associated with starting a family increased. The impact of the crisis was not merely temporary but gave rise to structural changes in Japan's labour market and social life, in which economic stability became a primary prerequisite before entering marriage and raising children. In this context, the bubble economy is not understood as the direct cause of declining birth rates, but rather as an initial factor that triggered a series of economic and social changes which, cumulatively, reinforced the trend of low fertility in Japan.

According to a 2024 report by the YuWa Population Research Institute, China is one of the countries with the highest child-rearing costs in the world. On average, the cost of raising a child in China until age 18 is 538,000 yuan. This figure is equivalent to 6.3 times the country's gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, which is significantly higher than the United States' 4.11 times and Japan's 4.26 times GDP per capita (Hawkins, 2024).

The report also highlights the opportunity costs borne primarily by women in raising children. Between 2010 and 2018, the average amount of time parents spent each week helping their elementary school-aged children with homework increased from 3.67 hours to 5.88 hours. As a result, mothers tended to experience reductions in paid working hours and leisure time. In contrast, fathers generally experienced only a reduction in leisure time without a significant decrease in paid working hours.

The report concludes that the high costs of having and raising children, together with the difficulties faced by women in balancing family responsibilities and employment, have contributed to the low willingness of Chinese society to have children. The term fertility willingness refers to the ideal number of children according to public perception, which, according to several surveys conducted in China, is fewer than two per family.

Public perceptions of the ideal number of children in China cannot be separated from the legacy of past policies. The implementation of the One-Child Policy in 1979 proved effective in reducing China's high birth rate during the 1990s. However, the success of the policy also produced long-term consequences, one of which was the distortion of the sex ratio due to the cultural preference of Chinese society for sons over daughters. This phenomenon later became known as the "missing girls" phenomenon. The practice of prenatal sex selection subsequently led to a significant imbalance between the number of males and females.

Although the One-Child Policy was abolished in 2016 and replaced by the Two-Child Policy, followed by the Three-Child Policy in 2021, these policy changes did not automatically alter people's reproductive preferences, particularly after the norm of having a small family had become deeply internalised over the course of three decades. Therefore, the low fertility rate in China is influenced not only by economic factors, such as the high cost of raising children, but also by the long-term effects of past policies that have reshaped social norms.

The high cost of living is also a key factor contributing to the decline in birth rates in South Korea. Rapidly rising property prices in metropolitan areas such as Seoul have made homeownership a difficult prerequisite for marriage and childbearing. At the same time, the highly competitive education system has compelled parents to bear substantial additional educational expenses from an early age. These conditions have created the perception that raising children is a high-risk, long-term economic commitment (Cho, 2021).

These economic pressures have subsequently contributed to a shift in social values among young people in South Korea. The younger generation increasingly prioritises individual freedom, financial stability, and personal fulfilment over marriage and family formation. Marriage is no longer regarded as a mandatory stage of life but rather as a personal choice that is often perceived as limiting individual autonomy and career opportunities, particularly for women. Within the context of South Korea's labour market, which is characterised by long working hours and a highly competitive work culture, women face high opportunity costs when choosing to marry and have children.

In general, distinct factors contribute to the decline in birth rates in Japan, China, and South Korea. In China, for example, the One-Child Policy has had long-term effects on the country's demographic structure and family preferences. Birth control policies were never implemented in Japan or South Korea; however, changes in social values have contributed to declining birth rates

in both countries. Despite differences in underlying causes, the three countries also share a common factor contributing to declining birth rates: economic conditions.

Economic factors can be identified as a common cause across all three countries. The increasing economic burden borne by young families, including the high costs of living, particularly housing, child education, and childcare, as well as the substantial opportunity costs, especially for women in a competitive labour market, has consistently become a major obstacle to decisions regarding marriage and childbearing. Therefore, the fertility crises in China, Japan, and South Korea reflect similar structural economic challenges.

4.2. Impact of Declining Birth Rates

Declining birth rates in China, Japan, and South Korea have triggered structural changes, driven by accelerated population ageing and an increasing old-age dependency ratio. Japan is the most prominent example, with the old-age dependency ratio exceeding 50% in 2021, meaning that only about 2 working-age individuals were supporting 1 older person. This condition has simultaneously reduced the size of the productive labour force (Mathieu, 2024).

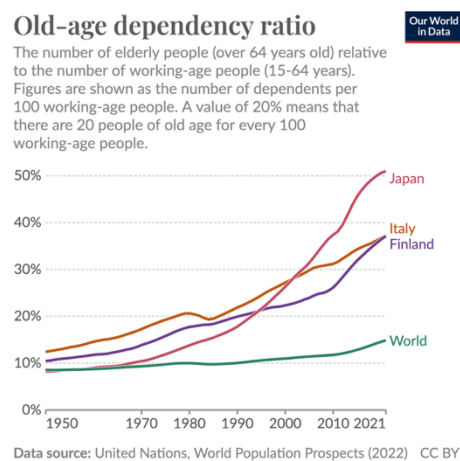


Figure 1. Global Old Age Dependency Ratio, 2021

Source: Mathieu, 2024

Findings from the OECD also confirm that Japan is facing significant demographic headwinds, with its old-age dependency ratio remaining far higher than those of other OECD member countries and projected to increase sharply over the coming years. South Korea is following a similar trajectory to Japan. The OECD projects that South Korea's old-age dependency ratio will surpass Japan's by 2050, indicating an exceptionally rapid acceleration of population ageing amid persistently low fertility rates (Jones, 2024).

Meanwhile, China has exhibited a consistent upward trend in its old-age dependency ratio. This trend reflects the growing burden imposed by the population aged 65 years and over on the working-age population, thereby increasing the risk of a shrinking labour force over the medium term (World Bank, 2024). The decline in birth rates in China, Japan, and South Korea has not only altered the age composition of the population but also triggered social transformations reflected in household structures, intergenerational relationships, and widening disparities between urban and rural areas. Urbanisation has drawn younger populations to major cities, leaving rural areas with a diminishing young labour force and accelerated population ageing.

In China, this demographic disparity is clearly evident between the more developed coastal regions and the inland areas, which are facing labour shortages and depopulation, thereby negatively affecting the sustainability of local economies (Li et al., 2020). Japan and South Korea exhibit similar patterns, with many villages and small towns experiencing dramatic population decline that threatens the viability of local communities and social cohesion. The prolonged decline in birth rates in Japan has led to a growing number of older adults living alone, a phenomenon commonly referred to as one-person households. Public health studies have reported that the proportion of one-person households in Japan has increased sharply in recent years. Demographic research institutions in Japan also project that the number of one-person households will continue to increase, with the majority consisting of older adults. This trend has significant social implications, including increased social vulnerability, such as the phenomenon of *kodokushi* (lonely death), which has been identified as a major social issue in Japan and is often associated with weakening social networks, declining family ties, and the growing number of people living alone in old age (Nakazawa et al., 2021). In South Korea, changes in social values are also reflected in declining marriage rates and the growing number of young adults who choose to remain single and childless. This trend is consistent with the preferences of the younger generation, who increasingly prioritise personal autonomy and economic stability over traditional family roles.

Therefore, the decline in birth rates in China, Japan, and South Korea should not be understood merely as a demographic phenomenon but also as a process of structural transformation with far-reaching implications for the economic, social, and political order. From a political economy perspective, population ageing has the potential to reduce national productivity through a shrinking labour force, increasing expenditures on social security and healthcare services, and the need for governments to restructure their development strategies and labour market policies. Declining birth rates have also led to social changes characterised by shifts in family structures, the weakening of informal family support systems, and widening disparities between urban and rural areas. These conditions require more adaptive and inclusive welfare policies. As a multidimensional challenge, the declining birth rates across the three major East Asian economies require integrated, long-term policy responses.

4.3. Policies and the Effectiveness

Declining birth rates in China, Japan, and South Korea have also influenced the orientation of public policies and government priorities in these three countries. Demographic issues have become a national strategic agenda that shapes the formulation of economic, social, and even national security policies. The Japanese government has explicitly recognised declining birth rates as a threat to the country's long-term sustainability. This recognition has prompted the government to introduce a series of family policy reforms, expand childcare services, and implement Womenomics policies to increase women's labour force participation.

One of the key legal foundations for addressing declining birth rates is the Basic Act for Measures to Cope with Society with Declining Birthrate (2003). This legislation provides the basis for various family support programs, including child allowances, childcare assistance, and expanded childcare services. Although these policies have been progressively expanded over the past two decades, their impact on increasing fertility rates has remained very limited.

The policy approach adopted by the Japanese government has placed excessive emphasis on financial incentives and has therefore been unable to address the more complex structural factors underlying low fertility. It should be noted that several of the principal factors contributing to Japan's low birth rate include employment insecurity among younger generations, the high cost of living, an intensive work culture, and gender inequality in the

division of domestic responsibilities. These conditions have led many couples to postpone marriage or choose not to have children. Consequently, the Japanese government's emphasis on financial assistance has not fully addressed the problem's root causes. A more comprehensive policy approach is required, encompassing greater labour market flexibility, gender equality, and stronger institutional support for childcare (Takao, 2024).

In other words, Japan's fertility crisis cannot be resolved solely through direct financial assistance to families. Instead, the government needs to develop more structural, long-term policies, including labour market reforms, greater gender equality, and a more family-friendly social environment. Without fundamental changes to these social and economic structures, efforts to increase Japan's birth rate will continue to face significant limitations.

Meanwhile, China has shifted from the strict One-Child Policy, implemented in 1979, to the Two-Child Policy in 2016 and, subsequently, to the Three-Child Policy in 2021. These policy changes reflect the government's efforts to rebalance the population structure amid declining fertility and accelerated population ageing. However, these policy changes have also required adjustments to a wide range of social policies, including family welfare systems, labour market policies, and childcare services.

China's family structure is often described as the "4-2-1" model, in which one child, upon reaching adulthood, is expected to support two parents and four grandparents. This structure is a consequence of the One-Child Policy, which remained in effect for several decades and created substantial social and economic pressures on younger generations. In addition, gender discrimination in the labour market, limited access to public services for migrant workers due to the hukou system, and the high cost of childcare have become additional factors that further complicate families' decisions to have children.

In response to these challenges, the Chinese government has developed three main categories of family policies: workplace policies, parental and child benefits, and childcare services. Workplace policies include extending maternity and paternity leave, flexible working arrangements, and protecting the rights of employees with children. Meanwhile, parental and child benefit policies include tax incentives for families with children, as well as various forms of childcare subsidies provided by both the central and local governments. On the other hand, childcare service policies focus on expanding the availability of affordable childcare facilities, particularly for children aged 0–3 years, for whom such services have remained limited in many parts of China.

Despite the implementation of these policies, the report *Family Policies in China*, published by UNICEF China in 2023, emphasises that no single policy can directly increase birth rates by a significant amount. Global experience suggests that family policies tend to produce long-term effects, particularly by increasing women's labour-market participation, reducing the economic burden on young families, and improving the balance between work and family life (UNICEF China, 2023).

Consistent with the experience of the Japanese government, the effectiveness of the Chinese government's family policies depends not only on economic incentives but also on the state's ability to foster a social environment that encourages young families to have and raise children. In other words, efforts to increase birth rates in China require a multidimensional approach encompassing simultaneous economic, social, and institutional policy reforms.

South Korea is perhaps the country in East Asia facing the most severe decline in birth rates. This phenomenon has persisted since the early 2000s, when the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) fell below 1.3 and has continued to decline to an exceptionally low level. This situation has even led to a natural population decline, a condition in which the number of deaths exceeds the number of births.

The South Korean government has responded to this challenge through a range of national policies. One of the principal initiatives is the Basic Plan for Ageing Society and Population Policy, first introduced in 2006 and revised every five years. This policy is designed to address two major challenges simultaneously: declining birth rates and population ageing.

The program encompasses a wide range of cross-sectoral measures, including support for pregnancy and childbirth, childcare facilities, financial assistance for families with children, maternity and parental leave policies, and efforts to create a more family-friendly working environment. Nevertheless, despite the government's substantial budgetary allocation, these policies have not yet significantly increased fertility rates (Cho, 2021).

The limited effectiveness of South Korea's policies in significantly increasing fertility rates can be attributed to their excessive focus on financial incentives, such as subsidies and other forms of economic assistance. However, the problem of low fertility is far more complex, as it is closely associated with labour market structures, long working hours and an intensive work culture, gender inequality, and the changing social values of younger generations. Therefore, pro-natalist policies should not rely solely on economic assistance but must also be accompanied by broader social transformation, including labour market reform, improvements in work culture, and greater gender equality.

Thus, the experiences of Japan, China, and South Korea demonstrate that declining birth rates cannot be understood merely as a demographic phenomenon but rather as a structural challenge closely linked to economic, social, and institutional dynamics. Although each country has adopted different policy approaches—ranging from the legacy of population control policies in China to family policy reforms in Japan to comprehensive pro-natalist programs in South Korea—all three have encountered similar limitations in increasing fertility rates. This suggests that policies based solely on financial incentives are insufficient to address the deeper underlying causes, including employment insecurity among younger generations, the high cost of living, an intensive work culture, and gender inequality in the division of domestic responsibilities.

Therefore, addressing the demographic crisis in East Asia requires a more holistic and socially adaptive policy approach. States must not only provide economic incentives but also create a social ecosystem that enables younger generations to establish families without sacrificing their economic security or career aspirations. Accordingly, the success of future population policies will depend largely on governments' ability to integrate economic reform, social policy, and institutional transformation within a more inclusive and sustainable development framework.

4.4. Future Challenges

If the trend of declining birth rates in China, Japan, and South Korea continues, East Asia is projected to undergo profound demographic changes over the coming decades. These three countries will face a combination of declining total population and accelerated population ageing.

In Japan, for example, more than 29% of the population is already aged 65 years and over, and the country has entered the phase of a super-aged society. Meanwhile, South Korea is projected to reach the same status within a relatively short period over the coming decade. Furthermore, various projections indicate that by the middle of the twenty-first century, approximately one-third of the population in East Asia will be aged 65 or older, making the region one of the fastest-ageing regions in the world (Sasipornkarn, 2023).

On the other hand, the working-age population is projected to continue declining. This phenomenon has the potential to fundamentally reshape the population pyramid, with older adults increasingly outnumbering younger generations. In the long term, these demographic changes may have far-reaching consequences for economic stability, the sustainability of social welfare systems, and the capacity of states to maintain sustainable economic growth.

The demographic changes driven by declining birth rates pose serious challenges for governments and societies in the future. One of the most significant consequences is the shrinking labour force, which may reduce economic productivity and slow long-term economic growth. The OECD projects that population ageing will substantially increase the old-age dependency ratio and constrain the growth of national income in many advanced economies unless accompanied by labour market reforms and adaptive social policies (Hannon, 2025).

In addition, the growing elderly population will place considerable pressure on social security systems, pension schemes, and healthcare services. As the number of working-age individuals contributing to taxes and social security payments continues to decline, governments will face increasingly complex fiscal challenges in financing welfare services for the ageing population. In many East Asian countries, this situation is also likely to increase the economic burden on younger generations, who are expected to assume greater financial and caregiving responsibilities for older family members (Eberstadt, 2024).

Beyond fiscal challenges, demographic change also has significant implications for society's social structure. As childlessness becomes more prevalent and family size continues to decline, the traditional family support system, which has long served as the primary source of care for older adults, is becoming increasingly weakened. This situation is likely to increase demand for institution-based elderly care services and encourage governments to develop social welfare models better suited to ageing societies.

Therefore, the continuing decline in birth rates in Japan, China, and South Korea will not only affect demographic dynamics but also reshape the economic and social structures of these countries in the future. To address these challenges, the governments of the three countries need to develop more comprehensive policy strategies, including measures to enhance labour productivity, reform pension systems, expand the labour force participation of women and older adults, and strengthen sustainable social welfare systems.

5. Conclusion

The phenomenon of declining birth rates in China, Japan, and South Korea demonstrates that the fertility crisis in East Asia cannot be understood merely as a demographic issue, but rather as the result of a complex interaction among economic factors, state policies, and the transformation of social values. These three countries exhibit relatively similar patterns, including rising living costs, high housing and child education expenses, and substantial opportunity costs, particularly for women, in balancing family responsibilities and career aspirations. Collectively, these factors have consistently contributed to delayed marriage and postponed childbearing among younger generations. Nevertheless, each country also possesses distinctive characteristics, such as the long-term consequences of China's One-Child Policy, the economic stagnation following Japan's bubble economy collapse, and the pressures of intense economic competition and a demanding work culture in South Korea.

The prolonged decline in fertility has triggered structural changes in population composition, including accelerated population ageing and an increasing old-age dependency ratio. These developments have direct implications for the shrinking labour force, rising expenditures on social security systems, and the potential slowdown of future economic growth. Furthermore, the fertility crisis has also driven social transformation, as reflected in changing household structures, the growing prevalence of one-person households, and widening demographic disparities between urban and rural areas resulting from urbanisation. Thus, persistently low birth rates in these three countries represent a multidimensional challenge encompassing economic, social, and institutional dimensions.

The various pro-natalist policies implemented by the governments of Japan, China, and South Korea demonstrate that policy interventions do not necessarily lead to higher fertility rates in the short term. Financial incentives, child allowances, and expanded parental leave may alleviate part of the economic burden on families. However, they are often insufficient to address deeper structural problems, including employment insecurity among younger generations, gender inequality in the division of domestic responsibilities, and work cultures that are not conducive to family life. Therefore, addressing the fertility crisis requires a more comprehensive, long-term policy approach that includes labour market reforms, greater gender equality, affordable childcare services, and a more family-friendly social environment.

Looking ahead, if the trend of declining fertility continues, these three countries are likely to face increasingly severe demographic pressures on the sustainability of their economic systems and social welfare systems. Therefore, the fertility crisis in East Asia should be understood as a strategic challenge that requires integrated and adaptive policy responses. Success in addressing this challenge will not only determine demographic stability at the national level. However, it will also shape the economic and social dynamics of East Asia over the coming decades.

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