

# THE MEANING OF THE SECOND DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSITION AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A MATURE SOCIETY

**Emiko Ochiai**

Graduate School of Letters, Kyoto University, Sakyo, Kyoto, Japan

I recently saw the British film ‘The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel’, which is about a group of retirees who decide to ‘outsource’ their retirement by settling in sunny, low-cost India. Movies and dramas depicting group living among seniors have also become quite common in Japan. While I have not heard of one set in India, some Japanese seniors are living off their pensions in countries like Thailand or the Philippines.

Nevertheless, I was struck by one particularly big difference between these Japanese dramas and this one. The British film showed seniors energetically looking for romance, including physical relationships. This zest for life is a development that is hidden or only very rarely seen in Japan, even in fiction. This difference reflects concrete, significant differences in the ways the Second Demographic Transition has occurred in Europe and Asia.

Western European (including Northern and Southern) and North American societies began to experience the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) in the late 1960s. Fertility dropped below replacement levels and divorce rates greatly increased. At the same time cohabitation increased, as the institution of marriage weakened, and, as many said, the question of getting married became a lifestyle choice. Progress was also made toward gender equality. Many saw this as a change in modernity. ‘Second Modernity’ was among the various names proposed for marking this transformation.

So has the Second Demographic Transition taken place in other regions of the world? Is it as universal as the First Demographic Transition? This is an important question that contemporary sociologists should be asking to understand global social changes in our period. Verification has just

begun. It became a topic at a symposium on low fertility and population policies held in Berlin in 2010.<sup>1</sup>

The following can be said about Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore: (1) total fertility rates have fallen below the level of Europe's 'lowest low fertility'; (2) divorce rates have risen, marriage rates have dropped, the age at marriage has increased; and the proportions never marrying seem to be rising; and (3) cohabitation has risen only slightly, and proportions of births out-of-wedlock are extremely low. The institution of marriage is still strong, even though an 'escape from the family' is occurring, as indicated by (1) and (2). Social norms that men and women should marry if they live together and that children should be born to married persons strongly persist. If these trends continue, not too many free spirits like those at the Marigold Hotel will emerge in East Asia.

We should now ask, what indeed are the Second Demographic Transition and the Second Modernity? Do they have a strong imprint of European culture? The First Demographic Transition proceeded well within the universalistic framework of modernization theory. As for the Second Demographic Transition, should we say that cultural diversity is being manifested?

My answer would be that it is not that simple. I discussed the reasons for low proportions of births out-of-wedlock in East Asia with a Taiwanese sociologist who unequivocally stated that Asian familialism or other cultural factors are not primary. She said that it was rather a case of women being unable to have children outside the family because they cannot receive any support for raising children other than from families. In societies where a welfare state has yet to be developed, the family is the most important social resource. However, the family easily turns to risk in the same societies when one has to support one's family. Therefore, we see an 'escape from the family'. South Korean sociologist Kyung-Sup Chang ([forthcoming](#)) calls this phenomenon 'risk-averse individualization'. I would call it 'familialistic individualization'.

Lesthaeghe and van de Kaa have stressed that the Second Demographic Transition in Europe was largely caused by individualism and other value factors. It was natural that the value change was considered important because many scholars engaged in the discussions belonged to the generation of counterculture movement. However, we should also consider economic factors behind it. A long recession in Europe and North America in the 1970s triggered high unemployment, particularly among younger workers. I can recall myself that in Europe, even in the

1. The results of the Berlin symposium were brought together as 'Fertility in the History of the 20th Century: Trends, Theories, Policies, Discourses' in a special edition of the journal, *Historical Social Research*, No. 36 (2011).

early 1990s, people walking down the street were often pressed for spare change by young men. This can be linked to late and fewer marriages, the need for dual-income families, and to decisions to live together rather than marry and start a family. Unstable job situations undermine long-lasting relationships.

It was only when Japan entered the long recession since the 1990s when I truly understood what happened to Europe since the 1970s. Japan in the 1990s was similar to Europe in the 1970s. Their dominant economic positions were shaken in respective periods by the emergence of younger economic powers. In addition, each of the countries became 'aged societies' in the periods, with more than 14% of their population 65 or over. We tend to consider the Second Modernity as hyper modernity but it is misleading. The Second Modernity may be associated with the end of growth or decline in the world system.

I am not saying that values are not important. On the contrary, values have played powerful roles in determining which path to take. Europe has gone through periods of painful social changes, and achieved social reforms thanks to the formation of new values through the counterculture movement, the feminist movement, the anti-racism movement, and all other kinds of social movements which flourished in the 1960s and the 1970s. The phenomena that may have occurred associated with decline, such as individualization, diversification of families, and gender equality, acquired positive values and contributed to social reforms. For example, an environment was created to enable people to live together with their partners and not give up on having children despite precarious economic situations. The contribution of feminist research on welfare states has been enormous in developing ideas and policies to institutionalize individualism and to internalize the cost of care, which has become a critical issue in aged societies.

I have heard of the coming back of the family in Europe in the context of the 'big society' or manifested in the increase in marriage rates in Scandinavian countries. People might argue that Europe is becoming closer to Asia but we should not forget that such changes in Europe are happening in societies that already have public support for the family to a certain extent. The coming back of the family is happening in societies where the family is not the only source of support for individuals. I would call this phenomenon 'individualistic familialization'.

Unfortunately, Japan provides an example of new values not working in a timely way. In the 1970s, Japan also had young people's movements seeking new values. However, the prosperity the country enjoyed for two decades after the decline of Europe, undermined social reforms simply because they were not needed, thanks to still favorable demographic and economic conditions. Instead, the government reinforced the social

system from the 1960s, calling it a 'Japanese model'. After the favorable conditions were lost, shifts in values and social reform became very difficult due to the skillfully consolidated social institutions. The country went through a period called 'the lost decades' and has become the world's most aged society (Ochiai 2014).

An aged society with modest economic growth is the promised place for human beings seeking a long life. Perhaps we would better call it a 'mature society', instead of 'aged society'. If the human race is to enjoy longevity in the millenniums to come, we need to reorganize the ways we manage our societies to enable people to enjoy their long lives. I appreciate that the Europeans have shown their creativity in producing new values and new institutions that would suit mature societies after the period of growth. Japan, as well as other countries outside Europe, has a lot to learn from the European experiences and achievement.

## References

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**Emiko Ochiai** is Professor of Sociology and Director of the Asian Research Center for the Intimate and Public Spheres, Kyoto University, Japan. She is a member of the Science Council of Japan.

**Address for correspondence:** Emiko Ochiai, Graduate School of Letters, Kyoto University, Yoshida-honmachi, Sakyo, Kyoto 606-8501, Japan.  
E-mail: [ochiai.emiko.3r@kyoto-u.ac.jp](mailto:ochiai.emiko.3r@kyoto-u.ac.jp)