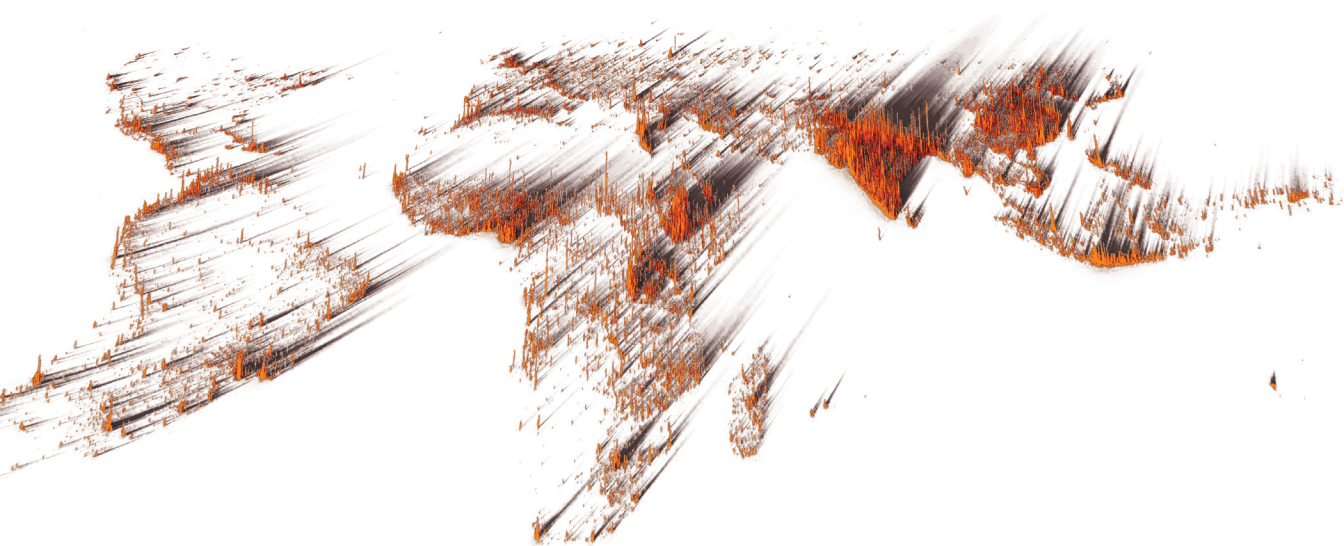


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Live Long & Prosper?

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Booms, Busts and the Future of Asia: Pre-Modern, Modern and Post-Modern Demography

PAUL MORLAND

Demography, the rise and fall and movement of populations, causes a certain unease for many people. On the one hand, they recognise that it is a powerful force which has shaped our human story until now and will continue to shape our common destiny. On the other hand, many get confused. Are there too many people in the world or too few? Are societies we once associated with large families (Italy, say, going back a while, or Mexico more recently) still having them? Most reasonably educated people have some sense of what the reverend Thomas Malthus argued at the end of the eighteenth and start of the nineteenth centuries and might have some notion of the so-called demographic transition but they perhaps confuse the two and struggle in either case to relate these to the current scene.

Much of this confusion, I think, is cleared away by envisaging history, or demographic history at least, in three phases, which I call for the sake of simplicity 'the pre-modern', 'the modern' and 'the post-modern'. I will set out what I mean by these and then explain why Asia, or at least East, South-East and

South Asia, can be used as a particularly stark demonstration of my thesis.

In the pre-modern era, the conditions described by Malthus broadly hold. The economy is overwhelmingly an agricultural one, its productive capacity grows only slowly and, given the prolific potential of humans to procreate, human numbers tend to press up against the frontiers of the possible. In some societies custom or practice (from at best partially-effective contraception to late marriage to infanticide) keep the population below this frontier. But where efforts to curb fertility are not made, or where they are largely ineffective (eighteenth-century China is often held up as an example), the vast majority of people live in dire need, at the edge of existence.

But just as Malthus was writing, we see, at least in his British homeland, a shift of the Malthusian pre-modern demographic dispensation to what we can call the modern. The dawning of the industrial age removed the Malthusian constraints, or at least raised them far faster than anyone of Malthus's generation had envisaged, even

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as that era unfolded before their eyes. Vast new continents fell under the plough or pasture for the service of European tables and stomachs, allowing first British and then more widely European populations to grow. Demographic modernity marks the shift into and through the developmental process. It is not a straight-forward or simple story, but essentially as countries and regions became more industrialised, more wealthy and more educated, first their mortality rates fell, creating fast and consistent population growth, then their fertility rates fell. Thus, population growth rose and fell. A society undergoing this process transitions from high fertility and high mortality with a small population, to high fertility and low mortality with a growing population, and finally to low fertility and low mortality with a large, stable population. That, at any rate, is the theory, and it fits the history of demographic change pretty well, despite its critics.

The key thing to grasp about demographic modernity is that it is a process, not a destination, and that it is a process in which the key drivers are material (more and better food, more salubrious housing, improved healthcare and public health). As a society is able to offer these improved conditions, its death rate falls first- people are better fed and generally looked after - and then the birth rate falls. The fall in the birth rate is associated with the general experience of lower infant mortality, with people needing to bear fewer children in order to meet their family size goals. It is also associated with a rise in the number of people living in cities where children can be more expensive to raise and take longer to be economically useful and people are more likely to be educated, particularly women, and thereby have both the ability to determine their own fertility and a desire to do so. Part of the decline in fertility rates is, of course, influenced by access to modern contraception, the willingness to use it, and its effectiveness.

Although income per capita is an imperfect measure for the various and complex factors

which determine progress through socio-economic development and the demographic transition, it turns out to be a reasonable proxy. I took a look at the relationship between a country's income and fertility rate, infant mortality, and life expectancy in 1970 and found moderate correlations: the higher the income, the lower the fertility rate and infant mortality, and the longer the life expectancy. But once a country reaches a given level of development, again using GDP per capita as a proxy, the relationship breaks down. Looking at the same set of countries in 2019, when just about all of them had materially higher per capita incomes than fifty years previously, we find that each correlation (income and fertility, income and infant mortality, and income and life expectancy) is weaker. This is particularly true for the total fertility rate, where between a third and 40% of the correlation has been lost. The point is underlined by comparing less wealthy and more wealthy countries at the same time. For the wealthiest quarter of countries, any relationship between income and fertility rates had just about broken down altogether.

What does this mean? Essentially that once we are through a process of development accompanied by demographic transition, the old material drivers of fertility rates (and other key demographic indicators) no longer apply. Whether you are in dirt-poor Chad (with a fertility rate of six children per woman) or emerging South Africa (with a fertility rate just above two children per woman) affects your fertility rate. South Africans also live nearly a decade longer than Chadians and experience less than half the infant mortality rate. But whether you are quite rich Poland or very rich Luxembourg, the precise level of GDP per capita or any other material measure makes little difference. The influence of material factors on demography has diminished. What matters for even modestly rich countries today - and indeed for more and more countries as global development proceeds - are a set of cultural attitudes and practices which have nothing to do with just how rich they are. I often cite Israel and

South Korea, both wealthy, urban, and highly educated, yet in the former, the average woman has more than four times as many children as in the latter. Whatever is going on, it can no longer be explained by measures of development. This is what is meant by demographic post-modernity.

Where is Asia?

The key thing to grasp about the schema suggested above is that different countries and regions pass through these phases at different points, so at any given time, some countries may still be in the pre-modern phase, while others have already reached the post-modern phase.

Where, then, is Asia today? In this article, I restrict myself to the parts of the continent classified by the UN as 'Eastern Asia', 'Southern Asia', and 'South-Eastern Asia'. I am therefore excluding Central Asia and West Asia / the Middle East. Despite this exclusion, the region under consideration is one of extraordinary diversity and variation according to just about every metric. It includes some of the world's least developed and most developed countries. For example, the GDP per capita in Japan is more than eighty times that in Afghanistan.

Adopting the schema above, we can simply categorise Asian countries by their level of development and map them onto what we would expect. Malthusian pre-modernity is over almost everywhere. Poor Afghanistan and Pakistan are clearly at the relatively early stages of their development. With per capita incomes of around US\$400 and US\$1,400 per annum, they are indisputably poor countries. Their fertility rate remains relatively high although it is clearly falling (about 4.5 for Afghanistan and 3.5 for Pakistan) and their life expectancy short although clearly rising (in the mid-sixties, so decades longer than it was in the middle of the twentieth century). Both countries have experienced a rapid rise in their populations. Note that the data for

Afghanistan generally predates the 2023 Taliban takeover, whose socially regressive policies may well reverse some of these trends. The challenge for the governments of these countries is to continue to improve healthcare and public health and through general human development, especially female education, and through the propagation of family planning to continue raising life expectancy and reducing fertility and population growth. Insofar as these governments, particularly that of Afghanistan, refuse to do so, we can expect to see arrested human demographic development.

Perhaps the above paragraph can be criticised for suggesting the imposition of Western values on non-Western countries, and such a criticism is not entirely undue. The desire that people live reasonably long and healthy lives should hopefully be universal. The desire for women to be free to control their own fertility – and to choose to do so by having on average families of moderate sizes – is more controversial. But an ideological commitment to a worldview in which a nation's population grows exponentially should bring with it a responsibility to explain how such a population can be provided for.

At the other end of the developmental spectrum, Japan and South Korea are well into what we call the post-modern phase of demography. They enjoy among the world's lowest infant mortality rates (around two per thousand) and longest life expectancies (into the mid-eighties) but also face persistently low fertility rates and ageing populations, with a declining working-age population. Their challenges are slightly different. Japan fell below replacement fertility earlier, around 1970, and for about 35 years has had a fertility rate below 1.5. It took South Korea until the early-to-mid 1980s to go sub-replacement but it plunged faster and further. Today, the South Korean fertility rate is just two-thirds of the level of Japan's. But in terms of the all-important support ratio (the balance of those in work to those of retirement age), Japan is suffering from the cumulative effects

of longer-lasting low fertility. In any case, both societies are enroute to a close-to 100% support ratio (i.e. one worker per retiree) and it is quite difficult to predict how any society is going to function at this level. A former Japanese prime minister reasonably warned of societal collapse.

The state of Japan's and Korea's demography is not, we would contend, simply a function of their advanced socio-economic condition. We have already cited Israel—a country that, per capita, is significantly wealthier than either and has a fertility rate much higher than both. One could also cite countries like the US and France, which, although suffering from too few births, have much healthier fertility rates than those in advanced East Asia. Just as the poorest countries in Asia are among the most lamentable cases of low human development outside sub-Saharan Africa, so the wealthiest Asian countries have the lowest fertility rates anywhere. Singapore and Hong Kong fare little better than Japan and South Korea. Culture is a slippery concept (it is far easier to correlate demography with material, financial, and economic factors), but something in Asian culture seems to discourage bringing children into the world when societies become wealthy.

The challenge for countries like Pakistan and Afghanistan is one of human development, and if their governments are serious about addressing it, they will find it relatively straightforward. Billions of dollars in external aid are available to support them. The challenges for countries like Japan and South Korea are far more complex. Getting fertility rates up, if that is what you want to do as a country, is no mean feat. Much thought and effort have been devoted to this, yet no tried-and-tested methods guarantee success.

The Fatal Case of the In-Betweens

By looking at Asia through the lens of the three-era schema outlined above, we

observe differing policy challenges across the region, though none that are surprising. As time has gone on, we seem to find that there is a tendency for countries to move through it faster, or, to put it differently, for the demography to race ahead of the socio-economic development.

When it comes to life expectancy and infant mortality, this is an indisputably good thing. Take India as a good example. Its per capita GDP is only around US\$2,500. Admittedly, this is in current US dollar exchange terms, which undoubtedly understates the actual living standards of the average Indian. In Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) terms (i.e. adjusting for the relative affordability of goods and services within India), it is approximately four times that amount. Still, for all its recent economic successes, India remains a relatively poor country. Yet since 1980, it has more than halved its life expectancy gap with the US, reducing it from two decades to less than one. The average Indian now lives to 68, the average American to 77. Infant mortality rates in India plunged from 43 to 23 per thousand in just the decade from 2012 to 2022.

But the problem for India is that fertility rates too are speeding downward. The average Indian woman now has barely two children and in many parts of the country it is much lower. The fertility rates in significant areas of the country such as Punjab, West Bengal, and Kerala are now similar to those in wealthy countries in Western Europe and North America.

These are relatively recent developments, so there are still plenty of young people and a burgeoning workforce in many Asian countries, India included. The worry is that if fertility rates are this low when socio-economic development, for all its advances in recent decades, is still only just seriously taking off, then just how low is fertility going to fall when these countries reach middle-income status. It is not just India. Thailand has a fertility rate that would put it among the poorer-performing European countries. "The phrase 'old before they are rich' has

gained traction in recent years, and we are witnessing it become a reality across much of Asia.

The challenge of pro-natal policies was once a luxury problem of the rich world. In the coming years and decades, it is going to become something that much of developing Asia needs to think about. ■

