

Revisiting the Relationship between Marriage and Childbearing in Low-Fertility East Asia: Evidence from Japan

In this study, Dr Fumiya Uchikoshi proposes and evaluates a new hypothesis for understanding “lowest-low” fertility in East Asia, focusing on the strong link between the desire for children and marrying. Recognizing that later and less marriage is the primary reason for low total fertility rates in East Asian societies, Dr Uchikoshi hypothesizes that weak or uncertain fertility desires are negatively associated with marriage via their influence on the relationship between marital desires and the transition to marriage. He evaluates these hypotheses by focusing on Japan, a society where parenthood plays an integral part in the “package” of normative family expectations and obligations that accompany marriage, especially for women. Using two sources of nationally representative data, Dr Uchikoshi describes the relationship between marriage desires and fertility desires among unmarried men and women. He also examines how fertility and marriage desires are associated with the transition to marriage among never-married men and women net of marriage desires. Results from discrete-time marriage hazard models reveal that stronger fertility desires were significantly associated with earlier transition to marriage net of marriage desires. He also finds that the relationship between marriage desires and the transition to marriage is weaker for women, suggesting that the high opportunity cost of marriage and parenthood among women suppresses the role of fertility desires in family formation. These results provide important insights into ongoing policy debates over declining fertility in East Asia, where scholars criticize pro-natalist policies targeting the childbearing of married couples as mistargeted.