



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 47 | Issue 4

Article 11

2020

Review of *The "Population Problem" in Pacific Asia* by Stuart Gietel-Basten

Soonhyung Kwon
University of Illinois

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Kwon, Soonhyung (2020) "Review of *The "Population Problem" in Pacific Asia* by Stuart Gietel-Basten," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 47: Iss. 4, Article 11.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.4482>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol47/iss4/11>

This Book Review is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

Stuart Gietel-Basten, *The "Population Problem" in Pacific Asia*. Oxford University Press (2019). 222 pages, \$55.00 (hardcover).

This book brings attention to population problems, such as low fertility, population decline, and aging, in Pacific Asian countries (mainly South Korea, China, Singapore, Taiwan, and Japan). Population stagnation and decline is one of the most critical challenges among Pacific Asian countries because population problems may worsen economic conditions and the balance of political power. Governments look for policies to solve the low rates of fertility and marriage, but often their efforts do not reflect realistic demands. With this concern in mind, Gietel-Basten suggests three significant limitations of current approaches to such population problems.

Firstly, Gietel-Basten points out the limitations of the Total Fertility Rate (TFR), which reflects temporary shifts in the context of childbearing. Alternatively, the Cohort Fertility Rate (CFR) is likely to measure more realistically the number of people in a country. Secondly, Pacific Asian countries create policies that may not boost fertility rates due to a significant difference between their governments' conceptions of fertility barriers and the actual fertility barriers their populations encounter. While governments in Pacific Asian countries formulate policies to increase the marriage rate as a starting point, actual fertility barriers are more associated with direct/indirect costs for childbearing, gender roles, and individualism. Thirdly, as a malfunctioning side effect of fertility and marriage policy, stigmatization exists against unmarried women, as well as a "discriminatory gaze" between the older and younger generations in social culture. Those of the older generation too often assume that younger people do not want to get married because of their selfish egoism.

Gietel-Basten's approach helps explain the low fertility rate in Pacific Asian countries. First of all, he uses a multidimensional lens to identify the population problems at the individual level, such as direct/indirect costs for childbearing, the malfunction of fertility policy, and cultural factors such as individualization, changing gender roles, and stigmatization against unmarried people and also between generations. Secondly, he focuses on examples of specific cultural factors in Pacific Asian countries. Each country has different levels of deep cultural values, such

as filial responsibility, familism, gender roles, and religions. For example, a cross-cultural research study cited here suggests that Japanese culture is more likely to be individualistic than Korean culture. This book highlights specific reasons why low fertility rates persist, taking into account subcultural nuances in Pacific Asian countries.

Although this book has valuable strengths, there is at least one weakness. This book does not sufficiently deal with the issues concerning the increased number of the elderly people in the population profile of Pacific Asian countries, at least not when compared to the attention given to low fertility among the young. Given the size of the “baby boom” generation birthed during the period of post-war industrialization, especially in South Korea, China, and Japan, a now-aging society is a major factor in population stagnation and decline.

Soonhyung Kwon
University of Illinois