

A Survey of the Poor in Asia I: The Case of Northeast Asia*

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Abstracts

This paper describes the poverty situation in Northeast Asia, mostly China, South Korea and Mongolia in various aspects. Even though there exists a wide-ranging diversity in the region, one might find the growth-and-redistribution policy, among other things, in the single most important factor to escape from the trap of the so-called 'vicious circle' of the poverty.

Keywords : Poverty Line

I . Introduction

1. This paper intends to describe the poverty situation in Asia. The first series of the paper covers mostly China, South Korea and Mongolia, based on the already existing researches, reports, government publications, official statistics, etc.. The second and third parts will cover the Southeast Asia and Central Asia, respectively, as will be forthcoming in the ensuing issues of this journal. The vastness of territories and immensity of population sizes in the subregion of

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the East and Northeast Asia defy any simple description of its economic and social situation. While Japan is one of the most developed industrialized nations in the world, Mongolia in transition is still trying to escape from the old regime of centrally planned economy. China, being the biggest nation in the world in terms of population, exhibits the most diverse facets of social and economic phenomena. While one can find an ultra modern urban sector in the eastern coastal area of China, there also exists primitively backward remote western mountainous area in the deep west. The Korean peninsular also shows two extremely contrasting pictures. Whereas Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea is still tightly closed, Republic of Korea is challenging the global economy with its openness.

2. While there exists a wide-ranging diversity in this subregion one might also find a common yardstick to apply in measuring its cultural aspect, namely Buddhism/Confucianism, which pervades invisibly or visibly in every sphere of life in the subregion. A strong egalitarian spirit, enforced by communal coherence, cooperative ethics and filial integrity in family also created industriousness and diligence, which resulted in economic growth and development in the subregion.

3. The overall initial conditions seem to be similar to each other in the subregion. After 1945, when Korea and China were liberated from the Japanese colonial rule, both countries undertook land reforms in one way or another. In cases of Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea and Peoples Republic of China, the land reforms were undertaken following the principle of socialism, while the Republic of Korea had undergone the reform along the principle of "land to tiller" based on market mechanism, which, however, eventually failed due to the Korean War and subsequent chronic inflation. In both cases, the landlord class was virtually abolished, and even though individual holdings were meager, the asset distribution

was more or less fairly accomplished. The birth of new republic in China in 1949 and the three-year scourge of the Korean War in subsequent years also almost completely equalized wealth and income distribution in both Chinese continent and Korean peninsular. Even though economic conditions both in China and Korean Peninsular then were extremely unfavourable to escape from the trap of so-called "vicious circle", at least an absolute equality in terms of economic opportunity had incidentally been realized. Even though the official national account was yet to be published, it is not difficult to conjecture that per capita GDP could have been far less than USD 100 during the 1950s at current prices.

4. The cultural heritage, which has been formed over millennia in the subregion's long history, Buddhism/Confucianism, in particular, has also contributed to shaping egalitarian societies and strengthening work ethics regardless of one's social status and wealth. Hard working has always been considered as manifestation of virtue and idleness vice. Even though there had been slight degree of gender discrimination, the entire domestic affairs, including economic management, was delegated to women. A distinct division of labour, in a sense, was fully utilized. High aspiration to pursue higher levels of education disregarding gender has always been built in the traditional ethics and culture and also in practice encouraged by family and community as well. Material affluence mattered little and poverty never became a major obstacle in one's education and training. Where there was will, there was an opportunity to be educated and trained.

II. Initial Conditions of Early Poverty

1. Promotion of industry and eradication of poverty have always

been two major economic goals of People's Republic of China since its founding in 1949. However, the People's Commune Movement and the Cultural Revolution frontally contradicted against these two major economic goals, resulting in drastically negative impact on the progress of national economy and eventually pushing the economy in a backward situation. As a result, by the time the economic reform was initiated in 1976, approximately 33 per cent of rural population, which accounts for about 250 million, was officially estimated to be poor(Wang, 2001).

2. The two historical events, the People's Commune System and the Cultural Revolution, had substantially reduced both land and labour productivity by discouraging people's willingness to participate in production and in efficiently allocating factors of production. Furthermore, mobilization of abundant domestic resource was also hampered by these two events, since ideological logic always superseded economic reasoning during this period of time. It was lost decades, only giving China a bitter lesson.

3. China has many faces of poverty, primarily because of vastness of the territory and diversity of the ethnical composition. There are also wide differences in income distributions and economic activities among different provinces. This necessarily entails different poverty pictures in different geographical areas. China is geographically situated in the vast continent connecting Asia and Europe, which contains not only majority ethnic group, Han, but also so-called "bordering barbarians" such as Mongolian, Uigur, Miao, Korean, etc.. Topographical and climate conditions also vary over the continent. From the permanently snow-covered roof of the world in west, fertile coastal area in east, and from the arid deserts in north to semi-tropical wetland in south coexist in China.

4. China has its own National Poverty Line, based in household expenditure surveys, which is far lower than one dollar a day in terms of purchasing power parity of 1985. China's National Poverty Line is estimated to be roughly 0.66 dollar a day per capita (Poverty Statistics, 2001). The China's National Poverty Line has annually updated, reflecting changes in cost of living and expenditure structure. According to the official statistics, the population under the National Poverty Line in 1978 occupied more than 30 per cent, which dropped down to 8.6 in 1990. In 1990, the share of population under one dollar per day per person, in contrast, turned out to be 31.5 per cent, which is more than three times of the official count. The National Poverty Line 1999 was 625 yuan per household per month. While the share of poor population under one dollar a day per person dropped from 31.5 per cent in 1990 to 16.5 per cent in 2000 slightly more than half of the 1990 level, the share under the National Poverty Line dropped from 8.6 per cent in 1990 to almost one third level of 3 per cent in 2000.

5. Causes of poverty in China differ from one area to another. Because of geographical diversity, natural endowment also varies from one area to another. Inclement natural condition may become one of the important causes of poverty in some area. Desert areas as well as mountainous areas do not allow the inhabitants to produce and accumulate enough to escape from their poverty traps without external assistance. The same is true with the areas, where chronic flood and landslide affect agricultural production and other economic activities. Benefits of civilization of the outside world did not reach remote desolated areas, and everlasting poverty could not have been paid a proper attention generations after generations.

6. The traditional belief in China that having as many male children as possible would be the best social insurance to be benefited

after reaching old age had thrust population growth even amid poverty. It is well known fact that when growth rate of population surpasses income growth rate, economic situation is inevitably deteriorated. This is also statistically corroborated by the fact that the highest population growth rate was usually realized in the poorest area in China. With extremely limited arable farmland and without any other means of creating income, ever-increasing population reduces the portion of harvest allotted to per capita. Malnutrition caused by limited supply of food furthermore decreases labour productivity in mostly agriculture based poor local economy.

7. Poor education is also another cause of poverty in China. If schooling systems and facilities do not follow a rapid increase in population because of remoteness of poor area location and lack of financial means to send children to schools, or because of utilization of child labour to compensate declining income instead of sending them to school, poverty would further be exacerbated, and the vicious circle of poverty would permanently continue. Again, this phenomenon is evidenced by statistics in China that show the lowest level of education is usually observed in the poorest area. Low enrolment level at primary education institutes would cause eventual high illiteracy rate of adults. It is also witnessed that the highest illiteracy rate is observed in the poorest area in China, while the lowest number of years of education among the poor group is also found there.

8. The poor in China is also characterized by high infant and maternal mortality rates, sometimes surpassing almost 20 times the level of developed regions. These high rates are as expected, originated from lack of basic health service and medical facilities in the poor areas.

9. Insufficient investment in social overhead capital such as communication and transportation networks, medical and educational facilities, and agricultural infrastructure is both causes and consequences of poverty in China. Local governments usually could not mobilize enough resources for investment in social overhead capital primarily due to the extremely low level income generated in the poor areas. And because of extremely limited and insufficient investment in social overhead capital, labour productivity could hardly be augmented and, therefore, poverty level could not be reduced. Again, it was witnessed that an everlasting vicious circle had been continuously repeated in the poor areas and permanent poverty pockets had to be created. Every statistic indicates that the lowest investment per capita was made in the poor areas in China.

10. Early conditions of the Korean economy in the post-Korean War period were also very unfavourable for growth and development. Per capita income was so low that there was no room at all to save, and, therefore, capital formation, absolutely needed for economic growth, could not be realized. Even a large part of domestic consumption was supported by foreign aid such as agricultural surplus product coming from the United States. Poverty was a pervasive and rampant phenomenon in the country. In particular, rural poverty was so severe that literally "grass root and tree bark" became substitute food for rural population. The urban picture was not any better. Large crowd of unemployed poor labourers even scavenged the rubbish dumps disposed of by the United Nations forces stationed then in Korea.

11. The land reform in the early 1950 and the Korean War of 1950~1953 substantially equalized income and wealth distribution in Korea. Under the land reform law, only one hectare of rice paddy and meagre equivalent piece of dry farm land were permitted to be held

by per household, and remaining land to be sold in instalment, to sharecroppers within the same limit per household. The price of land was designated by the authority according to the productivity of land under question. However, because of the hyper-inflation during the following period of the Korean War, the compensation paid to the former landlords was nominal, and the effect of the land reform was virtually free distribution of land to the former sharecroppers.

12. Even though the life expectancy of an average Korean male during this period was extremely low at 42 years, and sanitary conditions were very poor, literacy rate was high, and zeal for education also advanced. Even during this tragically poor period, human capital was steadily being accumulated in Korea. Furthermore, the Korean War deeply inspired the Korean populace with socialistic egalitarian work ethics and paralleling income distribution. A wide gap in income and wealth distribution was not emotionally tolerated in Korean society from the very beginning, and a major portion of basic industries, such as electricity generation, coal mining, transportation, steel production, tobacco manufacturing, etc. were nationally held in the hand of the government.

13. Severe coldness and inclement weather during the long months of winter in Korea further exacerbated the economic situation of the rural poor to survive, and the difference between urban and rural economic conditions induced a large influx of rural migration into urban sectors, causing excessively over-swollen urbanization in Korea during the two decades 1950's and 1960's. While raising rural agricultural labour productivity, the migration played an important role of labour supply sources for newly developing industrial sectors in urban areas in Korea.

14. As in Japan, there has not been an official National Poverty

Line in Korea until the most recent year. An official guideline by which the livelihood protection subsidy was doled out by the government could have served as National Poverty Line. However, the guideline did not cover all households or population belonging under that line, because the conditions imposed upon to household in order to be a beneficiary of the subsidy were restrictive and sometime exclusive. Accordingly, the mere number of households under the line established by the subsidy scheme could not be counted as poverty head count in Korea. Some study was undertaken by one of national research organizations to establish an expenditure basket for the poor. But it was also one-time-point study, which could not be used to generate a time-series poverty statistics(Suh *et al.*, 1981; Yoon, 1994).

15. Estimations of income thresholds in terms of relative poverty, which was based on the so-called "Leiden Method" have been attempted by researchers in academia in Korea. The lines estimated were uniformly far higher than the national guidelines and, therefore, the poverty incidence based on these lines are also far greater than official beneficiaries of the livelihood protection subsidy. However, there is a distinct trend of declining share and number of poor population over time by these relative poverty thresholds in Korea. It is noteworthy that the declining trend was temporarily reversed during the financial crisis period of 1997~1999 in Korea.

16. Mongolia has experienced a transition from a centrally planned socialist regime to a market oriented economy in 1990s, and during the transition state controlled prices were changed in fluctuating prices according to market forces, trade was liberalized, exchange rate became flexible, banking and financial sectors were also drastically restructured, and state firms were privatised. Social instability created during the transition caused economic imbalance between rural and urban sectors, and led a substantial migration into urban sectors, which again worsened poverty of the nation.

III. Growth and Inequality in the Northeast Asia

1. The records of economic growth both in China and Republic of Korea during the last three decades in the 20th century were very impressive. While the Republic of Korea began to show its momentum of growth from the early 1970's, People's Republic of China also started to spurt in its economic awakening after the Deng's economic reform and liberalization in the late 1970's. It is generally accepted that both economies built their momentum of economic growth by initiating economic liberalization. In case of the Republic of Korea, the highest growth rate, almost reaching 10 per cent per annum, was recorded in the late 1980 and early 1990, while in case of PRC the rate was attained during 1990's.

2. Even though it is strongly argued that economic growth is necessary but not sufficient condition for poverty eradication, a statistical evidence exhibits clearly that a distinct negative correlation, or an inverse trend, is found between per capita income and poverty incidence(Ravalion and Chen, 1997). Economic growth in both cases of PRC and Republic of Korea has definitely contributed to the poverty reduction, in match with the evidences shown by international statistical comparisons.

3. It is a well-established fact that the economic growth in China has highly been generated by physical capital input, labour and human capital accumulation measured in terms of years of education. Particularly, the pre-reform growth was dominantly achieved by human capital investment. Primary and secondary education not only contributed to growth but also to poverty reduction through economic growth in China(Wang and Yao, 2001).

4. Economic liberalization and subsequent marketization of the Chinese economy after the reform substantially contributed to worsening of income distribution in China. In particular, the regional disparity in economic development and industrialization extensively resulted in widening gaps between different provincial income levels. Rapidly developing eastern coastal provinces could enjoy a high income level, while remote mountainous or desert provinces in the west or north-west were left far behind. The recent picture of worsening income distributions is reflected both in Gini coefficients and shares of the poorest quintile in national income or consumption. The Gini coefficient in 1990 recorded 34.6. It continuously increased annually up to 41.5 in 1996, and slightly declined to 40.3 in 1998, somewhat reversing the trend. The share of the poorest quintile in national income or consumption also consistently show the same picture. Beginning from 7.0 in 1990, it declined to 5.5 in 1995, but slightly increased in 5.9, again reversing the trend.

5. Even though income distribution over the period of 1990~1999 slightly deteriorated in China, the trickling-down effect was clearly visible in terms of poverty reduction. The high growth rate definitely contributed to reducing both share and number of poor population in China. The poverty reduction during this period could clearly be witnessed by employing any poverty line; national poverty line, 0.5 dollar-a-day line, 0.75 dollar-a-day line, etc.. Using the national poverty line, the poverty incidence in 1978, which recorded 30.7 per cent dropped to 10.1 per cent in 1990, and again far down to 3 per cent in 2000. In terms of one dollar a day line, the poverty incidence in 1990, which recorded 31.5 per cent dropped to 16.5 per cent in 2000. Using the highest line, 2 dollar a day, the poverty incidence also dropped from 78.8 per cent in 1990 to 60.6 per cent in 1999(Poverty Statistics, 2001).

6. Subdivision of the period 1990~1999 gives better pictures of poverty reduction in China. The first three years of 1990~1993 do not show a significant poverty reduction, primarily because of worsening income distribution. However, using a higher poverty line, the situation seems to be better off. This is again consistent with worsening income distribution in this period in China. The period between 1993~1996 experienced a significant poverty reduction in China, particularly rural poverty. Since the government doubled the official purchasing price of grain in this period, the benefit mostly was given to small scale and poor grain producing farm households. However, poverty reduction trend was again reversed during the 1998~1999 period, because of financial crisis and subsequent general economic stagnation in East Asian countries during the same period. Republic of Korea, Thailand, Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia, which were important trading partner, suffered from the crisis, and it also indirectly affected Chinese economy. In most of these countries, poverty incidence increased during these years.

7. In spite of worsening of income distribution during the most recent decade in China due to economic liberalization and marketization substantial poverty reduction has been achieved and has helped in narrowing the disparity between rural and urban sectors in particular. However, the cumulative income growth during the same period gave more benefit to higher income brackets than lower, even though absolute number and share of poor population were substantially diminished(Chen and Wang, 2001).

8. Since China does not publish an official National Poverty Line for urban sectors, it is almost impossible to conjecture the poverty situation in the Chinese urban sectors. It seems there is a growing recognition that an analysis should be made for poverty in urban

sectors among the interested scholars and officials, and recently periodic urban household expenditure surveys have been initiated by the National Bureau of Statistics, PRC.

9. Rampant inflation, reduction of per capita GDP, large-scale unemployment decreasing magnitude of trade and extremely low investment in early 1990's after the collapse of COMECON and the Soviet system in Mongolia inevitably generated extensive poverty initially. However, with assistance from international organizations and adoption of various macroeconomic policies, the Mongolian economy started to show its recovery from the mid-1990's. The recovery did not last long. The Asian crisis and natural disaster inflicted severe difficulties on the Mongolian economy and pro-poor economic measures could not be taken. In consequence, there has not been any substantial reduction in poverty. The latest available figure in 1998 shows about 36 percent of poverty incidence under the Mongolian national poverty line(Government of Mongolia, 2001).

IV. Growth, Equality and Poverty Reduction Mechanism in the Northeast Asia

1. China's comprehensive rural poverty reduction strategies may conveniently be divided into three stages, namely the first stage 1978~1985, when structural reform was undertaken, the second stage 1986~1993, when large-scale government poverty reduction interventions were made in a nation-wide scale, and the third stage 1994~2000, when an attack was officially launched to alleviate poverty in hard-core sectors.

2. The economic growth and subsequent poverty reduction in the

first stage, 1978~1985 were basically thrusted by a series of economic structural reforms undertaken during this period. First, the collective farming system under People's Commune was completely replaced by the so-called Household Contract Responsibility System, under which a farm household was allowed to rent farmland for period of 50 years (initially it was a shorter period) and cultivated under its responsibility. The renewed system fundamentally increased productivities of almost every crop and eventually raised farm household income substantially more than doubling the pre-reform level(Chen and Wang, 2001).

3. With the new establishment of the household contract responsibility system in rural sector, one of the most important developments was the re-establishment of markets for agricultural product, which revived market mechanism in determining agricultural product prices and supply of and demand for the product. Competition in the markets also induced productivity increase and eventually farm investment for land improvement. Establishment of land rights even in a form of tenure also resulted in more competitive and full utilization of farmland. With a paralleling industrialization in urban sectors, large emigration from rural sectors was economically encouraged, and again it contributed to increase in per capita agricultural productivity. Government, also considering worsening terms of trade between rural and urban sectors, raised the government purchasing prices of agricultural product. Farmers adjusting to new market mechanism changed their crops from low value-added to high value-added product.

4. The second stage rural poverty reduction strategies during the period of 1986~1993 primarily focused on elimination of geographical economic gaps. Even though a rapid reduction of poverty incidence

was achieved by a series of economic reforms, during the first stage, by eliminating the marginal poor who bordered near the National Poverty Line, there still remains a large portion of rural population in various provinces, particularly due to geographical, ethnical and social factors. Economic reforms definitely contributed to reduction of rural poverty incidence, but did not provide economic opportunity evenly all over the country, because of different geographical conditions existing among different poverty groups.

5. Since geographically even rural development could not be materialized by implementing only a series of institutional economic reforms, the government decided to intervene directly into poverty alleviation by establishing a new government ministerial branch, the State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development in 1986. With the establishment of the State Council Leading Group, the replicated organizations were also established at provincial, prefecture and county level, making the institute a four-tier structured organization. It had a strong support from the 4th Session of the 6th National People's Congress, which incorporated "poverty alleviation" into the 7th Five-year Plan(1986~1990).

6. With the principle of development led by self-help, governments of all levels provided poverty funds to be invested in industrial system projects, through which a large scale rural employment could be created. Since the rural sectors, where the institutional economic reforms were partially or minimally effective, should be approached with additional policies, with less emphasis on farming, overall industrialization schemes with government provided funds and locally recruited labour supply were logical strategies to be adopted in China.

7. The third stage of 1994~2000, which concentrated on targeted poverty groups, approached poor groups with hard natural

conditions, deficient social services and no infrastructure, mostly located in the northwestern plateau, the southwestern mountainous area with lack of arable land and permanently snow-covered Tibetan area. There were officially 592 counties in 1994, Nationally Designated Poor Counties(NDPC's), as targeted poverty groups in China. Out of these 592 NDPC's 82 per cent were situated in central and western area of China, which indicates the existing wide disparity among different geographical areas.

8. Since both of institutional reform in the first stage and development driven strategies in the second stage did not fully work in reducing the so-called hard core poverty in China, the third stage strategies should be more an individual project based approach designed in response to specific situations of NDPC's in China. In accordance, the central government of China designed and implemented the so called 8.7 Poverty Reduction Plan, with definite objectives, targets and policy-measures in the time framework of 1994 ~ 2000(Wang, 2001).

9. The case of Republic of Korea is somewhat different from PRC. Neither institutional economic reforms from Collective Communes to Household Contract Responsibility System nor focussing on target poverty groups were needed in the process of implementation of poverty reduction strategies in Republic of Korea. Ethnical homogeneity and geographical uniformity were always there in Korea. Even though the nation was uniformly poor across all the sectors of economy and all the strata of society in the beginning 1960s, there was no permanently poor pocket area in the country, ethnically or geographically.

10. As it is observed, income distribution in Korea has not shown any distinct trend except the Gini coefficients fluctuating within a

narrow band of 0.27~0.32, exhibiting the relatively egalitarian distribution compared to other countries in the region. However, the growth rates during the same period of three decades marked one of the highest records in the region. Without worsening income distribution, the high growth rates should directly be linked to reduction of poverty incidence, and this is exactly the case in Korea.

11. With initial conditions of high literacy rate, strong women's participation and highly equal wealth distribution after the Land Reform in 1950 and the subsequent Korea War of 1950~1953, the economic growth at rates of 7~10 per cent per annum enhanced the overall level of living conditions of the country and ultimately played a very important role of reducing poverty incidence in Korea.

12. Even though Republic of Korea Government had not published an official National Poverty Line until 2001, except piecemeal guidelines for livelihood protection subsidy eligibility for the poor, various poverty lines estimates show clearly a picture of reduced poverty incidence over the period of last two decades, except recent few years when the economy suffered from Asian financial crisis.

13. Even though the first two five-year Economic Development plan(1962~1971) in Republic of Korea did not bring a remarkable growth performance, the two plans laid a strong foundation in inviting foreign capital investment in the economy, which undoubtedly, with a high productivity, contributed to the rapid economic growth during the subsequent two decades. Transparency and accountability in the process of managing foreign capital investment during this period of the five-year economic plans were very important in materializing a positive connection between foreign capital and domestic economic growth.

14. Once growth momentum was initiated, various measures to boost domestic savings resulted in successful mobilization of resources also from national sources both home and abroad. Newly generated high income classes were progressively highly taxed, income tax rates reaching 77 per cent 1976~1980, which effectively contributed to domestic resource mobilization for economic growth and to equalizing disposable income distribution. It is reported that the top 10 percentile income bracket paid almost 70 per cent of income tax in Korea in 1998(Hyun, 1999). The Gini coefficient for tax-payment distribution was estimated to be 0.686 in the same year in Korea(Yoon, 2001).

15. In addition to the growth-and-redistribution-oriented policy, the government-supported civilian movement, called Saemaul-Undong, was initiated in 1970 in a nation-wide scale. The movement was basically launched with a strong principle of self-help to improve economic foundation and living environment, and to strengthen competition in raising productivity. The impact of the Saemaul-Undong Movement was clearly shown in the beginning in rural sectors where basic infrastructure was built and in the later period, also in urban sectors. Farm income, which had chronically been lower than urban income surpassed the urban income level in 1974 with help of the Saemaul-Undong Movement.

16. The various elasticity of welfare expenditure over economic growth in Korea uniformly and consistently indicates that not only growth but also welfare-oriented policies definitely contributed to poverty reduction during the past three decades. It is very important to realize that in order to reduce poverty a strong will and intention should always be reflected in policy design and implementation process along with good governance, transparency and accountability of decision-makers, as exemplified in the cases of China and Korea.

17. The Mongolian government, despite its unfavourable economic situation, is fully committed to launching and implementing various poverty reduction measures in cooperation with various international organizations.

18. It is very important to realize that poverty reduction in China, which occupies almost one fifth of the world population, is a key to reduce the poverty incidence in Asia as well as in the world. The past performance of China in poverty reduction substantially contributed to reshaping the poverty picture in the world and in Asia (Sala-i-Martin, 2002).

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