

Late marriage and low fertility in Singapore: the limits of policy ¹

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The Singapore context

Singapore, though located in Southeast Asia, can appropriately be compared with the East Asian low fertility countries – Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, though its special circumstances need to be borne in mind in doing so. One of these is its ethnic mix. Singapore's population of 5.1 million in 2010 was made up of 3.2 million citizens, 541,000 permanent residents (PRs), and 1.3 million non-residents. This last group is, in turn, divided into different components – broadly, skilled workers and labour migrants. The PRs and non-residents grew much more rapidly than the citizen population over the first decade of the 21st century (despite the granting of citizenship to many PRs), and increased their combined share of the population from 13.9% in 1990 and 25.9% in 2000 to 36.4% in 2010.

The fertility data for Singapore are provided for the resident population – i.e. the citizens and permanent residents. Ethnic composition is important in Singapore, and although not stated officially, the government considers it of basic importance to maintain roughly the proportions of 75% Chinese, 15% Malay, 8% Indian, and 2% “other” among its resident population. Disquiet is expressed about even small changes in these proportions. Although differential fertility tends to make for increases in the Malay proportion, migration intake (with many Chinese and Indians moving in to Singapore) tends to keep the proportions in balance. When the 2010 census revealed that the Indian proportion had risen from 7.9% in 2000 to 9.2% in 2010, and the Malay proportion had declined from 13.9% to 13.4% over the same period, this led to expressions of concern by Malay community groups.

Trends in fertility, then, need to be examined separately for the different ethnic groups. Figure 1 shows trends in fertility since 1970. Interpreting these trends in comparison with low-fertility East Asian countries raises some interesting observations. First, Singapore's fertility is in the same league as these countries, though it has never gone as low as recent figures for Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea. Bearing in mind, however, that Singapore is a city-state, comparisons with other cities in the region are appropriate. When this is done, we find that Singapore's fertility rate is

approximately 15% to 50% higher than in cities including Tokyo, Seoul, Busan, Shanghai, Beijing, Taipei, and Hong Kong (Jones, 2009, Table 2)². We will later examine possible reasons for this. There may be some elements of policy in Singapore that are partly responsible for these differences.

Second, fertility differs substantially among the different ethnic groups in Singapore. Malay fertility is substantially higher, and Chinese fertility lower, than the average. However, given the three fourths weighting of Chinese in the resident population, the overall fertility level is heavily influenced by the fertility of Chinese Singaporeans (whose TFR fell to a historic low of 1.08 in 2009). Malay fertility rose substantially for some time after being the first Muslim population in the world to reach replacement level fertility in 1976³, but it has recently fallen sharply to reach its 2009 TFR level of 1.8.

TRENDS IN SINGLEHOOD

Since the present paper is focusing on Singapore as a very low fertility country, the discussion here will place Singapore in the context of the other countries of the region where fertility is very low - Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Thailand and Hong Kong. These are the countries where late marriage and non-marriage is very high, and tending to rise further; proportions remaining “effectively single” in their 30s are higher than in the late marrying countries of Europe (Jones, 2007), which probably means they are the highest in the world⁴. The trends for many of these countries are shown in Jones and Gubhaju (2009) and their effects on singlehood rates for people in their late 30s are also summarized in Figure 2. The most dramatic change in recent times is among the younger marriage-age cohorts in South Korea. Although for the cohort aged 35-39 in 2005, only 8 per cent of South Korean women remained single, far below the figures for Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong (18, 16, and 20 per cent respectively), for the cohort aged 25-29, the South Korean percentage single (59 per cent) was just as high as in Japan and Taiwan. The factors making for this remarkable rise in South Korea have been discussed in detail in Jones and Gubhaju (2009).

It should be mentioned that in China, levels

of singlehood have not risen significantly over recent decades. Almost all women have married by the time they reach 30 (for more detailed discussion, see Jones, 2007: 466-7). In terms of the proportion of women remaining single in their early 30s, China is an oddity compared to the other countries, though given its dominance of the region's population, perhaps we should say that all the other countries are odd in not mirroring the Chinese situation.

Singlehood levels for women and men in their 30s in Singapore, while high, are distinctive in showing little increase since 1990, and indeed none when standardized by education. It is important to investigate why this might have been so.

FACTORS INFLUENCING MARRIAGE AND MARITAL FERTILITY

In Singapore, like other East Asian countries, childbearing outside marriage is extremely rare (less than 2 per cent of births). Therefore the factors accounting for low fertility can usefully be divided into those resulting in delayed or non-marriage, and those resulting in low fertility within marriage. In the case of Singapore, Yap (2008) estimates that declines in proportions married were responsible for more than a third of the decline to ultra-low levels of fertility in the 2000-2005 period.

Factors influencing marriage

We will summarize very briefly some of the factors thought by various scholars (e.g. Retherford, Ogawa and Matsukura, 2001; Tsuya and Bumpass (eds), 2004; Ono, 2003; Jones, 2007; Eun, 2007; Raymo and Iwasawa, 2005; Retherford and Ogawa, 2006; Boling, 2008; Bumpass et al., 2009; Jones and Gubhaju, 2009) to underlie the high levels of singlehood in the region, before moving to a more detailed discussion of the Singapore situation.

Basically, these authors have argued that the trends are linked to fundamental changes in demographic structure, economy and society that have affected marriage markets and the perceived costs and benefits of marriage and its normal sequel, childbearing. The limited survey information available in the region suggests that most women desire to marry (Quah, 1998, Table 3.5; Quah, 1999; Chan, 2002; Raymo and Iwasawa, 2008; MCYS, 2004, Chapter 2)⁵, but many factors weaken the intensity of this general desire to marry, or hinder its realization.

One important factor has been the expansion of education, more rapid in the case of females than of males. Educational expansion and trends

in labour markets have opened up employment possibilities for women, widened their aspirations and freed many from financial independence on men. Delayed marriage has particularly characterized the growing group of women with tertiary education. However, in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, upsurge in non-marriage since 2000 has occurred in all educational groups (Jones and Gubhaju, 2009). Another factor has been increasing uncertainty in the labour market, which has perhaps been most marked in Japan with the demise of the firm-based lifetime employment system, but has also been very important in Korea since the economic crisis of 1997-8, and is felt in varying degrees throughout the region. As a result, men, and couples in serious relationships, are reluctant to marry until they can build up some capital, and women are increasingly cautious about marrying a man with poor earnings prospects. Rising divorce rates in many countries of the region are probably leading to increasing caution in choosing a marriage partner.

Most of these countries are basically urban societies, facing issues of work pressures, including very long hours of work, housing affordability, and reluctance to live with (and later, care for) parents in law. They are also increasingly sexually permissive societies, meaning that access to sex outside of marriage is easier to come by. The "line of least resistance" for many in such settings may be not to go through the marriage search process, or not to go through it again if one serious relationship has failed.

To what extent do people avoid marriage because they want to avoid having children? It is likely that in the East Asian context, in which strong pressure is placed on those who marry to have a child quickly, the most straightforward way to avoid having children is not to marry (Jones, 2004: 17; see also Raymo, 2003). Therefore factors relating to reluctance to begin raising a family (to be discussed later in the paper) also work against marriage.

Understanding singlehood in Singapore

Singlehood in Singapore is still on the rise, if measured by the proportion of females single at ages in their 20s. However, if measured by the proportion of females single in 5-year age groups in the 30s and 40s (see Figure 2), or by the singulate mean age at marriage, there has been little increase in singlehood since around 1990. Indeed, when controlled by education, prevalence of singlehood for women has remained steady at all ages above 30 since 2000 (see Table 1; also Jones, 2004, Table 1). When compared with trends in other East Asian

countries, levels of singlehood in Singapore, while high, are distinctive in showing no increase. The striking differences between trends in Singapore and other low fertility countries of East Asia are apparent in Figure 2.

Trends in age-specific marriage rates show more clearly what has been happening in Singapore (Figure 3). For both males and females, marriage rates have declined at ages 20-24 and 25-29, indicating delays in marriage, but have increased somewhat at ages above 30. The “stock” of unmarried Singaporeans aged in their 30s and 40s has grown substantially because of the decline in marriage rates at the younger ages, but higher marriage rates than previously at ages above 30 are limiting the further growth of this “stock”.

A study by the author and colleagues (Jones et al., forthcoming) has investigated both the policy context of non-marriage and the circumstances and attitudes of unmarried Singaporeans in their 30s and 40s. It argues that Singapore’s institutional context and policy approaches may have played a role in dampening the rise in singlehood. There are two policy areas in which the government clearly promotes marriage in ways other East Asian countries do not: housing policy and matchmaking efforts.

In Singapore, 85% of the population lives in government-provided housing (Housing and Development Board (HDB) high-rise apartments, generally between 12 and 40 storeys), and housing policy is directed towards maintaining a stable society based on home-owning families as conventionally defined (Chua 1995; Teo 2010). Singlehood is discouraged by the rules of eligibility for HDB housing; singles must be over the age of 35 to be eligible to purchase this subsidized form of housing. Various inducements are offered to those planning to marry to get into the waiting list. Under the Fiancee/Fiancee Scheme, courting couples who intend to marry may apply for a flat. This helps to shorten waiting time for flats and if couples plan ahead the flat could be ready when they are ready to move in, as they only need to produce their marriage certificate within three months of getting the keys to their flat⁶. They are also allowed to buy a HDB flat from the resale market (which involves a mark-up in price but allows for flexibility in timing). First-time HDB flat buyers are also allowed to rent flats while waiting for their own flats to be built, so that young couples will not have to delay their marriage until the completion of the building of their flats (Wong and Yeoh, 2003:18).

A mild concession is made to the possibility of Western-type patterns of shared housing by singles under the Joint Singles Scheme, whereby a

flat can be bought jointly by two to four single Singaporean citizens from the open market. However, this is only available to the unmarried or divorcees if they are over the age of 35.

Overall, then the Singapore government’s housing policies are definitely oriented towards encouragement of marriage, and of earlier rather than later marriage.

Turning from housing policy to the direct involvement of the government in match-making, the Singapore government began this involvement in 1984 with the formation of the Social Development Unit (SDU) to assist partnering among university graduates. Subsequently, a SDS (Social Development Service) was formed to assist those with lower educational qualifications (Quah, 2003: 21-23). In 2009 the two were merged to form the Social Development Network (SDN) in a bid to give members “a wider pool of singles to choose from” (Straits Times, 29/1/2009).

The efforts of the SDU tended to be scoffed at internationally; locally, there was a certain stigma about being known to be seeking a partner through the government’s matchmaking efforts. However, it is widely accepted in Singapore that the demise of earlier traditions of matchmaking, combined with long working hours and limited opportunities to socialize, left a void in possibilities of finding a suitable partner. Similar concerns are frequently expressed in Japan (Retherford, Ogawa and Matsukura, 2001: 87-8). The Singapore government’s matchmaking efforts have become more sophisticated over time. There is now a strong emphasis on the internet by the SDN, whose website “Love Byte. A world of possibilities. Just a click away” lists four kinds of dating services provided by the government agency. In the same website, the Social Development Unit announces new initiatives to raise standards in the local dating industry. An accreditation scheme has been introduced and seed funding provided to qualifying companies to upgrade and professionalize themselves.

It is very hard to assess the impact of the government’s matchmaking efforts. Official reports list the number of couples who have “tied the knot” after being engaged in SDU activities. In 2003, for example, some 4,050 graduates registered with the SDU married, or 15 per cent of its total membership of about 26,000 (Saw, 2005: 147). These figures cannot address the counterfactual – how many of these people would have married anyway, in the absence of the government’s programs? Nevertheless, the fact remains that marriage trends in Singapore have diverged from those in most other countries of the region, which certainly leaves open the possibility that

government housing programs, matchmaking programs and other elements of family policy may have played a role.

Findings from interviews with Chinese Singaporeans

Despite the “stalling” of the increase in singlehood since 1990, Singapore has one of the highest singlehood rates in East and Southeast Asia. The trend of singlehood among Chinese Singaporeans follows the general trend of singlehood in Singapore, but the percentage single among ethnic Chinese (see Tables 2 and 3) is even higher than for the population of Singapore as a whole. Singlehood among Chinese Singaporeans has still been on the rise since 1990, if measured by the proportion of females single in 5-year age groups in the 30s and 40s and the proportion of males single in 5-year age groups at ages 40-49.

We have conducted a qualitative study to better understand why high proportions of Chinese Singaporean men and women remain single in their 30s and 40s and the policy issues that flow from this, drawing upon in-depth interviews and focus group discussions conducted with never-married ethnic Chinese between the ages of 30 and 44 from a broad range of socioeconomic and educational backgrounds (Jones, Zhang and Chia, forthcoming). The section below will draw on some findings from in-depth interviews with 23 never-married ethnic Chinese (11 women and 12 men), 17 of them with tertiary education but earning a wide range of incomes, though most respondents (16 out of 23) earned between S\$2,000 and S\$5,000 a month⁷. Co-residence with parents is the prevailing living arrangement of unmarried singles in Singapore; among the 23 respondents, 21 lived in their parents' houses while two respondents lived in their siblings' houses. Twenty respondents had had at least one serious relationship with the opposite sex, while three respondents had never been in any serious relationship. As for their current relationship statuses, four were in a serious relationship at the time of interview, three were in casual and multiple dating relationships, and the remaining 16 were not in any relationship (one was actively looking for a marriage partner, two were actively looking for dating partners, while the majority were not actively looking). Among the 23 respondents, only three intended to get married in the near future.

Our study suggests that one possible explanation for later and less marriage in Singapore is changing attitudes about the desirability of marriage, linked with the increasing social acceptability of premarital sex and cohabitation. This is not surprising, given the evidence from other

countries in the region of an increase both in premarital sexual activity and in cohabitation among the rising proportions who are single at ages well beyond traditional ages at marriage. There is ample evidence that sexual activity among singles is increasing in the region (for Japan, see Retherford, Ogawa and Matsukura, 2001: 88-91). As far as cohabitation is concerned, second demographic transition proponents argue that increasing cohabitation could be expected in situations where secularism and individualism is increasing. This is indeed happening in Japan (Retherford, Ogawa and Matsukura, 2001; Raymo, Iwasawa and Bumpass, 2008; Tsuya, 2006; Lesthaeghe, 2010, Table 3 and 4) and Taiwan (Lesthaeghe, 2010, Table 5). In Japan and Korea a significantly higher proportion of young people accept cohabiting relationships than is the case for older people.

Cohabitation is not a traditional practice in Singapore, and information about cohabitation among never-married Singaporean adults is limited. Nevertheless, our study suggests that cohabitation as a new form of couple relationship is acceptable to many singles and may not be rare in practice, especially for male respondents. Fifteen out of the 23 respondents stated that cohabitation is acceptable to them, some of them mentioning that cohabitation has some benefits in terms of providing couples with a good chance to establish emotional bonds, letting them see how it works to live together before getting married, and at the same time still allow each partner to have plenty of freedom. In fact, several of our respondents reported that they had cohabitated with their partners before or were cohabitating with them at the time of interview.

Changing attitudes towards the desirability of marriage

Unlike Japan, where many women seem to have lost faith in marriage, the national survey data in Singapore show a general desire to marry (Chan, 2002; MCYS, 2009). For instance, 85 per cent of singles surveyed in the Study on Marriage and Parenthood 2007 indicated an intention to get married (MCYS, 2009). This proportion is higher than the response in 2004 when a similar survey was conducted, which suggests there is a good deal of involuntary singlehood in Singapore. Our preliminary findings, that marriage was still considered as a desirable state by the majority of respondents, are consistent with the findings of these earlier surveys. However, our interviews with eight of the respondents suggest an increasing ambivalence towards the desirability of marriage among a number of Singaporean singles, especially single women over the average marriage

age. Two more respondents appeared to have completely lost faith in marriage. The rising divorce rates in Singapore⁸ seem to have discouraged some singles from getting married to avoid suffering from marital break-ups. Seven respondents in our study stated that many of their married friends or relatives have serious marital problems and are trapped in unhappy marriages or are divorced, which weakens their desire to marry.

The economics of marriage

The perceived costs associated with marriage, such as housing and the wedding ceremony itself affect singles' attitudes to marriage. A number of our respondents mentioned that the rising cost of the marriage ceremony, housing and raising children has become a deterrent for Singaporean singles to get married. Quah (2003) suggests that the traditional roles of men as providers tend to keep an increasing number of single men busy up to their mid-thirties to equip themselves before getting married. Our study finds that economic stability is considered one precondition of marriage, especially for single men, and that traditional gender role expectations of men as providers and women as housekeepers tend to cause single women to be increasingly cautious about marrying a man with poor earnings prospects.

Homogamy (marriage market rigidities)

In Singapore, there is a "marriage squeeze" for less educated men as well as for educated women, resulting from educational trends (sharp increases in the number of young women completing upper secondary and tertiary education) and conventions about age differences between spouses and appropriate marital partners. Chinese men tend to marry a woman with a lower education and lower income than themselves while tertiary educated women are reluctant to marry 'downwards'. Thus we observe high proportions remaining single among tertiary educated females and lesser educated males (see Table 1).

Koh (2011) argues that hypergamy has been fading over time in Singapore. Our interviews throw some doubt on this conclusion. Three successful female respondents stated frankly that they wanted to marry a man of equal or better socio-economic status, for various reasons. For instance, they want to maintain their life quality after marriage; or they don't want their partners to feel too much pressure and eventually lose their masculinity; or they don't want to give away their assets if their marriages fail. Due to the difficulty of finding a suitable local mate, more Singaporean men are marrying foreign wives (Jones and Shen, 2008).

Many Singaporean men perceive the main cause of delayed marriage among Singaporean women to be that they are picky and demanding in finding a suitable partner⁹.

Individualism and focus on career

Our study suggests that freedom and independence present an attractive alternative to marriage to many single Chinese Singaporeans. They are also more likely to give priority to career advancement, financial stability and material success than to marriage and procreation. Marriage is only considered after a stable career has been established. This is consistent with the findings of a previous survey (MCYS, 2009) and the study of Koh, 2011.

A competitive global economy demands long working hours. Singles in this global city face issues of work pressures including very long hours of work. Almost all the respondents mentioned that they had dedicated themselves to their careers. They very often work overtime and sometimes had to take work home to do outside office hours. A number of them mentioned that Singapore's work culture and especially long working hours are a hindrance to active social life and efficient dating.

Although they live together in the same apartment, the relationships between the single and the family are not particularly close if we only consider their daily activities. Only about half (11 respondents) spend time and do daily activities (such as chatting and watching TV; having meals together is rare) with their family every day. More than half of our respondents only spend time with their family once a week or less than that, typically having a meal on weekends. It is more often friends rather than family who provide satisfying sources of emotional support for singles. Nevertheless, the independence between singles and their families in daily activities does not mean their relationships are remote. In fact, consistent with previous research on several Southeast Asian countries (e.g. Situmorang, 2007; Tan, 2009), our study also finds that the economic support and care responsibilities between singles and their families are very strong.

Raymo (2003) argues that changes in the desire for children are more important in understanding marriage behaviour than changes in the desirability of marriage itself. Our findings suggest weakening of the desire for children and changes in the acceptance of out-of-wedlock birth are both important in understanding delayed marriage and non-marriage (Jones, Zhang and Chia, forthcoming). Nine out of our 23 respondents were ambivalent about procreation, considering children not

important to them or optional, while another six respondents (all males) accepted children born out of wedlock.

Some implications

To what extent is non-marriage in Singapore voluntary or involuntary (i.e. through force of circumstances)? Educational and economic homogamy seem to remain strong in Singapore, reinforcing the selective “marriage squeeze” in the local marriage market elaborated by Jones (2007: 464-5) and the increase in international marriage. But rather than drawing too sharp a distinction between the voluntary or involuntary aspects of non-marriage, it may be more important to note that there are frequently stages in adult singlehood. Voluntary singlehood in the early to mid-20s relates to the idea that there is still plenty of time to marry, and relationships can be pursued without marriage being the overriding goal. Most of those in their 20s want to get married eventually. They have chosen to be single in the current life stage or just watch or wait for the right partner to appear. By the early 30s, the feeling that the ideal partner has not appeared and that there may be more urgency appears for some, especially females aware of their biological clock. On the other hand, some respondents found that having children was not important to them, and was certainly not a factor driving them to accept marriage to a less-than-ideal partner. But for others, singlehood becomes more involuntary at this stage, with an awareness that the right partner may never materialize.

Singlehood seems to be widely accepted among the general public in Singapore, perhaps because it has now been prevalent for long enough to change traditional notions that marriage is essential. Singles do not feel strong social and familial pressure to marry, and little social stigma and discrimination.

What of Singapore’s place in the second demographic transition (SDT)? Lesthaeghe (2010) argues that all the features of the Second Demographic Transition except procreation within cohabiting unions have spread to several advanced Asian populations including Singapore, though Japan leads the way. This is supported at least to some extent by other studies for Singapore (Eng, 1997; Pereira, 2006; Wang and Tan, 2007). Some findings from our Singapore case, though admittedly based on a small number of mainly highly educated respondents, do echo the second demographic transition as reported in many Western societies (such as increasing acceptance of pre-marital sex and cohabitation, increasing individualism in marriage, great value attached to freedom,

independence and self-actualization, decreasing desire to have children, increasing acceptance of out-of-wedlock births, and increasing acceptance of casual and multiple dating relationships). Our study suggests singles tend to regard marriage as a personal issue rather than a social and familial duty, leading singles to stress their personal freedom and choice in terms of whether to marry and when to marry. These findings may have implications for the Singapore government’s SDN programs. There is more than a hint that these programs may train Singaporeans to be more effective ‘daters’, but this does not necessarily mean that more marriages will result.

FACTORS AFFECTING MARITAL FERTILITY

While extended singlehood is prevalent in Singapore, the fact remains that most Singaporeans do eventually marry. To understand fertility trends, we need to understand factors influencing the childbearing decisions of those who marry. The high costs of raising children in Singapore – both the monetary costs and the opportunity costs – are clear to all Singaporeans. There is a range of opportunity costs of raising a family in a big city environment with its logistic problems of arranging children’s activities, societal emphasis on economic success and plethora of alternative activities for those without family encumbrances. Women face the brunt of the problems of raising a family, and in particular the opportunity costs of interrupted career development. Neither the labour market conditions, employer and co-worker attitudes, nor husband’s or potential husband’s attitudes make it easy for women to combine full-time work with raising a family. Singapore men show a reluctance to assume more of the childcare and household maintenance activities, even when their wives are working full time. The time commitments required by full-time employment make for wrenching conflicts with the mothering role. The conflicts are exacerbated by the strong societal expectations in East Asian societies about intensive parenting and raising the “successful” child, the burden of which falls heavily on the mother. If the child fails to live up to expectations, it is the mother’s reputation that suffers most. All this poses a stark dilemma for women who would like to combine childbearing with a career. The opportunity costs of childrearing they face are great.

Rising education of women has played a key role in the very low fertility reached in East Asia, including Singapore. It is not the high level of education per se that is important. High levels of female education in some northern and western European countries, the United States, Australia

and New Zealand have not prevented them having close to replacement levels of fertility at present. Rather, it is the extraordinarily rapid expansion of education - more so than in the West - in the East Asian institutional context - that is the key. This has compressed the time interval in which family and society can adjust to the new set of opportunities, challenges and constraints faced by women in the region. The tensions between making the most of the opportunities opened by their education and raising a family is particularly acute for educated women.

POLICY ISSUES

Earlier in the paper, the Singapore government's policies toward marriage have been discussed. Here I will summarize briefly its policies towards fertility within marriage.

Singapore started earlier and has gone further than the other East Asian countries in some areas of policy designed to influence fertility, particularly in the use of tax rebates to encourage early childbearing, the scale of child allowances, fairly generous maternity leave provisions, subsidization of child care and specific programs to encourage marriage. Policy developments over time have been described in detail in Wong and Yeoh, 2003; Saw, 2005; Yap, 2009; and Straughan, Chan and Jones, 2009. Here I will simply highlight a few of the key policy changes.

Policies introduced in Singapore around 1987 and extended in 1990 included income tax relief for children, childcare subsidies for working mothers, and granting of income tax relief for the foreign maid levy for working mothers. In 2000, a set of additional measures was introduced, prominent among which was the baby bonus scheme, a two-tier payment involving an outright cash component and a co-saving component matched dollar for dollar by the government, for second and third children. In 2001, eight-week paid maternity leave was extended to the third child.

In 2004, a slew of additional measures was introduced, including, among others, extension of the baby bonus to first and fourth children; parenthood tax rebates; application of paid maternity leave to the fourth child, and its duration for all births extended from 8 to 12 weeks; and contraction of work week for civil servants to five days, though with extended working hours on the five days. Working mothers were also eligible for tax relief where grandparents or in-laws look after children aged below 12.

In 2008, a further set of revisions to the Marriage and Parenthood (M&P) Package was introduced, budgeted to cost the government S\$1.6

billion, double that for the 2004 measures (Lee, 2008). The baby bonus scheme was extended to fifth and subsequent children, and cash payments for the first and second child were also increased. Tax reliefs for children and for working mothers were increased. Paid maternity leave was extended from 12 to 16 weeks, the last eight of which can be taken any time over a year from the child's birth. Employers who fire pregnant women for no good reason in the last six months of their pregnancy must pay their maternity leave benefits. Previously, this applied only to firings in the last three months of pregnancy. Finally, subsidies to working mothers for childcare centre costs were doubled from \$150 per month to \$350 per month, covering about half of the fee charged by the average childcare centre.

An ideological shift was apparent in the post-2000 population policies with regard to men's role in the family. In 2000, paternity leave of three days was introduced for fathers who worked as civil servants. Compared with 12 weeks of maternity leave for mothers, this is not much, but symbolically it is very important, signifying that fathers should be involved in childcare. In addition, men were now able to take unrecorded childcare leave. In the 2008 M&P Package, paid childcare leave was extended to six days a year for each parent when the child is below age six, and unpaid infant care leave was introduced, giving each parent six days a year when the child is less than two years old. The government argued that this was a more flexible arrangement than giving paternity leave, the take-up rate for which in Scandinavian countries is not very high.

Fertility has not responded as hoped, and this may well reflect the fact that the baby bonuses and tax concessions for children are not substantial enough to make much of a dent in the high monetary costs of raising children. Moreover, the culture in many Singapore workplaces remains unfriendly to those who prioritise family over responsibilities to the firm, and this discourages women from having a child that may hurt their career prospects and relationships with workmates. Nevertheless, it could well be that Singapore's more comprehensive policies to support marriage and childbearing go a long way towards explaining why fertility rates in Singapore, though disappointingly low from the perspective of the Singapore government, are higher than in other major cities in the region, as noted earlier.

The dilemma – migration can redress the balance, but is politically problematic

Despite all policy efforts, Singapore's fertility

rate remains stubbornly low, and the population structure is such that the population would begin to decline before long in the absence of net migration. Singapore has no difficulty in attracting skilled migrants from many source countries (not to mention unskilled labour migrants, who outnumber the skilled migrants in Singapore at any given time), and in theory, this can always be relied on to redress the balance of declining labour force, and ultimately declining population, resulting from ultra-low fertility. Indeed, migration has played a key role in raising the growth rate of the Singapore population over the past decade far above what it would otherwise have been. This is evident from a comparison of the Singapore population as projected by the United Nations in 2000 (using an assumption of limited net migration) with the actual 2010 figure. The United Nations projected a population of 4.604 million; the actual figure was 5.076 million, more than 10 per cent higher.

Events in recent years, however, have demonstrated that high immigration brings with it social tensions that are difficult to deal with. Singaporeans complained of feeling like strangers in their own country, of crowded subways and buses, of rising house prices, of increasing traffic congestion on the roads, and of dealing with shop assistants who could not communicate with them. This backlash against the rapidly rising number of foreign-born in Singapore was evident to the government, which responded with a drastic cut in the number of applicants granted permanent residence in 2009 and 2010.¹⁰

Final thoughts

Globalization, neo-liberalism, and consumerism provide the context in which the life goals of individuals and families in Singapore are determined, and in which uncertainty increases about whether these goals can be met. Indeed, this is the case throughout the East Asian countries - Japan, South Korea, China, Taiwan, and Singapore. Patriarchy and Confucianism continue to play a role in creating societies in which the goals of economic advancement and population replacement are on a collision course.

It appears that in these East Asian countries the state and individual families are as one in their belief that children should be pushed to high performance in education. The belief is so strong that the tyranny of the Juku or cram school in Japan is legendary, and similar situations exist in South Korea (with its kwawe cram schools), Taiwan and Singapore. When the Singapore government announced in 2010 that it planned to abolish

the primary school entrance examination, sat by 6-year old children, and later to also abolish end-of-year examinations for Primary 1 and Primary 2 children, this was greeted by howls of protest from many parents, who thought it signalled the decline of educational standards. Many parents in Singapore take two weeks' vacation to assist their 12 year olds manage the trauma of the primary school leaving examination, which plays a major role in determining the future life course of the child. Interestingly, similar attitudes can be seen in China, where, "even when schools cut back on extra classes or try less exam-oriented teaching methods, parents make up for this by sending their child to more supplementary classes, hiring tutors, or buying extra study materials" (Crabb, 2010: 397, citing Tang, 2005).

The emphasis on education is commendable, albeit sometimes taken to obsessive extremes. However, it is unfortunately one factor pushing fertility down to ultra-low levels. Many young Singaporeans are unwilling to contemplate parenthood until they are confident that they can play the role of the ideal parent. For those who do marry, the rather stark quality-quantity trade-off in raising children in the Singapore context deters most of them from having more than one or two children.

The economic success achieved in the East Asian countries, and Singapore, has much to do with the high quality human capital they have achieved through this emphasis on pushing children to strong educational performance. The dilemma is that the advanced economy so created will be enjoyed by increasingly fewer citizens and may itself be put at risk by the downward spiral in labour force and (with some delay) in population size. There is a great irony in the apparent fact that the very pressures to prioritize economic growth and the human capital factors that can contribute to it – long hours of work, involvement of women in the workforce on much the same terms as men, strong pressure on children to perform outstandingly in school, and the extra tuition and coaching that is considered indispensable for reaching this goal – contain the seeds of an inability of the population to replace itself.

Is there some way out of this dilemma? Perhaps we should be looking to the experience of those Western countries where fertility remains relatively high – a motley group actually, comprising the Scandinavian countries, France, USA and Australia, among others. If we look for key explanatory factors, we might say (rather crudely) that gender equity does it in Scandinavia, money does it in France, and the culture of minority populations – Hispanics and blacks and religious

fundamentalists - does it in the USA. Thus no one “silver bullet” for raising fertility in East Asian countries to near-replacement levels emerges from their examples. But I would venture to say two things about East Asia generally, and Singapore in particular: (1) Greater gender equity in the household would help alleviate the stark choices facing

women choosing between a career and family – or trying to juggle both; (2) Less single-minded attention to children’s educational performance, and more family-friendly workplaces, would help raise the birth rate, albeit perhaps at the sacrifice of some economic growth.

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- ¹ Paper prepared for presentation in Kwansai Gakuin University, Nishinomiya and at Waseda University, Tokyo, 1 and 3 August, 2011.
- ² Singapore’s TFR is roughly 20-25% higher than in Seoul, Busan, Taipei, and Hong Kong, 50% higher than in Shanghai and Beijing, but only about 15% higher than in Tokyo.
- ³ It has been hypothesized that Malays, as the lowest-income group in the Singapore population, were more influenced than other ethnic groups by pro-natalist incentives introduced by the Singapore government in 1987. Aside from that, it is worth noting that the rise in Malay fertility coincided with a rise in Malay fertility in neighbouring Malaysia, and given the close links between the two countries, may have been affected by some of the factors operating there (Jones, 1990).
- ⁴ It should be noted, however, that at least in the cases of Japan and Taiwan, cohabitation rates are quite high (Lesthaeghe, 2010: 236-240), thus throwing some doubt on this conclusion.
- ⁵ For example, in a large Singapore survey, 76 per cent of never married women said they want to marry, another 20 per cent said they would leave it to fate, and only five percent said they did not intend to marry (MCYS 2004). In Korean and Japanese studies, though, not as high a proportion of women as of men see marriage as necessary or intend to marry (Choe, 1998; Retherford, Ogawa and Sakamoto, 1996), and in Japan, responses in attitudinal surveys indicate a time trend towards greater acceptance of non-marriage (Retherford, Ogawa and Sakamoto, 1996: 15-16.)
- ⁶ However, there is not much point in making such an application unless the intention to marry the current partner is quite firm, because the HDB website states sternly that “you are not allowed to delete the name of your fiancé/fiancée so as to include a new fiancé/fiancée even if consent has been given by your ex-fiance/fiancée”. In other words, the newly constituted couple intending to marry must return to the back of the queue.
- ⁷ At the time of the survey, the Singapore dollar was equivalent to approximately US\$0.77.
- ⁸ The general divorce rate for males (per 1000 married resident males) increased from 6.1 in 1990 to 7.7 in 2009 and the general divorce rate for females rose from 6.1 to 7.3 during the same period of time (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2010).
- ⁹ “Do single Singaporeans need yet another dating campaign?”, <http://sg.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20100813014355AA6ndsS&r=w>, accessed on 26/08/2010.
- ¹⁰ The number of permanent residence permits granted in the early 2000s was in the 30,000 to 40,000 range. This shot up to 52,300 in 2005; 57,300 in 2006; 63,627 in 2007; and 79,167 in 2008. The evident public disquiet led to a drop to 59,460 in 2009 and a drastic cut to 29,265 in 2010. It is significant that the government faced an election in 2011, and was well aware of the electoral liability of the immigration issue.

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Figure 1. Total Fertility Rate by Ethnic Group, Singapore 1970-2009

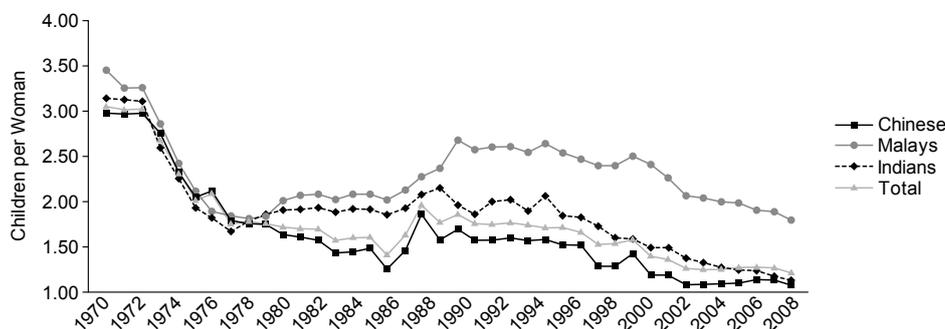


Figure 2. Trends in Proportion Single among Women and Men Aged 35-39, 1970-2005

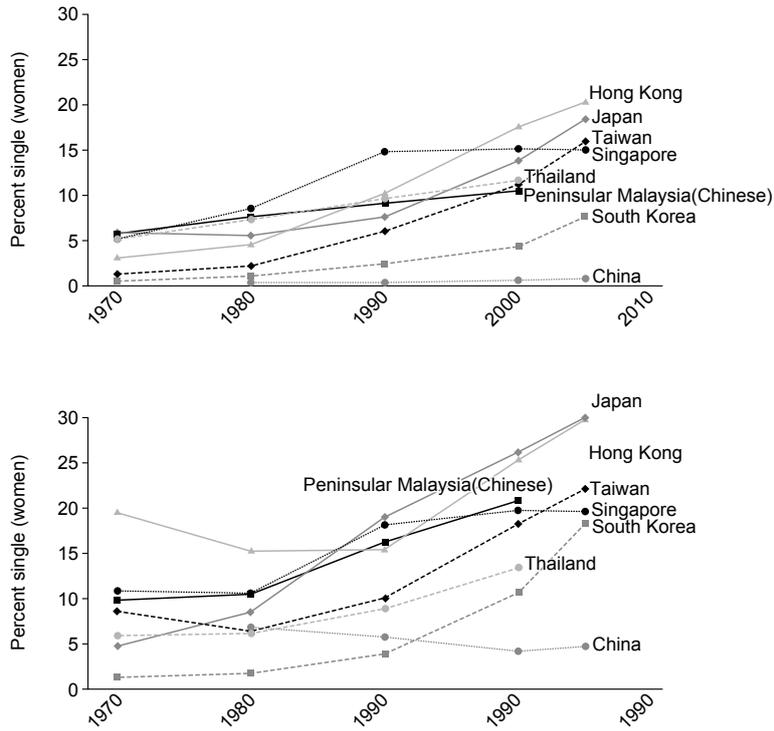
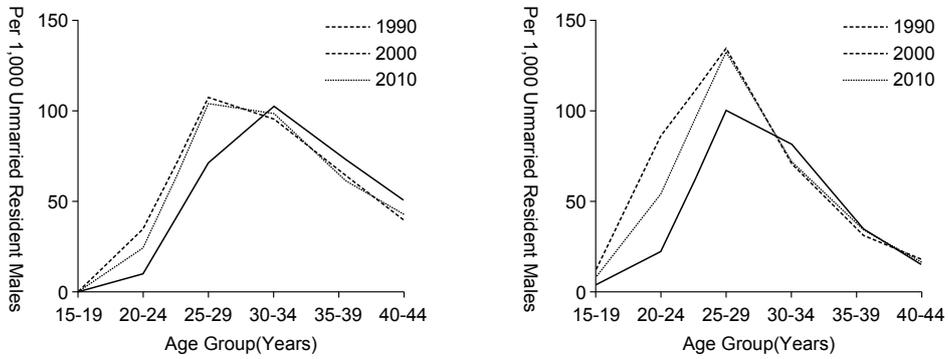


Figure 3. Singapore: Age-sex specific marriage rates, 1990-2010



Source: Singapore Department of Statistics, Yearbook of Statistics Singapore 2008

Table 1. Proportion never-married by age, sex and educational level, Singapore (percent), 2000, 2005 and 2010

Sex and age group	Below Secondary			Secondary			Post-secondary			University		
	2000	2005	2010	2000	2005	2010	2000	2005	2010	2000	2005	2010
Female												
25-29	21	21	23	30	34	35	43	47	52	54	56	62
30-34	13	13	13	17	17	18	23	24	27	27	28	28
35-39	10	10	9	14	14	13	20	17	18	23	20	21
40-44	9	10	9	15	14	12	20	18	16	22	21	19
Male												
25-29	62	67	64	58	63	64	70	69	74	69	73	76
30-34	40	42	39	29	35	38	28	33	37	28	32	35
35-39	28	29	29	18	22	25	15	18	21	13	14	17
40-44	21	23	23	14	14	18	9	12	14	7	8	11

Source: Yap, 2008, Table 8.3; Singapore Population Census 2010

Table 2. Trends in age-specific proportions single for Chinese Singaporean men (proportions expressed as percentages)

Age group	1970	1980	1990	2000	2005	2010
25-29				67.0	72.7	78.1
30-34	23.3	22.6	36.9	32.7	36.8	42.2
35-39	11.9	11.4	19.3	21.8	21.5	23.7
40-44	7.7	8.8	11.5	16.5	16.9	17.0
45-49	6.2	7.0	8.5	11.5	14.5	14.8

Source: Yap, 2008, Table 8.3; Singapore Population Census 2010

Table 3. Trends in age-specific proportions single for Chinese Singaporean women (proportions expressed as percentages)

Age group	1970	1980	1990	2000	2005	2010
25-29				45.0	51.3	61.3
30-34	11.1	17.8	22.4	21.6	25.6	29.8
35-39	5.8	9.3	15.6	17.1	17.0	19.9
40-44	3.6	6.7	12.3	15.0	16.0	16.2
45-49	3.4	4.6	7.9	13.5	14.4	14.8

Source: (Jones, 2004; Jones and Gubhaju, 2009; 2010 Census report)