

Jul-2012

## Book Review: Population Policy and Reproduction in Singapore: Making Future citizens

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### Recommended Citation

Makiwane, Monde (2012). Book Review: Population Policy and Reproduction in Singapore: Making Future citizens. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 13(3), 197-200.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol13/iss3/15>

## **Population Policy and Reproduction in Singapore: Making Future citizens.**

By Pop Shirley Hsiao-Li Sun

Routledge Contemporary Southeast Asia Series: Taylor & Francis Group. : London and New York

ISBN: 978-0-415-67068-5 (hbk) ISBN: 978-0-203-14618-7 (edk)

Review by Monde Makiwane<sup>1</sup>

The aim of the book is to evaluate strategies that have been adopted by the Singaporean government to raise the level of childbearing. The problem of low fertility is found in most post-industrial societies of Asia and Europe. In most of these countries, the fertility level is below replacement level, thus on the average women give births to less than two children during their lifetime. If that prevails, without massive immigration into the country, the population size of the country will decline. The biggest impact of fertility decline is usually felt in declining numbers of young people available to join the labour force, necessitating a need to import labour from other countries. As a result of this influx, tension between immigrants and citizens are common in countries where there is such an influx. As a strategy to avoid dependency on foreign labour, a number of developed countries have adopted policies that encourage women to increase their rate of childbearing.

The approach adopted by the author was to first analyse historical policies which were adopted by the government to reduce the rate of childbearing in Singapore. Such policies were introduced in many parts of the world as part of combating population explosion, which was then thought to be the major problem in the world. The author then sets the current economic context of Singapore, acknowledging the fast economic growth that has happened in Singapore. It is within the context of Singaporean economic miracle that the author has located the failure of policies that were designed to encourage higher fertility rate in Singapore. The rest of the book is devoted into enumerating and then explaining factors that caused pronatalist policies to fail, in spite of being underpinned by generous incentive schemes.

Throughout the book, the author has located the economic changes that have happened in Singapore at the centre of the fertility debates. Singapore is one of the Asian countries that experienced rapid economic growth which was followed by rapid decline in fertility. It took less than half a century for Singapore change from a country noted for having high unemployment, undernourishment and inadequate housing to be a nation noted for being healthy, educated and wealthy. This economic miracle has been felt by the entire population. For instance, female literacy rates, which were historically low, increased from 42.6% in 1965 to 93.3% in 2009 and the mean years of schooling for females grew from 3.7 years in 1980 to 9.2 years in 2009. Moreover, the female labour participation increased from 24.2 percent in 1965 to 55.2 percent in 2009, with close to half of working women being professional, managerial and technical workers. Most remarkably, is the fact that unemployment rate has consistently been below 5% in recent years. While the history of fertility change is

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replete with analyses of how, when and why fertility has declined in many parts of the world, this text presents arguments about why attempts to raise the level of fertility have failed. Fertility decline is well documented, and reasons for the decline have been adequately debated; historically the economic explanations were the most dominant in explaining fertility decline but these have of late been challenged. Hsiao-Li Sun contrasts the East Asian fertility decline with that of Europe. The fertility decline in Europe happened within cultural and religious boundaries. Fertility decline in most of Asia has its roots in the late 1950's and has generally been faster than in developed countries. The rapid growth in the economy of Singapore was led by export-led and foreign-capital-intensive economic development. Increase in savings and manage to attract foreign investments. Due to successful growth the country was able to introduce a successful welfare programmes. Human resources development was a key engine to economic growth in the region. This was expressed in the form of meritocracy and multiracialism, buttressed by an education a quality universal and free education which emphasised access to all its citizens including groups that were historically disadvantaged. The background factor that did not feature highly in the text is the fact that low fertility on the European and Asian continents are now universal. Thus, Singapore is not the first country to experiment with policies that are aimed at raising fertility levels to replacement levels; and as to date, success stories in this regard are rare. Both historical and continental factors, glaringly lacking in Hsiao-Li Sun's account, are relevant to understanding current fertility behaviour among Singaporeans.

While Singapore experienced a rapid decline in fertility decline, family planning played a lesser role in this process. The Family Planning Association (1949-1965) was low key private operation supported by government funds; state intervention played a major role in the fertility decline of Singapore. Anti-natalist policies were accelerated during the period 1966 to 1983. A number of acts came to effect which included Voluntary Sterilization Act of 1974 which made sterilization to be obtained on request, the Abortion Act of 1969 legalized induced abortion, and in 1974 abortion on demand were adopted. In addition a number of Acts that discouraged large families were enacted. These included the reduction of income tax relief to cover three children, lower priority for choice of primary school admission for children of fourth birth order and above and limitation of paid maternity leave to cover two children only. This period was quickly followed by antinatalist policies, as a result of an accelerated decline in fertility.

Four chapters were devoted into discussing various strategies that have been employed in order to increase fertility. The pronatalist policies came in different modes which included income tax relief, tax rebates, childcare subsidies use of Medisave accounts, maid levy subsidies. All evidence shows that all these attempts have failed dismally to influence the fertility behaviour of women in Singapore. For instance, programmes to enhance Work-Family balance are well entrenched in Singapore, but are woefully inadequate to entice a career women to take time off from work to give birth to more children. In addition, the fact that these benefits are offered by employers rather than the state, have led to a suspicion that recipients will be allowed to slip behind in the career advancement because of resentment by employers of such a cost.

While the intervention strategies pursued by the government of Singapore have been carefully framed to appeal to all members of society; it is clear from the data presented in the book that there is a general perception of class bias. The strategies employed to encourage childbearing have a differential appeal to members of various economic strata. For instance, the tax breaks are clearly meant to raise fertility among the upper class, as none of the poor classes will benefit from these. Secondly a “Dollar-for dollar Development Account”, where the state contributes an equal amount for the child savings to that which parents can afford directly appeals to people of higher income. Another similar scheme is the citizen-responsibility which is in a form of Central Provident Fund (CPF). This is a comprehensive social security savings plan providing for retirement, healthcare and housing needs for citizens of Singapore. What has not been shared in the text is whether the perceived class bias of the policies could possibly have ethnic ramifications. Although great strides have been achieved by the Singaporean government in bringing people of different races into the mainstream economy, racial disparities persist. For instance, differences in educational attainment are glaring. Chinese have the highest educational attainment, followed by Indians and Malays have the lowest. Only two (2) per cent of the Malayan population have university degree. Thus, a class appeal in encouraging the increase in childbearing could easily be translated to mean ethnic preference. The author argues that the unintended consequence of the pronatalist policies might result in chasm between people of different races. In addition, incentives which could have more appeal to women of lower classes are under-marketed. The findings presented in the book suggests that lack of information about these policies is more acute among women of lower socio-economic status. This again raises the question of whether these policies are targeted at all women or are mainly targeted at women of upper income

The anti-natalist policies were, from the very beginning set for failure as they run against the essence of what made Singapore a successful nation that is, an emphasis on economic growth. As stated above, Singapore is among the “Asian tigers” that developed very fast. This was accompanied with a rapid growth of middle class of professionals, executives and businessmen, including among the historically marginalised groups. This was generally achieved by providing quality education to all communities. Thus, the emphasis was both quality and universal access. The quest for “best education money can buy”, raised the cost of raising children. The education itself is substantially free, save for nominal financial contribution required from time to time. In such a competitive society, parents go an extra financial mile to ensure that their children are competitive and are likely to add value to their children as much as financial resources allow. This is where the financial incentives come short, as they are unlikely to keep up with financial needs of a highly competitive society. The assistance which is offered by the government is seen against the lens of high cost of living, competitiveness of Singaporean society, and fear of slipping from your class. In addition, in such capitalist societies, it is not likely that people will appreciate incentives as a just an assistance for parents, but would value it against opportunity costs that would be gained if a woman did not bear a child.

The missing historical account of fertility decline would have been very helpful to the reader. Unfortunately, the author did not delve into this background, deciding instead to concentrate on economic factors that explain the fertility inertia in

Singapore. In spite of its lack of appropriate contextualisation, the book is well written, and provides excellent points of discussion on this important topic. It contains minimal technical jargon, making it accessible to a wide readership. The text is likely to appeal to readers interested in demography, economics and sociology.