



INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

# **Ethnicity and Fertility in Singapore**

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**ETHNICITY AND FERTILITY  
IN  
SINGAPORE**

**by**

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## PREFACE

The Ethnicity and Fertility in Southeast Asia Project that commenced in 1980, was an outgrowth of an earlier project, Culture and Fertility in Southeast Asia, which was completed in 1979. Building upon the results of the earlier study, which established that ethnicity was a significant factor underlying the fertility differentials among the various ethnic groups in Southeast Asia, the present project aimed to explore in greater detail the extent to which ethnicity and ethnic factors like ethnic attitudes, ethnic identification and cultural practices influenced reproductive behaviour. Instead of utilizing secondary sources, the project relied on primary data collected through the survey technique. In all, twenty ethnic groups from the five ASEAN countries were surveyed in this study which spanned a total of three years.

A study involving five different countries and so many ethnic groups of diverse cultural and religious backgrounds would invariably pose problems of comparability. To maximize comparability across countries, the study relied on the use of a common core questionnaire as well as a common analytical framework and data analysis procedures. While comparability was important, the incorporation of country-specific factors salient and relevant to the explanation of fertility behaviour was also encouraged. The final research design therefore attempted to be as comprehensive as possible in the exploration of the ethnic dimension in fertility differentials among the various ethnic groups studied.

Three workshops were held during the period of the project to enable the researchers to come together to discuss and resolve problems related to the project. The first workshop was held in May 1980. At this workshop the conceptual framework and the core questionnaire were finalized. In the second workshop held in June 1981, the methods of data analysis were decided. At the

final workshop in September 1982, the country teams presented their preliminary findings. The final reports were completed by December 1983.

A study of this scale obviously also involved many researchers. The researchers were all Southeast Asian social scientists drawn from various disciplines and backgrounds. Some were attached to universities of the region while others were from research institutes or government agencies.

Dr Rodolfo A. Bulatao from the East-West Population Institute provided the initial intellectual impetus to the project by formulating the conceptual framework and research design for the study as well as the drafting of the preliminary questionnaire. In addition Dr Bulatao together with Dr Aline K. Wong from the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Dr Ng Shui Meng from ISEAS served as co-ordinators of the project. The country teams consisted of:

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The results of the study are being published in six monographs in this series:

Ethnicity and Fertility in Southeast Asia: A Comparative Analysis

Ethnicity and Fertility in Indonesia

Ethnicity and Fertility in Malaysia

Ethnicity and Fertility in the Philippines

Ethnicity and Fertility in Singapore

Ethnicity and Fertility in Thailand

ALINE WONG and NG SHUI MENG  
Project Co-ordinators  
and  
General Editors of the Series

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## INTRODUCTION

### The Setting

There are at least two important reasons why a study on ethnicity and fertility should be of special relevance to Singapore. Firstly, Singapore society is ethnically diversified. The 1980 census reports that there are 76.5 per cent Chinese, 14.6 per cent Malays, 6.4 per cent Indians, and 2.1 per cent "Others" in this island-state of 2.4 million population (Saw 1981, p. 16). Each of the three major ethnic groups in Singapore has its own relatively distinctive cultural traditions and complex linguistic and religious patterns. As such, the majority of the population have traditionally been strongly influenced by the customs and beliefs characteristic of their own ethnic cultures. To the extent that multiracialism remains one of the guiding ideological principles and is in fact a way of life in Singapore, a study of ethnic cultures and traditions can lead to a fuller understanding of Singapore society.

Secondly, Singapore has experienced a rapid process of fertility transition in the past few decades. Its national family planning programme is known to be among the most successful in the Third World. While it is generally recognized that there must be some causal connections between the declining fertility trend and the implementation of the national family planning programme and related social policies (Chang, Ong, and Chen 1980, p. 43), it is also noted that different ethnic communities seem to have responded to the family planning programmes in different fashions and have demonstrated different patterns in fertility transition. It is, therefore, an important question to ask whether and to what extent the ethnic cultural traditions, customs and beliefs affect the fertility behaviour of population with various ethnic backgrounds.

The present monograph reports the findings from a study on



the nature, causes, and implications of ethnic differentials in fertility in Singapore. Based on a stratified, random sample of 1,755 married persons, analysis has been made to provide a systematic and comparative description of the cultural and social structural differences across ethnic groups. A detailed comparison of their fertility-related attitudes and behaviours is also made. The contribution of different cultural and social structural characteristics of each ethnic group to these differentials is assessed. More specifically, multiple classification analysis has been carried out to identify certain factors to account for fertility differentials between ethnic groups.

### Theoretical Background

That different ethnic groups show differentials in fertility rates is an empirical fact well documented in Singapore, as in most other ethnically plural societies. However, researchers in the field are still looking for a coherent framework for an overall interpretation and understanding of such ethnic differentials. The majority of such attempts at explanation are, however, ad hoc and tend to be culturally or situationally specific, not allowing greater generalization. This is perhaps due to the fact that the concept ethnicity itself is rather elusive, often implying a combination of many interrelated cultural, social and psychological characteristics.

Since the present study was initiated as a part of a comparative project on Ethnicity and Fertility in Southeast Asia involving all five ASEAN countries, a common theoretical perspective was earlier accepted by all the participating research teams to assure comparability of the data. Two schematic frameworks have been adopted to account respectively for the two dependent variables under investigation, namely, fertility and the use of contraception. These two models are presented as Figure 1 and Figure 2.

The framework distinguishes the proximate and the distal determinants of the two dependent variables. The proximate factors are those believed to have a "direct" effect on contraceptive use and fertility, while the distal factors are seen to affect the two dependent variables by modifying the proximate factors.

In both Model One and Model Two, three groups of proximate factors are identified. The headings of these groups and the major factors included under each of them are presented as follows: