
The population history of Southeast Asia of the last half century or so is of importance to virtually everyone—both inside and outside the region—interested in changes in population growth rates, but at the same time this history is practically unknown, except among a handful of specialists. It would appear that most scholars, concerned about the future of our planet, agree that we are on a so-called overshoot trajectory, using our resources in an unsustainable way, meaning that we live beyond our means. Many of them regard slowing down the present population growth rate as a prerequisite for sustainable development. Now it is well-known that population growth in most of Europe is close to zero, and would drop below zero if there were no immigration, and I assume that the low population growth rates obtaining now in Japan and China are familiar phenomena as well. However, Europe and Japan are arguably too wealthy to be regarded as useful demographic examples for poor regions with high population growth rates, such as Western Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The solution chosen by China—the one-child policy—had the unfortunate effect that a large male birth surplus came into being (as predicted), which will almost certainly create societal problems further down the line, while it is likely that such a policy could only be implemented in a country with a totalitarian regime.

Few people seem to know that in a number of large and populous Southeast Asian countries population growth rates have slowed down considerably as well. Using estimates for the average annual rate of population growth during the period 2010-2015 (1.1 percent for Southeast Asia as a whole), we find the lowest annual growth in Thailand (0.5 %), followed by Myanmar/Burma (0.8 %), with a shared third place for Indonesia and Vietnam (both 1.0 %). During the period 1960-1965 the average annual population growth rate for the region as a whole was 2.6 percent, and was therefore more than halved during the last half century. It could be argued that this so-called Demographic Transition (also named Fertility Transition) in some of these countries might constitute an example for other low-income countries with high rates of population growth.
The book under review deals with the factors that constitute the Demographic Transition in Southeast Asia, and its time-depth is roughly the same as that of the Transition—the last 60 years or so. The book has seven numbered chapters, in addition to a Preface and a Conclusion. The Preface, written by the editors, appears to substitute for an introduction—there is no formal introduction—but is only 4 pages long; a missed opportunity in my view. There is also a ‘Conclusion,’ written by the editors. It highlights, as one might expect, salient points from the various chapters, a valuable service to readers who are in a hurry or do not need the level of detail the chapters provide. The points they emphasize are often findings connecting various important demographic features, such as changing age structure and migration—indeed, the points that should be emphasized for a comprehensive view of recent and future demographic developments in Southeast Asia. In addition, a number of general points about the region are made that should have been included in an introduction. In fact, it would have been more elegant if Preface and Conclusion had been merged into one Introduction.

The first numbered chapter, entitled ‘Population and society in Southeast Asia; A historical perspective,’ is written by Charles Hirschman and Sabrina Bonaparte, and is the largest chapter in the book (pp. 5-41). It does not really make good on its promise, explicitly mentioned in the title, of offering a historical perspective, which should have included a systematic analysis of demographic developments between at least 1900 and 1950, or, even better, 1800 and 1950. Instead, the authors have produced a rather arbitrary collection of often antiquated opinions, dating from the older literature (the whole chapter smacks of a rewrite of an earlier essay of, say, 20 years ago, with references to match). Clifford Geertz’s Agricultural Involution, dating from 1963, is not a serious demographic historical study (although it contains some interesting observations), while Widjojo Nitisastro’s Population Trends (1970) and Bram Peper’s ‘Population Growth in Java’ (1970) were more political pamphlets than evidence-based historical studies. At the same time, the chapter ignores or misses recent developments in the demographic history of pre-1950 Southeast Asia. Neither author is a historian, which might explain why the period prior to 1950 has been dealt with in such a cavalier fashion (the lack of involvement of historians applies to the entire book). The chapter becomes more reliable and interesting when it reaches the 1950s. With the following chapters we move onto firmer ground.
Chapter 2, entitled ‘Fertility in Southeast Asia,’ was written by Terence Hull, one of the most knowledgeable scholars regarding the fertility transition in Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia. He provides tantalizing tidbits about recent developments in Indonesia regarding age at first marriage and decentralized contraceptive services that appear to be bucking the trend of dropping fertility levels (pp. 62-3). In chapter 3, ‘Marriage trends in Southeast Asia,’ Gavin Jones—expert Indonesia demographer on marriages—and co-author Bina Gubhaju, mention another trend-bucking development in Indonesia. After a trough in 2003, the divorce rate appears to have started to rise (p. 88). In chapter 4, Ghazy Mujahid deals with a relatively new topic—‘Population aging in Southeast Asia’. One of the aspects of the demographic transition in Southeast Asia was the rapid drop in death rates, which is well reflected by the changes in Life Expectancy at Birth figures, which went up from 42.4 for the whole of Southeast Asia during the period 1950-55 to 69.3 for the period 2005-10 (p. 95). It goes without saying that the proportion of the population of age 60 and older thus increased too: from 5.5 percent for the period 1950-75 to 9.6 for 1975-2000 (p. 100).

Chapter 5, entitled ‘Changing patterns of population mobility in Southeast Asia,’ was written by Graeme Hugo, well-known as an expert in mobility developments in Indonesia. International migration from Southeast Asia within and out of the region is a relatively novel phenomenon, of little importance prior to the 1970s. Now, in countries like the Philippines and Indonesia, outmigration is a demographic force to be reckoned with (much of this migration is female), while internal migration has led to very high rates of urbanization, and the formation of enormous primate cities such as Bangkok, Jakarta and Manila. Chapters 6 (‘Migration and health in Southeast Asia,’ by Mark VanLandingham and Hongyun Fu) and 7 (‘Population and environment in Southeast Asia: Complex dynamics and trends,’ by Sara Curran and Noah Derman) are a bit speculative, but signal new scholarly trends that might become more important as time goes by (and more factual information becomes available).

Strangely enough, the book has no general chapter on mortality, one of the basic demographic variables. This is a regrettable omission, as the fast drop in the death rate after the Second World War is at the heart of the Demographic Transition, and it is not as if there is insufficient data to write such a chapter. Neither is there an index, which is really a drawback for a book such as this one, which will be used by students and scholars who are
only interested in ‘their’ country. Summing up, for those who are interested in the post-war Demographic Transition in Southeast Asia, this book is a welcome addition, even though they will have to look elsewhere for the mortality story. This is not a book for those interested in developments prior to 1950.

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