Fertility Decline and the Transformation of Intimacy in Malaysia and Japan: A Comparative Study

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Introduction

Fertility in Japan dropped below the replacement level in the middle of the 1970s and declined further since the middle of the 1980s, to reach a total fertility rate of 1.42 in 1995 (M.Atoh 2001). In 2008, the total fertility rate declined further to 1.37 (Statistics Bureau 2010). It has often been argued in Japan that the declining fertility rate is closely associated with the increase in women with higher education (Osawa 1998). M. Atoh (1997) showed that the growth in higher education after the 1970s did result in increased opportunities for women to work outside the home, a phenomenon accompanied by changes in social values that contributed to the increase in the number of unmarried singles. Raymo’s (2003) findings also indicate that the higher educational attainment of women is a key factor in Japan’s declining fertility and that the trend towards later and fewer marriages is occurring across all levels of educational attainment. His findings are consistent with the argument that higher education is negatively associated with marriage, but only in those countries where gender relations make it particularly difficult for women to balance work and family (Raymo 2003).

On the other hand, the fertility transition in Malaysia began in 1966. The total fertility rate in peninsular Malaysia declined to about 2.4 per woman in 2006 from about 6.0 in 1960 (DOS 2001, 2006, cited in Tey Nai Peng 2009). The pace of the fertility transition varies significantly across the various ethnic groups. The Chinese and Indians started with higher fertility rates in the early 1960s, but underwent a more rapid decline than the Malays, so that Malay fertility has been higher than those of the other two ethnic groups since the late 1960s. For all ethnic groups, fertility decline accelerated following the launch of the National Family Planning Programme. The decline in Malay fertility was stalled in the mid-1970s, however, owing to the revival of Islamic fundamentalism; only to resume after the economic recession in 1985 (Leete and Tan 1993; Thambiah, Yong and Wong 2006; Tey 2009, 294). Subsequently, the ethnic fertility differential has become less pronounced as the total fertility rate of the Malays declined from 4.8 in 1985 to 3.5 in 2000. The total fertility rate of the Chinese, on the other hand, fluctuated between the replacement level and 2.7, in the period 1983-2000. In contrast, the Indian total fertility rate showed a more consistent decline from 2.9 in 1993 to 2.4 in 2000. Between 2001 and 2006, the total fertility rate for the Malays fell from 3.4 to 2.8, while that of the Chinese fell from 2.2 to 1.8, and the Indians' from 2.4 to 1.9. It is clear that the non-Malays have already achieved replacement level fertility, while Malay fertility is moving towards the replacement level and may reach it in the not too distant future (Tey 2009). Just like in Japan, the rise in the marrying age as a result of the rapid increase in educational opportunities, especially for girls, is seen as contributing to lower fertility rates, given that the women now marry later than before. Data from the 1994 MPFS show that the higher the educational level, the higher the age upon first marriage. Education has indeed changed women's attitudes and aspirations towards marriage (Abdul Rahman 2000; Thambiah, Yong, Wong 2006) within the context of very little changes in traditional gender relations.

Looking at the scenario in both Japan and Malaysia, this study attempts to shift discourses on fertility decline from demographic reasoning to more human-centered analysis by focusing on gender equality, the transformation of intimacy, and the value of children as important factors to be considered to understand this trend. There is a need to move away from mere demographic reasoning to a more nuanced explanation of fertility decline. Three scales were used for this purpose and they are the value of children, gender role egalitarianism, and fear of intimacy. The objective of this study is to see whether there is a link between fear of intimacy, gender role egalitarianism, and the value of children; and the future fertility motivation of young university/college students. By combining these three scales, I tried to achieve the objectives of the proposed study.

Method

A survey was conducted in Japan and Malaysia using a questionnaire that was translated into Japanese and