

Separate paths and ordinary people

CYCLING ACROSS THE PENINSULA: Singaporean learns more about Malaysia and his home

THROUGHOUT our journey, we met Malaysians, rural and urban, who couldn't believe that we were still single at the grand old age of 27.

As far as they were concerned, we had not planned our life well. We had not given enough priority to starting a family.

Do we Singaporeans value family life less than Malaysians? Quite possibly. After numerous conversations about girlfriends, marriage and children, my sense is that there are cultural and developmental reasons for this.

As incomes rise, people tend to have fewer kids.

This would partly explain why Singapore's fertility rates are today so low. This is a socio-economic phenomenon the world over, particularly with the other East Asian Tigers — Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan — who have all recorded torrid economic growth alongside plummeting fertility. (Similarly, the fertility rate in Malaysia's more developed states, such as Penang and Selangor, is lower than other parts of the country.)

Perhaps there is something unique about Singapore's pressure-cooker, rat-race, materialist society that has deterred young couples from having children. It is expensive to bring up children in Singapore, particularly with all the extra tuition, expensive preschool classes, and other personal im-

provement programmes that parents today deem necessary.

But government policy has also greatly influenced Singaporeans' family values.

In Singapore, love, and procreation have become somewhat manufactured; transformed from individual decisions and responsibilities into a national obsession. The government has indelibly shaped every Singaporean's conception of love, marriage and children.

In the 1970s, fearful of a population explosion, our government told people to "Stop at 2". As expected, we followed orders. By the early 1980s, it became clear that we were not replacing ourselves sufficiently and so, in a 180-degree turn, the government started to promote bigger families.

Tax breaks were offered to parents who had a

third child. It didn't make much of a difference.

By 2005, our total fertility rate had slumped to 1.26, well below two, the "replacement rate" required to maintain a stable population. Our government, desperate, pulled out all the stops: more tax breaks, longer maternity leave, and vociferous public campaigns.

Almost from the day he stepped into office, our prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong, has been urging Singaporeans to make babies. In the space of one generation, the Singaporean family psyche has been switched from big families to "Stop

at 2" and back to big families again. However, our government has tried to manipulate the population in a much more classist fashion — encouraging university graduates to marry other graduates rather than non-graduates.

This reflects Lee Kuan Yew's belief in genetic determinism. In 1967, he said that about five per cent of the population "are more than ordinarily endowed physically and mentally and in whom we must extend our limited and slender resources..." Later, in 1969, he worried that "less economically productive people in the community are reproducing themselves at rates higher than the rest".

Presumably, our government believed it could improve Singapore's gene pool. In 1984 it implemented a programme that tried to increase the fertility of university-educated women while offering subsidies for the voluntary sterilisation of poor and uneducated parents.

Singapore even set up a couple of government agencies to further this agenda.

The Social Development Unit was formed in 1984 to promote marriages among graduate singles, while Social Development Services was set up in 1985 to promote marriages among non-graduate singles.

Sometimes it seems like our eugenics policies were implemented in a bygone era rife with classism. Actually, it was less than 30 years ago. We grew up in a society where eugenics influenced love.

Kuan Yew's views on this haven't changed much. In 2008, he told 700-odd delegates at a Human Capital Summit that Singaporean graduates who marry non-graduates "will worry if their children will make it to the university".

In Singapore, something so nat-

ural, so carnal, so innately human as love is transformed into a more structured, formal process.

People's Action Party (PAP) fans love to boast about the party's forward thinking and successful long-term planning. But when its history is eventually written (by somebody neutral), the PAP's misguided population policies of the 1970s-80s will tarnish its legacy.

Many of Singapore's current socio-economic problems — including inequality, public transport squeezes and xenophobia — have their roots in our low birth-rate, and the government's attempt to address it with sudden, unsustainable high immigration.

Malaysia's government, on the other hand, does not try to manipulate its population dynamics so meticulously.

It does appear that the Singapore government's constant intrusions into the bedroom may have been counterproductive. At best, they have failed to achieve their goals.

At worst, love, marriage and sex, glorious expressions of the human condition, have been reduced to numbers, policies and projections. Procreation becomes a mechanical response, a "national service", akin to paying taxes.

Which begs the question: have we all spent enough time thinking about what makes us happy?

For those of us who want huge families, have we really thought hard enough about what else we could be doing with our time if we had a smaller family? Conversely, for those of us who want tiny families, are we missing out on one of life's basic joys?

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