

NEWS

How to Engineer a Baby Boom

East Asia's "tigers" are striving to boost falling birth rates. But will it work?



COMING FROM NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS, the tactics are bold: posters urging couples to forgo birth control, free weekend getaways for single civil servants, and a state-condoned sex fair featuring displays of toys and lingerie. So concerned are East Asia's powerhouses about their sluggish birth rates that they're doing everything they can to persuade residents to have more children.

Over the past few years, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore—with Hong Kong, sometimes called the "Asian tigers" for their rapid economic growth in the 1970s and '80s—have unveiled policies directed at filling maternity wards, and fast. The impetus is a fear that the pool of workers that drove the East Asian boom will soon dry up. The three countries' total fertility rates, or the number of children a woman is expected to have over her lifetime, hover between 1.1 and 1.3—beneath the threshold of what demographers call "lowest-low fertility" and among the lowest in the world.

Not long ago, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore were determined to reduce, not increase, their birth rates. In the 1960s and '70s, East Asian governments legalized or improved access to abortion, provided incentives for sterilizations and intrauterine device insertions, and pushed other measures, some of them draconian. Western money and expertise helped. In South Korea, the U.S. Agency for International Development furnished reconditioned Army ambulances that became mobile birth control clinics.

Some now question the wisdom of these methods, which resulted in high abortion rates and left other lasting social effects, and in the case of Singapore included eugenic policies at moments. But few dispute that they contributed to a rapid drop in births. In South Korea, the total fertility rate fell from an average of six children per woman in 1960 to replacement rate, 2.1 children, in 1984. Demographers say falling birth rates contributed to what is called a "demographic dividend": a period of breakneck economic

growth as the proportion of working-age people in the population rises. But few anticipated how far birth rates would ultimately fall. "The family planning program was maybe too successful," says Ik-ki Kim, a sociologist at Dongguk University in Seoul. The decrease in South Korea's fertility rate, he says, was "very rapid."

Leaders worry that a ballooning dependency ratio, signaled by a large proportion of retirees, will strain their economies, bankrupting the education system and bur-

issued a white paper on low fertility and aging. All three countries now give subsidies for births, or so-called baby bonuses, in amounts varying from \$200 for middle-class Singaporean families to \$2800 for third births on one Taiwanese island.

More fantastically, Taiwan offers all-expenses-paid getaways for single state employees, and once they've partnered up urges them to participate in group marriages of dozens of couples presided over by dignitaries. The Singapore government, meanwhile, operates a dating site, <http://www.lovebyte.org.sg/>, aimed at boosting the marriage rate.

Scholars in both Singapore and Taiwan are also studying the example of countries like Sweden and France, which have suc-

cessfully reversed declining birth rates after unveiling a slew of pro-family policies. But even there, says Hans-Peter Kohler, an expert on low fertility at the University of Pennsylvania's Population Studies Center, there is little concrete evidence explaining why the birth rate has risen. "There is not a clear consensus on the policy mix that would translate into higher fertility," he says.

Minja Kim Choe, a demographer at the East-West Center in Honolulu, says baby bonuses have been shown to influence the timing but not the number of births in the countries outside Asia where they've been tried. In the end, East Asia really needs a comprehensive, parent-centered approach to fertility, she wrote in an e-mail: "Only

policies that reduce the economic, social, and psychological costs of raising children have some hope of raising fertility."

Wen-shan Yang, a demographer at Academia Sinica in Taipei who advises the Taiwanese government on its birth policy, agrees. After decades of furious development, he says, the answer may lie not in extolling marriage or sex but in simply enabling couples to live more balanced lives. "Young people work until 9 or 10 p.m.," he says. "They don't have time to have babies. They are too tired."

Next year, East Asia may be helped along by the lunar calendar: 2012 is the year of the dragon, which is considered a lucky time to have a child. Leaders hope any rise in the birth rate will be more than temporary.

—MARA HVISTENDAHL



Multiply. An only child pleads, "Who will play with me?" (left), and another Taiwanese poster proclaims, "Having a Child Will Complete Your Life."

dening hospitals and clinics. And so they have shifted course, unveiling new comprehensive policies—this time with the goal of encouraging rather than deterring births.

In Singapore, the first of the Asian tigers to adopt a pro-natalist stance, the transition was abrupt. The country closed its Family Planning and Population Board in 1986 and launched its New Population Policy in 1987, disseminating the slogans "Have Three or More Children If You Can Afford It" and "Abortion is Not a Method of Family Planning."

South Korea followed suit in 2005. Its latest government plan allots \$67 billion for increasing the birth rate. Taiwan's efforts have been more gradual, starting with an emphasis on marriage in 1990 and picking up steam in 2008, when the government