

BOOK REVIEW

THAILAND'S REPRODUCTIVE REVOLUTION: RAPID FERTILITY DECLINE IN A THIRD-WORLD SETTING. BY JOHN KNODEL, APHICHAT CHAMRATRITHIRONG, AND NIBHON DEBAVALYA. MADISON: UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN PRESS, 1987. PP. X11 + 251. \$45.00 (CLOTH); \$ 19.95 (PAPER).

Reviewed by Rene S. Desiderio

With publication of Thailand's Reproductive Revolution: Rapid Fertility Decline in a Third-World Setting, we have the first comprehensive study of the remarkable transformation in reproductive attitudes and behavior that has been taking place in Thailand over the last several decades. This period of social and demographic change, during which the 1962 total fertility rate declined from 6.4 births per woman to 3.6 births as of 1982 is so far-sweeping that the authors aptly call it a "reproductive revolution." John Knodel, who has been working with Thai demographic data since the early 1970s, and the two leading Thai demographers, Aphichat Chamratrithirong and Nibhon Debalaya, set themselves the goal of describing and explaining this revolution by "documenting the nature and extent of the changes that have taken place and explaining them in demographic, socio-economic, and cultural terms, including an assessment of the role of organized family-planning programs."

The book is neatly divided into ten chapters. The authors begin by placing Thailand in the context of fertility transition in the Third World. An overview of fertility levels and trends in the 15 largest countries as assessed by the United Nations in 1982 is presented. The figures clearly show that by the first half of the 1980s Thailand's fertility rate of 3.6 was the third lowest of these, with only the TFRs of China (2.3) and South Korea (2.5) being lower. And yet this remarkable fertility decline occurred at a time when the country was still predominantly rural and agrarian. The conceptual framework utilized in analyzing Thailand's fertility decline is also presented in the first chapter. The authors' contention is that all fertility determinants are operating within a cultural context specific to Thailand.

Chapter Two describes the approach of the study, which attempts to combine quantitative and qualitative research. This is achieved by drawing on a variety of sources with particular emphasis on national sample demographic surveys for quantitative data and directed focus-group sessions for qualitative data. When necessary, anthropological studies were utilized.

Chapter Three is devoted to a discussion of the basic social and economic changes which took place in Thailand during the 1960s and 1970s. The presentation of conventional statistical indices are very useful (despite their limitations) in portraying Thailand's stage of development, helping the reader to understand the socioeconomic context of the changing reproductive patterns. In the same vein, Chapter Four provides an overview of recent fertility trends and other demographic concerns such as completed and desired family size, and gender preferences.

Chapters Five and Six, which I find to be the most engaging, focus on the proximate determinants of reproductive change. The former chapter devotes itself entirely to quantitative evidence. This is the most analytical chapter, providing an excellent assessment of the relative contribution of the key proximate determinants to the recent fertility decline. It is evident from the data that increased contraceptive use was the main proximate determinant accounting for this decline. The contributions of changes in the proportion married and the assumed increase in abortion are substantial but of much smaller magnitudes.

Chapter Six complements the preceding one by providing qualitative evidence, as drawn from the

results of the focus group sessions and anthropological studies. It is interesting to note that the results emerging from this approach are quite compatible with those obtained in Chapter Five.

Chapter Seven explores the relations between family size and the perceived cost of living, as brought about by monetization of daily life, extensive market penetration of the countryside, and changing consumer aspirations. Inevitably, the net cost of children comes to the fore. While available data could not validate Caldwell's concept of intergenerational wealth flows, the authors provide conclusive evidence that "whether or not there have been major changes in the benefits of children, their increased costs have resulted in an almost universal perception among Thai couples that large families are not affordable under present-day social and economic conditions." The response to these conditions taken by most Thais was to turn to planned family limitation.

Chapter Eight draws attention to the clear absence of pronatalist props often found in Third World countries. In Thailand, the locus of reproductive decisions largely rests on the couple themselves while female autonomy is relatively high. The majority religion, Buddhism, is generally silent with regard to reproductive behavior while also emphasizing the primacy of individual action and responsibility. The authors argue that these factors and the relative cultural homogeneity of Thai society have contributed to the extent and pace of fertility decline. In addition, the extensive government family planning service network likewise played an important role in precipitating and facilitating fertility change.

Chapter Nine focuses on the different channels by which the means of fertility reduction spread throughout Thai society. The government's family planning program, in particular, was a critical source of contraceptive supplies and information about family limitation. The legitimation provided by the program facilitated the rapid adoption of birth control. One factor, however, which is given relatively little attention by the authors is the important role that international agencies played in the early years of the program. As reported by the United Nations Population Fund, assistance came in various forms--commodity support (oral pills, condoms, medical kits and mobile family planning units), training of village communicators and "wechakorn" (barefoot doctors), and counterpart funds to match the internal resources allocated for family planning. The contribution of these agencies, and the Thai Government's "open door" policy towards the setting up of private and voluntary organizations, must have given a substantial boost to the drive for fertility control.

The final chapter provides an excellent summary of the basic arguments regarding the causes and conditions behind Thailand's rapid fertility decline. In short, the interaction of the program with other social changes, as complemented by a relatively favorable political and cultural setting, resulted in a virtual reproductive revolution.

While it is unrealistic to assume that the Thai experience can be duplicated in other developing countries like the Philippines, it is instructive to note both the programmatic and non-programmatic factors that contribute to the success of a population program. In the Philippine setting, it is important to take into consideration the economic setting, the status of women, the role of the Catholic Church and of international donor agencies, the institutional structure and management capability of the government offices responsible for the population program, and the government's priorities and commitment to the program. Viewed in this light, the Thai experience lends considerable relevance to understanding better the demographic and development dynamics in the Philippines.

The book is definitely a welcome addition to the demographic literature on Third World fertility. A major contribution is its attempt to combine quantitative and qualitative data for the study of demographic behavior. This is a bold and encouraging initiative in a field dominated by quantitative research. Another substantive contribution of the book is its lucid treatment of the proximate determinants. I have never encountered such a clear exposition of Bongaart's model as that presented

the authors in Chapter Five.

Yet despite these notable contributions, the book has a number of shortcomings. First, while it is commendable that the study gave more than cursory consideration to the "importance of indigenous cultures in conditioning reproductive behavior," there was, on the other hand, a tendency to overshadow the quantitative data. In attempting to combine two different techniques, the problem of devoting equal attention to both approaches come to the fore. A second criticism is related to the first; namely, that there was no attempt to measure the relative effects of the known causes of the fertility decline. It would have been better if the interactive effects of these independent variables could have been demonstrated. Third, while the use of focus group sessions is a valuable tool for gaining insight into people's attitudes and behavior, this technique does run the risk of generating some unfortunate effects--e.g., by inhibiting individual articulation, or by drawing out some respondents, even as others are subtly encouraged to succumb to "audience effects."

These limitations notwithstanding, this is a valuable piece of work on the subject. Knodel and his Thai colleagues have made an important contribution by providing a definitive account of Thailand's demographic transition. I have no doubt that this book will be of great interest to demographers and all others concerned with population and societal change, not only in Thailand but also the Philippines and the rest of the Third World.