

Excerpts from:

Manuel, Gren. 1999. Waking up to the baby blues: Faced with a declining birth rate, the Government is working on a population policy for the SAR. *South China Morning Post*.

“With the streets becoming ever more crowded and public concern at rising population levels, it seems difficult to believe that Hong Kong is facing an acute shortage of babies. But the facts are stark: government hopes for a post-handover baby boom have faded, and Hong Kong's birth rate, already one of the lowest in the world, is falling still further to below even the levels of Singapore and Japan. This is one of the factors behind the Government's move to create, for the first time, a population policy for Hong Kong and its 6.8 million inhabitants.”

“In the 1950s and 1960s Hong Kong had a baby boom as the new immigrants sought stability through having a family of five or more children, but by the mid- 1970s fertility rates were already below replacement level. By around 1986 fertility rates were about 1.4 and this was assumed to be a steady level. But around 1993 it had started dipping again. The Sino-British row and the uncertainties of the handover were blamed, and official projections assumed it would jump back to 1.4 as the handover passed and a more stable outlook had emerged. Instead, it has continued to fall. In 1998, the average number of babies for each woman had dropped to 0.98. Today's Hong Kong woman born between 1966 and 1976, now at the age that most women have children, has a more than 30 per cent chance of having no children.”

“Birth control and abortions are subsidised and available on demand, to both the married and unmarried. Subsidised health-care is keeping the elderly alive longer and the Hong Kong tax system encourages smaller families by reducing the tax allowances for third and subsequent children. In contrast, Singapore has had advertising campaigns with the slogan ‘Have three or more if you can afford it’ and tax breaks of up to S\$ 20,000 (HK\$ 93,000) for third and subsequent children. However, fertility levels are still falling.”

“Mr Luis says ‘Hong Kong does not have a population problem’ if people can easily be moved across the border. If Hong Kong has too few youngsters, he says ‘We can just import them. If we go to China and invite applications to emigrate to Hong Kong, say of a certain age, then they will come.’”

“Professor Liu Pak-wai of Chinese University's Department of Economics says that perhaps surprisingly, it would be better if an adult migrant had come earlier to Hong Kong because the Government would have been better off if it had invested in their education. The usual argument is that a flood of child migrants would drain educational budgets. But his figures show the Government can make a return - very roughly around 10 per cent - on every dollar spent giving a child an extra year at school because the adults that produces then boost the economy. His argument is that on economic grounds alone it is vital to let as many children come to Hong Kong as soon as possible and get them into the Hong Kong educational system. ‘My suggestion is clear the backlog as soon as possible,’ he says.”