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This work analyses changes in family patterns (marital and other) and their impact at the individual and family levels in the societies of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore. For the authors, these changes reflect those that have occurred in the family institution at large as well as economic and social transformations in Insular Southeast Asia. Across these socio-culturally and economically heterogeneous societies, the finding is that marriage remains the norm for forming a new household and a prerequisite for having children.

The strength of the work, aimed at a specialist readership, is that its analyses are based on both quantitative and qualitative data – censuses, surveys, civil registers; ethnographic studies, in-depth interviews, case studies – and its authors are from a variety of disciplines: demography, sociology and anthropology. The analyses emphasize the profound differences between countries and regions, urban and rural areas, and ethnic and socio-economic groups within countries. Moreover, the way the work is organized ensures strong argument consistency. The introductory chapter reviews the main changes in the countries' economic structures, their rapid urbanization, how their migration and labour markets have evolved, the lengthening of female education and reorganization of women's roles. Part I draws on quantitative data spanning the years 1961 to 2005 to present general regional trends: later marrying ages and a fall in number of marriages over the last decades, leading to lower fertility. It is important to note that despite the later mean age at marriage, teenage girls under 16 still marry, a situation that raises major public policy issues.

Part II comprises six chapters on the situation in Indonesia, where marriage continues nearly universal: fewer than five in 100 women are single after age 40. Contrary to what has been observed for Western countries and China, many single women over age 30 have low educational attainment and are of modest socio-economic origin. This new social group, the result of urbanization and rapid industrialization as well as increased female labour market participation, is socially stigmatized.

The four chapters of Part III examine marriage patterns and trends in Malaysia, showing among other things that later marrying age, singlehood, and divorce are now more matters of personal choice.

The last part of the book focuses on the Philippines and Singapore. In the Philippines, members of the most disadvantaged socio-economic groups marry latest and cohabit outside formal union more often than others groups. However, their dearest hope is to marry as soon as they have the financial resources, to put an end to the social stigma attaching to cohabitation. In Singapore, having children outside marriage is sanctioned with particular severity while the rising marriage age and singlehood directly impact on fertility. To counter these trends, the government authorities have implemented a set of pro.birth, pro-family
measures. Educated, economically independent women no longer perceive of marriage as a necessity but as desirable if they meet the “right person,” a man with whom they will be able to construct an equal relationship. Social hypergamy is no longer the rule for women, whose own educational level has been continuously rising. The trend is toward partners with the same educational level, a situation that could stabilize and perhaps reduce the number of unmarried university-educated women.

This book is of considerable interest, not least for the new data it contains on marriage dynamics in Southeast Asia. It would be interesting to compare its findings with those on China, Taiwan, South Korea and Japan, and to relate the book’s analyses to the theory of individualization, as Tey Nai Peng does somewhat obliquely in Chapter 10.

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