

# Section Four – Introduction

## Childhood and Youth in Southeast Asia: Confronting Diversity and Social Change

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### Abstract

In the following, the region of Southeast Asia will be introduced by offering an overview of the recent developments regarding demographic transition, socioeconomic change, social inequality and the diversification of migration patterns. We will sketch out, how young people fare in the face of these conditions, especially with regard to their own or their families' mobilities. Finally, the four contributions of this section, each reflecting a specific context of Southeast Asia's transnational societies and the related inter-generational dynamics, will be introduced.

*Keywords:* ASEAN; demographic transition; socioeconomic change; inequality; well-being; migration

### General Information on the Region

Southeast Asia (in the following referred to as the SEA region) consists of 11 countries lying east of the Indian subcontinent and south of China: Brunei, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, Timor-Leste, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. The region's total population is currently estimated to amount to 686 million people, accounting for approximately 8.5% of the world population (Worldometer, 2023). Despite sharing some historical experience and ways of living, *diversity* has always been a salient characteristic of the SEA region (Yeung et al., 2018). The region's feature of diversity can be traced in the histories as well as in the present political, cultural

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and social figurations in the 11 countries of Southeast Asia. This is most evident especially in the region's youngest history, including the heterogenous decolonisation and nation building processes that can be characterised not only by "a great deal of political and intellectual conflict" but also by "an outpouring of new ideas and creativity" (Frederick, 2018, n.p.). In the following, selected aspects of the changing Southeast Asian societies, and the ways in which they become relevant for families' and young people's lives, will be presented.

To do so, we include statistical data and qualitative studies to provide a more complex understanding of these social processes. We emphasise on their implications to children and young people by deliberately using studies with an explicit child-centred approach – highlighting children's views – and identifying gaps wherever necessary. This chapter does not aim to depict the whole heterogeneity of lived childhoods and youth in SEA nor does it provide a comprehensive state of scholarship on the matter. Instead, it offers a rough sketch of key processes of social change in SEA, the multiple realities that shape young people's lives and how young people, in turn, shape these realities.

*Demographic Transition:* In Southeast Asia, total fertility rates have sharply decreased from five to seven in most SEA countries to one to three in the four decades between 1970 and 2010 (Yeung et al., 2018, p. 470). The opposite direction can be traced for females' age at first marriage which has risen from 19 to 23 years in 1970 to 21–27 years in 2010 (Yeung et al., 2018, p. 471). These developments in SEA are in between those of East Asia where total fertility dropped in the 1990s close to or below replacement level, and South Asia where the development has been somewhat more modest. Southeast Asian countries can be considered at different stages and paces of demographic transformations, the reasons of which are manifold. These include factors such as social and economic developments. But as Yeung et al. (2018) argue, distinct features like colonial experience, kinship patterns and gender norms as well as religious, cultural and ethnic diversity add to the heterogeneity of the demographic processes in the area (Yeung et al., 2018). For example, the authors contrast (Buddhist-dominated) Southeast Asian kinship patterns with those of Southern Asia, the former being more flexible in terms of inheritance and residential arrangements, and with a clear preference for matrilocality (Yeung et al., 2018, p. 473).

*Economic development and social inequality:* Most SEA countries have succeeded in economic advancement, especially through industrialisation in the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) since the 1960s. While Singapore became known as one of the four 'Tiger states' representing one of the world's largest and most innovative commercial centres, other countries in SEA have developed their economies in different ways and paces. However, all have reached the status of (mostly low) middle-income countries in the new millennium (Tran, 2013, p. 11). In general, this has contributed to an overall gain in living standards, life expectancy and health of the population in general as well as for children, and is associated with the improvement of school enrolment rates (especially for girls, cf. Yeung et al., 2018, p. 477) and child protection (UNICEF, 2019; United Nations, 2019). It becomes obvious, however, when examined per country, that not all social groups in SEA countries have profited from the economic advancements in the same way.

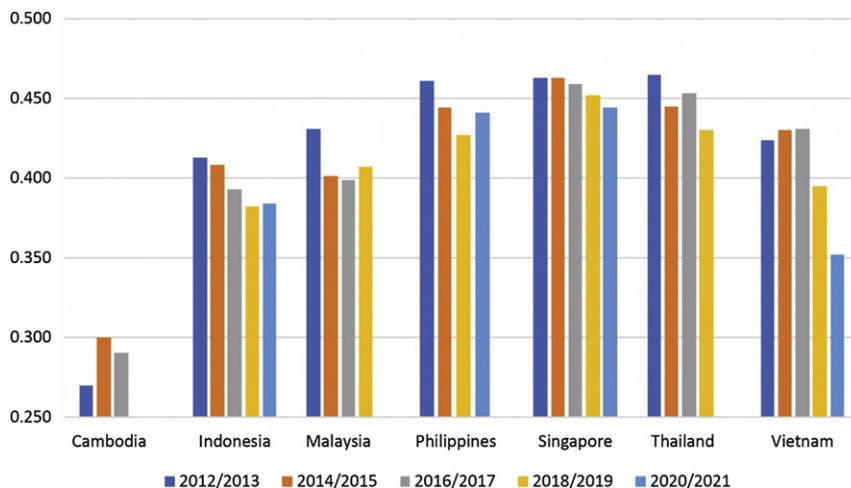


Fig. 1. Gini Coefficients in Selected ASEAN Countries 2012–2021 (as far as data is available). *Data source: ASEAN Statistical Yearbook (2022).*

Fig. 1 shows the Gini coefficients for selected SEA countries in the decade between 2012 and 2021. They point to the high variety of inequality between countries and non-linear developments in recent years, suggesting that the overall socioeconomic advancement in the region plays out very differently between and within the countries and may produce new vulnerabilities for specific social groups. According to UNICEF (2019, p. 53):

While poverty rates have fallen overall, there remain considerable variations within and between ASEAN countries, with sizeable pockets of poverty. These pockets of poverty may be demographic in nature (for example, among certain ethnic groups or household types), geographic (in the case of marginalized regions or sub-regions) or, increasingly, may reflect lower skilled workers in urban settings.

Nearly 25 million children in the region are estimated to suffer from multi-dimensional poverty (UNICEF, 2019, p. 15). Despite the countries' growing (though heterogenous) investments into social welfare policies for children, individual (extended) families are oftentimes the primary units of managing social change and of developing strategies to escape poverty (Furuto, 2013; De Los Angeles-Bantista, 2004).

*Migration as a regional and transnational phenomenon in Southeast Asia:* Migration has been for centuries and still is a large-scale phenomenon in the SEA region, with 23.6 million persons living away from their country of origin. Among

them, 15 million remain in Asia, 10.6 million in the region, and 7.1 even stay in the subregion (MDP, 2023). For transnational migration, as well as for domestic migration, rural-to-rural as well as rural-to-urban mobilities are common. Reasons for migration range from escaping political or environmental instability to family reunion or access to education. However, labour migration is by far the most common reason. Migration can be considered a “multigenerational poverty reduction strategy” (IOM, 2019, p. 48), reflecting the persistence of high regional differences in economic opportunities within the sub-region. Countries with stronger economies such as Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia are main destination countries for migration within the region. The main countries of origin are Indonesia, the Philippines, Myanmar and Vietnam (MDP, 2023). However, migration patterns are complex, especially at the face of growing educational levels, globalisation and transportation systems (MDP, 2023). While serving (in many cases successfully) as a poverty reduction strategy, migration also produces new vulnerabilities (e.g. exploitation) which are shouldered to varying degrees by different social groups (divided by gender, age, place of residence, ethnicity etc.).

## **Qualities of Growing Up in Southeast Asia**

Demographic transitions, socioeconomic development with its inherent inequalities, as well as the diversification of migration patterns as outlined above all have distinct, but again very diverse implications for children’s and young people’s lives.

*Growing up in smaller families and households:* For children, the above sketched demographic change implies that they are likely to grow up in smaller households, with fewer siblings and extended family members than their parents and grandparents did. In a comparative study by UNESCO on Thailand, the Philippines and Vietnam, Los Angeles-Bantista points to the advantages of demographic change: growing up with fewer siblings implies receiving “more of everything”, resulting in better health, education and well-being (2004, p. 5). This sufficiency or even abundance of resources, she argues, can even act as a “protective cushion” in times of crisis, such as economic downturns (2004, p. 6). However, demographic change also comes with disadvantages for children. For example, growing up with fewer siblings also means missing out on valuable experiences offered only by multiple sibling interactions and lifelong bonds with siblings (2004, p. 5). In the case of the Philippines and Malaysia, having more siblings serves as a source of “family immunity” as seen among commuter marriages. In this arrangement, brothers not only support each other for work (e.g. farming and fishing). When they are away, their wives also extend help to their left-behind families and parents (Gregorio, 2022). In the Philippines in particular, because of several demographic changes (e.g. smaller family size, improvement in longevity) as well as labour migration, the pool of caregivers is reduced while the number of elderly individuals in need of care is on the rise (Abalos et al., 2018). As children grow older, the reduced number of siblings also implies, that filial obligations towards the parents cannot be shared with (several) others. However, the implications demographic transformation processes have on children’s lives and

experiences, on intergenerational relations and on social structures such as the generational order more broadly are not yet understood very well.

*Children's Well-being:* Taking a closer look at children's well-being and the way it is measured in SEA, [Bin Aedy Rahman and Yuda \(2022\)](#) reflect that overall scores are lower than in East Asia (cf. also [Cho, 2015](#)). The authors criticise that child well-being in SEA countries is in a subordinate position in social policy making and mostly subsumed under the family. They plea for a child-centred approach to measuring child well-being, as well as the development of a conceptual framework which is more fit with the lives of children in the SEA region, their families and their environment than global standards are ([Bin Aedy Rahman & Yuda, 2022](#), p. 5). Differentiating child well-being along the four domains of health, education, household and protection, [Bin Aedy Rahman and Yuda \(2022, p. 19\)](#) conclude that:

The richer and more developed countries like Singapore have emerged as leaders in this comparative assessment of child well-being in almost all domains. By contrast, the least developed and poorer countries like Myanmar and Timor-Leste have performed worse than other countries across the Southeast Asia region. The strength of the richer and developed countries like Singapore and Brunei as well as developing countries like Malaysia, Vietnam, and Thailand lies primarily on their good performances in the household domain.

This household domain was assessed by a combination of indicators on basic necessities like access to electricity, clean fuels and technology for cooking, basic drinking water services as well as sanitation and hygiene ([Bin Aedy Rahman & Yuda, 2022](#)). The findings suggest that while SEA countries' socioeconomic development is associated with overall advancement in well-being, it is decisive whether it plays out in the household as a microsystem in which children live ([Bin Aedy Rahman & Yuda, 2022](#), p. 7). Considering developments in the field of child well-being research methodology, it is to be welcomed that the authors develop child-centred approaches and call for a context-specific conceptualisation that considers local features. However, the children's subjective perspective on their well-being is largely missing in Southeast Asian research. The Children's Worlds report from 2020 hints at the discontent of children in SEA with several aspects of their lifeworlds, and with low scores of overall subjective well-being in all three participating countries (Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam) ([Rees et al., 2020](#), p. 27). Qualitative approaches, which allow to consider local or regional particularities (as proposed, for example, by the international [CUWB Research Group](#), cf. [Fattore et al., 2019](#)), are needed to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of the factors hindering (and advancing) SEA children's (subjective) quality of life.

*Children and youths as (labour)migrants:* According to a report by the NGO Save the Children ([West, 2008](#)), children in the SEA region have participated in migration movements in different ways, with or without their parents, for many

years. They migrate both in-country and internationally for a variety of (and often multiple) reasons, e.g. for work in order to contribute to family income (or reducing household burden), to obtain education, to live with other relatives or to escape violence and abuse (West, 2008, p. 22). Their migration patterns are complex, including for example “unskilled migration such as that of child domestic workers moving from Lao PDR and Vietnam to Cambodia, and children moving from Myanmar and Vietnam into China” (West, 2008, p. 3). In the report, children’s migration is related to a growing demand for (unskilled) labour in informal sectors, such as domestic work, the fishing industry and agriculture, especially in those regions where local work force is sparse. However, children’s migration is difficult to grasp empirically and conceptually. According to West, a variety of terms other than “migrants” have been applied, such as street children, working children, child domestic workers, children in conflict with the law or trafficked children. They all point to different degrees of problematisation and moralisation of children’s (labour) mobilities, and lead to different types of interventions by governments and NGOs (West, 2008, p. 4).

Further research, which is informed by childhood theory, focuses especially on precarious forms of children’s labour and migration, such as child prostitution (Montgomery, 2001) or child trafficking (Huijsmans & Baker, 2012). The authors present dense in-depth accounts from their ethnographic studies in which they emphasise children’s experiences and agency. While children’s suffering and exploitation becomes evident, the authors nevertheless warn against over-simplifying and under-complex interpretations – in (globalised) media discourses or in policies and interventions launched by international organisations. For example, Huijsmans’ and Baker’s analysis lead the authors to critique the dominance of categories such as “child trafficking” when children’s migration is discussed. Initially meant as a term to fight the “worst forms of child labour” (ILO, 2008, p. 3), the anti-trafficking approach, the authors argue, has come to dominate debates on child migration policy, resulting in interventions to remove or discourage children from migration altogether. This may worsen, rather than add to, the quality of children’s living conditions (Huijsmans & Baker, 2012). Based on their own research, Huijsmans and Baker offer an approach which understands child migration as “intrinsically related to wider processes of change” (ibid., p. 941), and accounts for the scopes and limitations of young migrants’ agency and their efforts in negotiating the structural relations behind exploitative work arrangements.

## **New Vulnerabilities of Children’s Lives in Transnational Southeast Asia – and New Ways to Research Them**

In the following, some more recent phenomena regarding children’s lives in SEA will be presented which relate strongly to transnational dynamics, and which produce new vulnerabilities for children, as well as new – child-centred – research perspectives.

Regarding the ways children are involved in migration, a topic which has already received a great deal of attention globally is that of ‘left behind children’ whose parents leave for work (mostly temporarily) either to urban areas or abroad. The Philippines, with 6,094,307 emigrants in 2020 (MDP, 2023), are considered the number one sending country of labour migrants in the region, and due to a high share of female emigrants (54%, MDP, 2023), the issue of left behind children is especially pronounced (Parreñas, 2005). However, much of the research has focused on questions of transnational motherhood and the (re)distribution of care work in transnational families. Because of this, child-centred perspectives have long been a lacuna in migration research. In recent years, a growing body of research is emerging with growing attention to the perspective of “left behind children” in SEA countries, for example the CHAMPSEA project (Hoang & Yeoh, 2015; Lam & Yeoh, 2019) and other related works (de los Reyes, 2020; Somaiah et al., 2019). These studies add to the understanding of how children and youths experience parental migration processes, including the decision to leave (and to return), on (new) care arrangements and the emergence and negotiation of practices of “doing family” at a distance. In addition to that, immobility is an emerging concept used to capture children’s migration and mobility related dynamics (Bélanger & Silvey, 2020; Hertzman, 2020). A diversification of child-centred perspectives on children’s mobilities in Asia is reflected in several special issues, e.g. of *Children’s Geographies (Children and Young People’s Emotions of Migration across Asia)*, Vol. 16/6, 2018 and the special section *Asian Children and Transnational Migration*, Vol. 13/3, 2015), each including several contributions on SEA contexts. For an overview on transnational, including South-to-South migration in Asia, see [Parreñas et al. \(2022\)](#) in the introduction of their special issue on *Children and Youth in Asian Migration*. In this issue, the editors draw attention to the emergence of children’s “unlikely” destinations, as demonstrated by contributions on the flow of Korean migrants to the Philippines, Vietnamese migrants to Cambodia and Korean-Vietnamese children to Vietnam ([Parreñas et al., 2022](#), p. 220).

A pressing concern regarding children’s lives in SEA countries which has hardly been touched by research are the consequences of climate change, conflict and violence. Southeast Asia is particularly vulnerable to environmental disasters, including earthquakes, volcanic activity, tropical storms and flooding, as well as other consequences of global warming. Natural disasters lead to steadily rising numbers of new displacements in the region, with the highest amounts in 2021 being 700,000 in the Philippines, and 155,000 in Indonesia ([IDMC, 2022](#), p. 51). While international organisations like UNICEF demand to accelerate child-sensitive climate actions in the SEA region ([UNICEF, 2019](#), p. 77), research is needed to understand the social, economic and health-related consequences of natural disasters for children in the region. Displacements due to conflict and violence are also highly alarming, especially in Myanmar where 649,000 people were displaced in 2021 ([IDMC, 2022](#), p. 52).

In addition to internal and regional mobilities, children from SEA families are also involved in migration of more permanent character, with families settling in the diaspora of either other Asian or Western countries, such as Australia, the

United States or European countries. Migration from the SEA region to Western countries as a large scale phenomenon has started in the 1960s and continues until today. Reasons for Southeast Asians to migrate to Western countries are heterogeneous, comprising of forced migration due to conflict and war, migration for work (Geddes, 2021) and, more recently, for (higher) education, particularly within Asia (Ha & Fry, 2021; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2020). Research has focused on the intergenerational dimension of families' adaptive processes, especially when cultural norms and values of the destination country differ from those of the SEA country of origin. Since the descendants of SEA migrants grow up and integrate in the social orders and institutions of the destination country, tensions are reported resulting from discrepancies between parents' and children's (cultural) orientations and paces of assimilation (Qiu et al., 2011). At the same time, an orientation towards the ethnic community, its language, religious and social practices has been associated with advantages in academic achievement, e.g. for Vietnamese-American students in a well-known study by Bankston and Zhou (1998). In addition to such integration-related issues, visible Asian ethnic minorities are confronted with the "model minority" stereotype in Western countries – as well as anti-Asian racism – pointing to the positive and negative reductionist identifications as 'Asian' (e.g. Barber, 2015; Ngo & Lee, 2007).

## **Contextualising the Contributions of This Section**

The preceding sections have offered a broad overview of the heterogeneity (and the inequality) of childhoods and youths in Southeast Asia at the face of transformative social processes regarding demographic, socioeconomic and migratory developments in the region. The presentation of (selected) studies has also shown that much of the research is conducted and published by NGOs and international organisations, which usually aim at monitoring and implementing children's rights and respective policy-making or focus on specific groups of children. In addition, a growing body of research on Southeast Asian contexts is emerging from the (interdisciplinary) field of childhood studies. Studies from this field are mostly undertaken by scholars from Western countries and often chose contexts of pronounced precarity and young people's impressive ways of dealing with all kinds of adversities and impositions. Meanwhile, the studies presented in the four contributions of this sub-section turn their attention to what may be called rather 'ordinary' childhoods and youths in SEA (and its diasporas), which are nevertheless shaped fundamentally by ongoing processes of social change in the region. By offering fine-grained insights into the ways young people position themselves in their families, peer groups, society at large as well as in transnational social spaces, the four contributions add to a contextualised and comprehensive understanding of Southeast Asian societies and of growing up therein.

*Giuseppe Bolotta* focuses on Thailand as a Southeast Asian society with pronounced episodes of social change within the last decades, involving political protest and activism by very different groups and actors. Giuseppe in his

contribution spotlights Thailand's youth activists as protagonists of current movements who are not only voicing critique against the patriarchal government. Rather, they are shaking fundamental pillars of Thai society's moral order by questioning the traditional generational order and children's unquestionable respect to elders. Giuseppe's findings suggest that (symbolic and mediated) collective experiences on a peer-level are at the core of young people's protests and motor of transnational and transcultural hybridisation processes. Interestingly, the notion of collective family solidarity is not given up but rather reframed and reconstructed by aligning with activists from their parents' generation in terms of "engaged siblinghood".

With young Filipinos refusing the mobility imperative, *Elizer Jay de los Reyes* offers insights into another, strongly political and yet utmost private issue in a country where notions of the 'good life' are tied closely with an imperative to migrate abroad. Elizer Jay's interviews with left-behind children reveal that the young imagine their futures 'at home' with their families. In doing so, they do not simply make a different choice than their parents did, but critically reflect on a social construction of the 'good life' that is upheld not only by their parents, but also by the government, their communities, as well as commercial structures. Elizer Jay's approach is refreshing as he goes beyond the questions usually discussed when it comes to the experiences and views of left-behind children (mainly their coping with issues evolving around the absence or return of their parents). His study reveals that children critically reflect the normativity of migrating as well as their parents' migratory decisions and lifestyles. However, also here, young people's commitment to family obligations becomes apparent, hinting at the challenges of adhering to moral norms and stretching them at the same time in order to develop their own life plans.

The two remaining chapters by Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot and Jessica Schwittek, Doris Bühler-Niederberger and Kamila Labuda focus on contexts of migration from Southeast Asian societies to European societies. Both studies are mainly concerned with the cultural gap that migrant families are required to deal with. *Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot* investigates the logics of forenaming in Filipino-Belgian mixed families living in Belgium. Her study reveals that families may pursue the goal of either emphasising their children's individuality through single forenames or that of reinforcing collective affiliations – to both Belgium and the Philippines – by choosing compound forenames. Asuncion puts to the fore children's strong symbolic role as "social bridges" – built to reconcile parents' wishes of connecting with different nations, ethnic and cultural identities and their own parent or grandparent generation. And while forenaming in itself rarely offers opportunities of children's participation, Asuncion's analysis shows that children engage in several practices of interpreting, evaluating and of using or abandoning the forename(s) given to them.

The study by Jessica Schwittek, Doris Bühler-Niederberger and Kamila Labuda focuses on Vietnamese migrant families in Germany and their processes of reworking generational order in their families. The authors identify the emergence of a hybrid family pattern which they term "individualized interdependence". The concept draws together the study's findings that the notion of

family solidarity remains strong, but it is constructed as an intimate space in which mutual obligations and support are based on the acknowledgement of each other's individuality and (personal) wishes. This is especially interesting as individualisation is not only claimed by the young generation for themselves (a finding that is quite typical for members of the 'second generation' in several migrant communities in Germany); but that they demand that their parents should also live out their individuality. A complex balancing of different notions of intergenerational solidarity and rights and duties between parents and children becomes apparent, and much effort is taken to keep the family together. Individualisation is not understood as contradicting collective orientations and is not constructed as an either-or-decision by the interviewees. Instead, they engage in complex and time-consuming negotiations to arrive at viable solutions, again bridging (traditional) family solidarity patterns from Western Europe and Southeast Asia.

All four contributions portray young people in different countries and contexts, all of them facing different types of challenges and choosing different ways of dealing with them: they contribute to bridging the old and the new with their own names; they demand new and more open relationships through public protest and yet also borrow symbols from their own culture; they deal with their "left-behind" childhoods or try to adjust their family relationships to the opportunities of the immigration country. However, their different strategies follow a common thrust, and that is that they all aim to reconstitute and rebuild social relationships, which are heavily loaded emotionally and as well symbolically. The relations the young people (re)build are family structured, their ideal ultimately being connections of a communal kind, siblinghood, a new individualised intimacy, being together with the (extended) family, the connection between ancestors and the new. This drive towards *relationality*, an emphasis of connection – rather than separation – especially when the young position themselves in opposition and criticism of elders and authorities, is remarkable and calls for further research on young people's particular ways of encountering diversity and social change.

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