



International Spotlight

Aging in Multi-ethnic Malaysia

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Received July 30, 2015; Accepted September 17, 2015

Decision Editor: Rachel Pruchno, PhD

Abstract

Multiethnic Malaysia provides a unique case study of divergence in population aging of different sociocultural subgroups within a country. Malaysia represents 3 major ethnicities in Asia—the Malay, Chinese, and Indian. The 3 ethnic groups are at different stages of population aging, as they have undergone demographic transition at different pace amidst rapid social and economic changes. Between 1991 and 2010, the Malaysian population aged 60 and over has more than doubled from about 1 million to 2.2 million, and this is projected to rise to about 7 million or 17.6% of the projected population of 40 million by 2040. In 2010, the aging index ranged from 22.8% among the Bumiputera (Malays and other indigenous groups), to 31.4% among the Indians and 55.0% among the Chinese. Population aging provides great challenges for Malaysia's social and economic development. The increasing prevalence of noncommunicable diseases in older adults, coupled with the erosion of the traditional family support system has increased demands on health care services with an overwhelming need for multidisciplinary and specialized geriatric care. Following the adoption of the National Policy for the Elderly in 1995, issues of population aging have gained increasing attention, especially among researchers. There is an urgent need to increase public awareness, develop infrastructure, as well as support action oriented research that will directly translate to comprehensive and cohesive social strategies, policies, and legislation to protect not just the current older Malaysians but the future of all Malaysians.

Keywords: Aging population, Older adults, Health, Ethnic groups, Bumiputera, Malays, Chinese, Indians

Asia's population aged 60 and over is projected to increase from 507.95 million (or 11.6% of the population) in 2015 to 1,293.7 million (or 24.6% of the total population) by 2050 (United Nations, 2015). The speed of aging in Asia is unprecedented and poses great challenges to existing models of caregiving and social support (McCutcheon & Pruchno, 2011). The policies and systems in some countries

are lacking for this dramatic demographic shift (Arun, 2013; Sasat & Bowers, 2013; Zhang, Guo, & Zheng, 2012).

Malaysia, a multiethnic country, provides a unique insight into the diversity of population aging in Asia. Its population comprises of two of the largest ethnic groups in the world—Chinese and Indians, in addition to Malay