

## Who's afraid of a Tiger baby?

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Birth rate may not dip as much as in previous Tiger years as economics trump Chinese zodiac

WHEN couples plan their families nowadays, it is not the almanac they reach for to find an 'auspicious' year.

Rather, they cast an eye on the economy and ask themselves: Is this a good time to have a baby? Can we afford one? What about childcare logistics?

This was the consensus among observers *The Straits Times* spoke to, but it is still noteworthy that each time a Year of the Tiger rolls around, fewer babies are born here.

In the last three Tiger years - 1998, 1986 and 1974 - an average of 3,225 fewer infants were born than from the years before. This comes from more traditional Chinese seeing Tiger years as inauspicious, and Tiger children as temperamental, rebellious and unpredictable.

It is dismal news for Singapore this Tiger year. The fertility rate here has dipped below 2.1, which means couples are having, on average, fewer than 2.1 children, and the population is not growing fast enough to replace itself.

And as more people here get older, this baby shortage will hurt the economy's ability to grow and sustain itself long term, since every baby is a future worker, taxpayer and supporter of the old and the young.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, with an eye on the big picture, urged couples recently to have babies this year.

Observers already see the Chinese zodiac having less and less of a hold on when today's younger, pragmatic couples have their babies.

That the economy holds greater sway can be seen in that in the Year of the Ox last year, as the world still reeled from the 2008 financial crisis, the number of births here dipped by 172 from the previous year to 39,654.

Trend watchers predict the birth rate will continue to dip this Tiger year, though not by as much as in previous Tiger years while economies make a tentative recovery.

Dr Yap Mui Teng, a senior research fellow at the National University of Singapore's Institute of Policy Studies, said: 'The number of births here is already so low, it is hard to go even lower.'

Mr Jonathan Siew, a counsellor at Care Corner Counselling Centre, and Ms Chong Cheh Hoon, of advocacy group Focus on the Family, agree the cost of having a baby is ranked high among the barriers to having one.

After all, as life coach and marriage counsellor Ang Thiam Hong, 56, put it: 'Having children means heavy responsibilities - long-lasting ones that cannot simply be abandoned when one is tired.'

Film-maker and lecturer Boi Kwong, 32, and his wife April Tong, 30, will welcome their baby next month. Going by the almanac, it is best they have a baby in the Year of the Pig, given that he is a Horse and she, a Goat.

But they said they are not superstitious, and the next Pig year is not due until 2019. They do not intend to wait nine years, said Ms Tong.

Mr Kwong had a practical spin on the situation, saying that a child born in a year with fewer births will have less competition for places in schools.

For manager Amara See-Toh, 27, and her husband, childcare options, not the zodiac, are a concern, because they both work full time.

Sociologist and Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) Paulin Straughan said the current call to raise productivity at work could well make babies less of a priority for young couples trying to build their careers: 'There will be the perception that there is always going to be a 'next year' for having a baby.'

Cost and childcare issues aside, couples also want to be emotionally ready and be able to give the best to their child.

Despite these concerns, two couples pledged on Saturday to have babies in two years. At the launch of parenthood advocacy group I Love Children's parenthood resource centre - a roving double-decker bus carrying reference materials on parenthood - the couples climbed down a ladder and landed on a sticker in the shape of a baby cot.

One of the couples, newlyweds Kang Zhiping, 29, and his wife Joanne, 25, are open to the idea of a Tiger baby. She said: 'We're just hoping for a healthy one.'