

We Need 50,000 Babies a Year

Marriage and the Family in Singapore

By Chris Hudson



Singapore at night. Image source: <http://www.kellogg.northwestern.edu/student/gim/seasia2007/singapore.html>.

For the last four decades, issues around marriage and the family in Singapore have been prominent in public discourse and have been represented by the government as features of the economic and political agenda. It seems that, of all the social institutions in Singapore society, marriage and the family are those most often cited as integral to the long-term prosperity of the city-state. The Singapore government has a reputation for authoritarian-style management and a well documented history of attempts to influence people's lives, both public and private. This article examines marriage and the family in Singapore and considers the successes and failures of attempts to influence marriage and fertility patterns.

In 1991 the Singapore government published a manifesto for the future outlining not only national aspirations, but also some of the potential threats to Singapore's economic prosperity. Foremost among these was the problem of low birth rates. In that document, titled *The Next Lap*, Goh Chok Tong, the Prime Minister at the time, announced bluntly that: "We need 50,000 babies a year."¹ While Singapore suffers from extremely low birth rates, it is not alone among advanced societies, nor even Asian societies, as Imamura's articles point out in the case of Japan.² It is now some seventeen years since Goh's announcement, and despite a number of attempts before and after that time to change patterns of marriage and the family and to control fertility, there has been little increase in Singapore citizens' willingness to reproduce the nation in the physical sense.³ The birth rate remains below replacement levels.

BACKGROUND

Singapore is a republic of some 4.5 million people comprised of three main ethnic groups: Chinese, Malays, and Indians.⁴ It was a British colony from 1819 until full independence in 1965. Although Singapore's government functions as a British-type parliament, many observers have commented on its authoritarian style of government.⁵ Singapore sociologist Chua Beng Huat notes that authoritarian rule is seen in Singapore to be in the interest of good government, and, to distinguish it from its much-maligned Western model, is sometimes described, as "Asian-style democracy."⁶

In Singapore, the state is a significant presence in people's personal and domestic lives. The government's relationship with the citizenry, more direct and intrusive than in Western democracies, is carried out through the media. The People's Action Party (PAP) government effectively controls all media and has a history of using media

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sources to run campaigns designed to change people’s behavior.⁷ Government domination of public discourses has meant that many aspects of social behavior in Singapore are politicized—in particular marriage and the family—to an extent that is surprising to citizens of other developed nations. The family is imagined as the central social formation that provides cohesion to the nation. The fate of the family and the nation are promoted as inexorably linked, an idea enshrined in the national ideology and articulated in the “Shared Values” document that was tabled in parliament in 1991. This document is believed to express quintessentially Asian values and to capture the essence of being Singaporean. The values are: *Nation before community and society above self; Family as the basic unit of society; Regard and community support for the individual; Consensus instead of contention; Racial and religious harmony.* Ethnic and cultural differences that might engender different family forms are subsumed, and the nuclear family is given primacy as the core unit of the nation. The government describes the family as “the basic building block of society” or “the base camp” from which the young venture forth to begin their life struggle.⁸

Since the 1960s, Singapore has enjoyed spectacular economic development, so much so that it was known as one of the Asian “tiger” economies, when such terms were in vogue in the 1980s and early 1990s. From its early success as a colonial entrepôt economy, Singapore has become “a knowledge economy,” a regional center, an “IT hub,” a “global city,” a modern economy. It is the richest country in Asia outside Japan in terms of its gross national income. Singaporeans are known for their hardworking, pragmatic approach to life. They recognize their own society as highly competitive, success-focused and driven, and joke about the standard Singapore aspirations summarized in “the five Cs”—cash, car, condominium, credit card, and club membership.

THE CHANGING FORTUNES OF MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY IN SINGAPORE

Prior to independence, family structures among the population of Singapore were varied. In 1957, only sixty-four percent of the total households were “one-family nucleus.”⁹ Some Chinese men maintained multiple household arrangements, and more than one wife and family. Malay Muslim men were entitled to practice polygamy on condition that they were capable of the financial support of all wives and children. Concubinage was not uncommon. In 1959, the PAP campaigned for the election using the slogan “one man, one wife.” In 1961, a bill, known as the *Women’s Charter*, outlawed polygamous marriage, except among Muslims. This ensured that at least in non-Muslim society, the nuclear family would constitute the normative social arrangement, and replace all traditional family arrangements with the Anglo-Christian family structure enshrined in British law. Today in Singapore, the practice of polygamy among Muslims is rare. In Singapore, before the *Women’s Charter* was passed as a bill of parliament, there existed as many different forms of marriage as there were ethnic groups.¹⁰

Government intervention into marriage and fertility practices for

the purposes of nation building and national survival is not unknown in Western societies. Certain aspects of marriage, the family, and child-care are matters for government policy and have an impact on national development. For example, in 2004 in Australia, a country which typically favors small families, Peter Costello, the Treasurer at the time, exhorted women to have more children using the slogan: “Have one for the husband, one for the wife, and have one for the country.”

In Singapore, however, the state’s attempted intervention into marriage and child-bearing has been so intense, and female fertility so enduring a matter for public scrutiny, that it has been dubbed by local scholars: “uterine nationalism.”¹¹ While a man’s contribution to national development is to get an education, complete two years compulsory military service, get married, and be responsible for supporting the family, a woman’s is to grow up, have children and raise them. This might be the government’s ideal model as the building block of society; however, the tradition of the man acting as exclusive family breadwinner while the woman stays home is as outmoded a concept in Singapore as it is in Western countries.

In the post-World War II period, developing societies made use of the labor of women both domestically (through the institution of marriage and the promotion of the nuclear family over traditional forms) and in the market as part of their nationalist and development agendas. This is true of the Soviet Union, China, and Việt Nam, but is particularly true of the newly industrializing economies of capitalist Asia such as Singapore.

In the 1960s, an adequate supply of female labor was critical for the restructuring of the recently decolonized Singapore economy and its transition to an export-oriented economy. Policies that have been central to the PAP’s carefully managed nation-building strategies have also affected fertility patterns in Singapore. The Family Planning and Population Board (FPPB) was established to manage population growth by encouraging women to have fewer children.

The FPPB launched a public program known as the “Stop at Two” campaign. Large families were represented in the public domain as a threat to the development program of Singapore and to families themselves. Women who did not stop at two children were labeled irresponsible. Mass media representations located the problem in people’s life choices by exhorting married couples to “Stop at Two” or to think: “Girl or Boy, Two is Enough.” Size of family was paramount, gender composition less so. The average number of births per family fell from more than five to fewer than two, while the labor force participation rate of all women rose, with that of married women increasing substantially after 1970. Although these measures were designed to give the government more control over fertility and birth practices, an unintended consequence of freely available family planning measures was that it gave women more control over their bodies and sexuality. While Singapore feminists point out that the status of women in society is lagging behind men, the family planning program inadvertently raised the status of girls. Families who preferred sons had to be content with girls and began to educate them as much as boys.¹² For modern Singaporeans, there is no equivalent to the traditional Chinese and Indian fixation on male offspring.

These “anti-natalist” fertility policies of the 1960s and 70s—in particular the “Stop at Two Campaign”—were so successful that by 1985 the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) was 1.62, below the replacement level of 2.10. By 1986 it had fallen to 1.44.¹³ Lee Kuan Yew’s 1983 National Day Rally speech was the first notable public description of the success of the program as a new problem confronting Singapore.¹⁴ It

was in this speech that he introduced the metaphor of “lopsided development,” which was to become a common theme in public discussions of the problems surrounding reproductive patterns. It referred to two worrying phenomena: the lower fertility rate among Chinese women, and the increasing numbers of tertiary educated women remaining unmarried. On the whole, it was Chinese professional women who had the lowest fertility figures, while the ethnic minorities (Malays and Indians) were producing children at higher rates. The problem was seen as one of “quality” of the population, as well as “quantity.” Underlying fertility policies in Singapore is the issue of race and ethnicity, and it is clear that concern for the “lop-sided” development stems from anxieties about the increases in the non-Chinese population relative to the Chinese.

Lee also noted in his speech that because there were so many educated women remaining unmarried, only about one in four Singapore men with tertiary education was marrying his intellectual equal. This meant fewer people marrying at all because, as he also pointed out: “The Singapore male is chauvinist enough to not like marrying women better educated than himself.”¹⁵ As a well known believer in eugenics, he argued that this would bring about a dangerous dilution of the nation’s gene pool, particularly when less educated women were having larger families. His solution to the problem was that fertility policies must be amended to encourage better-educated women to have more children. In a reversal of the “Stop at Two” campaign, the New Population Policy was introduced in March 1987, by Goh Chok Tong (then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence). The “Stop at Two” slogan was revised to: “Have three or more if you can afford it.”

The new pro-natalist policy was aimed at “under-achievers”—women who were “under-performing” in their patriotic duty to reproduce.¹⁶ Two factors were cited as the cause of what has been known since then as the “graduate woman phenomenon”—educated women having small families, and people delaying marriage in favor of a career. Educated women were accused of being “too independent,” “career minded,” and “choosy,” and were asked to lower their expectations for a husband.¹⁷ Ironically, perhaps, Lee Kuan Yew’s own daughter, Dr. Lee Wei-ling, might be considered a choosy “under-achiever.” She is currently Director and Senior Consultant at the National Neuroscience Institute, and unmarried.

In addition to the public campaign, carried out in the media and reiterated in the Prime Minister’s address on National Day, a number of material incentives were offered in an effort to induce women to marry, to marry earlier, and to marry someone of the appropriate social class. In 1983, the “Graduate Mother Scheme” was introduced to encourage women with a high school education to have more children, and in 1984 the government offered financial relief of up to \$10,000 per child for the first three children to women with an O-level (Ordinary level) education (O-level exams are taken at the end of four to five years of secondary school education). A \$300 “baby bonus” was paid to women on the birth of each of their children. Around June 1984, to encourage less-educated women to have fewer children, the government also announced a sterilization scheme for low-educated and low-income mothers, under which they would be given \$10,000 if they were sterilized after their first or second child.

The “Graduate Mother Scheme” also gave priority in school admission to children of better-educated women and enhanced child relief for “specially qualified” mothers, in addition to other preferential treatment in school admissions for children of tertiary educated

The government’s Public Education Committee (later renamed Family Matters!) has also tried to introduce an element of romance into public life with its “Romancing Singapore” Campaign. The campaign was launched on St. Valentine’s Day 2003 and was aimed at promoting the importance of marriage and family for the welfare of the individual and the nation.

women. There was widespread anger, and not only among women, about the race and class connotations of these policies. This shift in the discourse and the public interest surrounding it came to be known as “The Great Marriage Debate,” or the “Graduate Woman” phenomenon. Debates centered on the idea that the education of women and the granting of equality had turned out to be a problem and a potential threat to the stability of the nation.

ROMANCING SINGAPORE

In a climate of anxiety about women marrying “down” and men not marrying at all, or being forced to marry “superior” women, thereby threatening the patriarchal structure of the family, and ultimately the nation, the government intervened as marriage broker. The Social Development Unit was established in January 1984, with the express aim of “matchmaking” male and female college graduates with a view to marriage. Other government marriage-broking units that dealt with people of lower educational background were later established. The brief of the Social Development Section was to help organize marriages for single people with high school qualifications only, while the Social Promotion Section managed matchmaking between those who had not graduated from high school.

Singapore has a reputation for being straight-laced and uptight, and the population is known to be so driven and oriented to career success that people have no time to develop relationships or sexual liaisons. While this is largely a myth—since people obviously form relationships and get married—it is true that, by and large, Singaporeans are ambitious, goal-oriented (the five Cs!), and work long hours. For this reason, a number of private dating agencies have also emerged in the last few years to make the task of finding a life-partner quicker and easier. One notable agency is “Lunch Actually,” a company that organizes first dates around busy Singaporeans’ lunch times.¹⁸ Many dating agencies offer “speed dating” where participants are introduced to a number of potential dates in a short time period. Typically, this would mean meeting eight to ten people and spending ten minutes getting to know each of them. The government’s Public Education Committee (later renamed *Family Matters!*) has also tried to introduce an element of romance into public life with its “Romancing Singapore” Campaign. The campaign was launched on St. Valentine’s Day 2003 and was aimed at promoting the importance of marriage and family for the welfare of the individual and the nation. It ran initially for one month, but is now a year long series of events—a festival of love—involving television game shows with competitions for dating couples, compilations of love songs on CDs, special deals on roses, perfume, champagne and chocolates, romantic cruises on the Singapore River, hotel package deals for romantic weekends away, and so on.¹⁹ A number of agencies also promise to find Singapore

Romancing Singapore Web site at <http://www.romancingsingapore.com>.

men “foreign brides,” in particular women from China and the Philippines. Public discourses have presented conflicting perceptions of such women, condemning them on the one hand for being opportunistic “gold-diggers” ready to exploit the lonely Singapore man, and applauding them on the other for being more feminine, submissive, and more grateful for a good husband than Singapore women.

CONCLUSION

An enhanced baby bonus program was instigated in 2001 and some \$38 million worth of baby bonuses were distributed in 2002. This did not, however, prevent the number of births falling to a fourteen year low of 40,800. The fertility rate for Singapore peaked in 1988 at 1.98 and it has fallen since. Some people have called the Singapore government’s attempted manipulation of marriage and fertility patterns a form of social engineering.²⁰ In reality, this is an oversimplification, and too crude an assessment of the social dynamics of a Singapore woman who is tertiary educated, career-focused, and independent has come to be known as “The New Singapore Woman.” They are typically portrayed in the media as demanding, overly hard to please when it comes to marriage partners, and too critical of Singapore men. While their mothers may have acquiesced to government pressures to manage their fertility for the sake of the nation, the new woman will apparently suit herself. It seems that the anti-natalist policies of the 1970s have had the long term, and unintended, effect of freeing women from the constraints of marriage and childbearing in favor of the freedom to choose when, or if, to marry and have children. ■

NOTES

1. Singapore Government, *The Next Lap* (Singapore, 1991).
2. Anne E. Imamura, “The Japanese Family Faces Twenty-First Century Challenges,” *Education About Asia* 8 (2): 2003. See also Anne E. Imamura, “Marriage in Japan: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow,” 13 (1), 2008, 25–29.
3. In Singapore in 2007 there were 9.17 births per 1,000 population, or 1.07 children per woman.
4. At the last census the population was: Chinese 76.7 percent, Malays 13.9 percent, Indians 7.9 percent, others 1.5 percent.
5. See for example: Christopher Lingle, *Singapore’s Authoritarian Capitalism, Asian Values, Free Market Illusions, and Political Dependency* (Barcelona: Edicions Sirocco, 1996).
6. Beng Huat Chua, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (Singapore: Routledge, 1995).
7. PAP: People’s Action Party, the ruling party of Singapore and the only party ever

- to have held power since Singapore was granted self-government by Britain in 1959.
8. Singapore Government, *Singapore 21*, retrieved April 17, 2005, from http://www.singapore21.org.sg/menu_sitemap.html (nd). “Singapore 21” was a government campaign to promote national and social cohesion.
9. Stella R. Quah, “Marriage and Family” in *Singapore Women. Three Decades of Change*, Aline K. Wong and Wai Kim Leong, eds. (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1993), 20–85.
10. Eddie C. Y. Kuo and Aline K. Wong. “Some Observations on the Study of Family Change in Singapore,” in *Understanding Singapore Society*, Jun Hui Ong, Chee Kiong Tong, and Ern Ser Tan, eds. (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1997), 231–238.
11. Geraldine Heng and Janadas Devan, “State Fatherhood: The Politics of Nationalism, Sexuality and Race in Singapore,” in *Bewitching Women, Pious Men. Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia*, Aihwa Ong and Michael G. Peletz, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 195–215.
12. See, for example, the Web site of AWARE (Association of Women for Action and Research), a feminist group dedicated to bringing women’s perception to national issues and to promoting gender equality and understanding, <http://www.aware.org.sg/>.
13. Khai Leong Ho, *The Politics of Policy-Making in Singapore* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 2000), 53.
14. Lee Kuan Yew was Prime Minister of Singapore from 1959 to 1990. His son, Lee Hsien Loong, has been Prime Minister since 2004.
15. Kuan Yew Lee, “Nature and Nurture” *Singapore Bulletin* 11 (13): 1983, 4.
16. Mui Teng Yap, “Singapore’s ‘Three or More’ Policy: The First Five Years,” *Asia-Pacific Population Journal* 10 (4): 1995, 39–52.
17. Lenore Lyons-Lee, “The ‘Graduate Woman’ Phenomenon: Changing Constructions of the Family in Singapore,” *Sojourn* 13 (2): 1998, 315.
18. See <http://lunchactually.com>, “Lunch Actually” now has branches in Hong Kong and Malaysia.
19. For a more extensive discussion of the “Romancing Singapore Campaign,” see Chris Hudson, “Romancing Singapore: Economies of Love in a Shrinking Population,” <http://coombs.anu.edu.au/SpecialProj/ASAA/biennial-conference/2004/Hudson-C-ASAA2004.pdf>.
20. It is worth noting in this context that Singapore is not the only country in the region that has attempted to engineer a change in fertility patterns with financial incentives. Since 2004, Australia has offered \$4,000 to any woman for the birth of a baby.

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