

International Conference on
Declining Fertility in East and Southeast Asian Countries

**Stork & Cupid Out to Lunch?
A Sociological Appreciation of Late Marriage and Low
Fertility on Singapore Society**

By

Paulin Tay Straughan

Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore

Organised

by

PIE and COE/RES, Hitotsubashi University

Hitotsubashi Collaboration Center, Tokyo, Japan, 14-15 December 2006

1. Introduction

Singapore is a relatively young city-state, and gained independent sovereignty only in 1965. However, in the short 40 years since independence, the young nation-state was propelled through an intensive economic transformation that saw pig-farms and other agrarian spaces turned into industrial towns that engaged skilled labour and technology. The unique city-state grew from a sleepy fishing village to one of the most vibrant commercial hubs in the world. As the economy and infrastructure were transformed to position the nation state as a competitive player in the global business market, the Singapore family was also transformed. Three-generation extended families were soon outnumbered by the smaller nuclear family form, a more desired option particular for the better educated who valued privacy in their family unit. This transformation of the Singapore family has resulted in demographic shifts that place the city-state in the same realm as developed nations where late marriage and low fertility result in a population that is fast graying. This paper will trace the evolution of these demographic trends, examine the implications of these trends on the future of the city-state, and discuss the efficacy of state policies that have been put in place to curb these developments.

2. Worrying Trends – Demographic Profile of the Singapore Population

The demographic trends found in Singapore are similar to that of other industrialized developed nations – delayed first marriage, decline in fertility, and a fast graying population. Singaporeans are getting married later, and more are staying single (see Tables 1, 2 & 3). In particular, the single hood rate is highest among less educated men (less than secondary school education) and graduate women. This mismatch in educational achievement among the singles in the two groups makes it highly unlikely that they would find potential spouses in each other. As reproduction continues to be sanctioned only within the legally recognized marital unions, these trends are accompanied by a consistent decline in birthrate. The total fertility rate (TFR) continues to fall well below replacement, and TFR is inversely correlated with higher female education achievement (see Tables 4 & 5). While the norm is still the two-child family, the proportion of families with only one child has increased. Among married women aged 40-49 years (who are likely to have completed the childbearing phase), the proportion with only one child increased from 15% in 2000 to 17% in 2005 (Leow 2006a). As a result of all these, the ageing indicators point to a bleak graying population and raised alarm signals to the leadership. Median age has crept up, and the proportion of our adult population aged 65 and older continues to grow. This result in a higher dependency ratio where each working adult will have to support more elderly members (see Table 6). Also alarming is the change in living arrangements of the elderly (see Table 7). As society develops and there is less reliance on the extended family, the nuclear family household is preferred over extended family households. Young married couples in particular value privacy over tradition, and are more likely to live on their own. The result in an increase on households with only the elderly couple. Of greater concern is the increased in proportion of elderly who are living alone. This proportion increased

from 6.6% in 2000 to 7.7% just five years later. As single-hood rates continue to climb, the group of elderly living alone is set to increase.

Certainly, these social trends of delay marriage, lowered fertility and increase in single-hood are not unique to Singapore. These are global trends, accentuated where the economy is developed. Indeed, if we look at the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) from other developed economies, we seem to be keeping good company with Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong SAR (see “Singapore in Figures 2004” at www.singstat.gov.sg). Perhaps the fundamental question we need to address is: what is it about economic development that works against larger family size? In this paper, I posit two triggers set off by economic advancement that has impacted marriage trends and family size. The first is the changed social status of women, which resulted in changes in ideology of marriage and parenthood. The second is the restructuring of paid work. I will expound on these further in the sections below.

Table 1. Mean Age at First Marriage

Year	Males	Females
1970	27.8	24.3
1980	27.1	24.1
1990	28.7	25.9
2000	29.8	26.8
2003	30.2	27.2
2004	30.5	27.3

Reference: compilation from various reports from Dept of Statistics (DOS), Singapore.

Table 2: Median Age at First Marriage (Women's Charter)

Year	Males	Females
1985	27.4	24.6
1995	28.8	25.8
2005	30.2	27.2

Reference: Statistics on Marriages and Divorces, Dept of Statistics (DOS), Singapore.

Table 3. Proportion Single 35-44 years.

Year	Male	Female
1970	18	8.4
1980	19.7	9.1
1990	28.2	26.1
2000	37	30.3
2005	39	32

Reference: compilation from various reports from Dept of Statistics (DOS), Singapore.

Table 4. Total Fertility Rate.

Year	Total Fertility Rate
1991	1.73
1996	1.66
1997	1.61
1998	1.47
1999	1.50
2000	1.60
2001	1.42
2004	1.24
2005	1.24

Reference: compilation from various reports from Dept of Statistics, Singapore.

Table 5. Total Fertility Rate (TFR) and Education Level of Women.

Education Level	1990 TFR^a	2000 TFR^a	2005 TFR^b
Below Secondary	3.4	3.3	3.1
Secondary	1.6	1.9	2.0
Post Secondary	1.5	1.5	1.6
University	1.4	1.3	1.3

Reference: ^aLeow (2004) ^bLeow (2006)

Table 6. Ageing Indicators.

Year	Proportion ≥ 65	Dependency Ratio	Median Age
1970	3.4	5.9	19.5
1980	4.9	7.3	24.4
1990	6.0	8.5	29.8
2000	7.3	10.2	34.2
2001	7.4	10.4	34.6
2002	7.5	10.5	34.9
2004	8.0	11.1	35.7
2005	8.4	11.6	36.0
2006	8.5	11.8	36.2
2030 [#]	18.7	29.5	

Reference: compilation from various reports from Dept of Statistics, Singapore

Table 7. Living Arrangements of Elderly

Living Arrangement	2000	2005
<i>Living with spouse</i>	50.4	52.4
With no child	13.9	17.4
With working children	33.1	31.2
With non-working children	3.4	3.7
<i>Not living with spouse but with children</i>	37.2	34.5
With working children in household	33.2	30.5
With non-working children in household	4.1	4.0
<i>Not living with spouse or children</i>	12.3	13.1
Alone	6.6	7.7
With other elderly	1.2	1.3
Other	4.5	4.1

Reference: Leow (2006b)

3. Rationalizing the Inevitable I - Gender Dynamics: Changing Status of Women

Of significant impact for the family is the change in women's social status. In the past, when women had few socially acceptable alternatives to marriage, social expectations of marriage were more binding on them in a way it had never been for men (Shumway 2003). Three developments in the history of Singapore women since 1965 (post-independence) have significant bearings on the family. The first is the shift in the mode of production, from a primarily male-dependent semi-agrarian economy to an industrialized, manpower-intensive economy. The demand for labour resulted in the second significant development, the mass entry of women into the labour force. And to facilitate the induction of women into paid work, the doors to formal education were opened to women. Tables 8 & 9 below show the increase in labour force participation rate for women from 1970 to 2004, and the corresponding gains in formal education for women.

As the social status of Singapore women changed with these developments, so does the role of women in the family. In the past (pre-1970s), marriage and parenthood were perceived of as a natural path in the life cycle and for women in particular, getting married was essential for sustenance as the majority did not have means to sustain themselves economically. With little or no formal education or skills training, access to paid work was denied to most women. Marriage was governed by a rigid division of domestic responsibilities where men were empowered by their role as wage earners and women stayed home to manage childcare and homecare. This gender-based division of domestic labour resulted in minimum contradictions on women's time and they were able to focus on raising large families. However, this was at a cost to women as they were totally dependent on their husbands, thus rendering them economic, socially and politically weak. Many had to marry, in order to gain economic security through their spouse as they themselves were not able to engage directly in paid work.

With the advent of industrialization, and the accompanying requirement for manpower, Singapore could no longer afford to have half her population rendered economically inactive. The increased demand for skilled labour resulted in opportunities for women to enter into the men's world of paid work. To facilitate their entry to the labour force, formal education was made accessible to women. Women made tremendous gains in formal education since 1970 (see Table 8), and are currently almost on par with men in terms of educational achievement. With formal education came access to paid work. In 1970, only about one quarter of all women worked outside the home; by 2004, a little more than half were gainfully employed (see Table 9).

With more women entering the labour force, we see yet another trend developing – the rise of the dual-income family. The 2000 Singapore census showed that 40.9% of all married couples were dual-earners compared to 40.2% where only the husbands worked (Leow, 2001). This means the in almost half of all families, the full-time domestic manager is missing. The normative expectation is for the wife to be the primary person responsible for home care and child care. Who takes over this role in dual-income families? This is perhaps one of the greatest obstacles to forming larger families.

Table 8. Highest Education Qualification by Gender (%)

Education	Gender	1970	1980	1990	2000	2003
No formal Education	Male	17.4	27.1	25.7	15	12.4
	Female	39.4	42.8	37	23.9	14.2
Primary	Male	42.6	50.1	30.7	24.3	5.9
	Female	31.6	38.3	23.4	21.9	4.2
Secondary	Male	37.1	19.3	33.5	40	50
	Female	27.9	17.1	34	39.4	54.7
Tertiary	Male	2.3	3.5	10.1	21.1	31.7
	Female	0.9	1.8	5.7	14.7	26.8

Reference: 1970, 1980, 1990 and 2000 figures from Population Census; 2003 figure from Report on Labour Force Survey 2003

Table 9: Labour force participation rate by gender (%)

Year	Males	Females
1970	67.6	24.6
1980	81.5	44.3
1990	79	53
2000	76.6	50.2
2004	75.6	54.2

Reference: 1970, 1980, 1990 and 2000 figures from Population Census, 2004 figures from Labour Force Survey 2004

4. Rationalizing the Inevitable II – Changing Expectations of Marriage.

With the emancipation of women through empowerment, and the dissociation of sex from procreation with the advent of accessible birth control, the old model of marriage became increasingly unacceptable to women. As Shumway noted, “Women began to envision life projects beyond those of wife and mother” (2003:22). This is clearly reflected in the demographic trends. The proportion of singles between 35-44 years old increased dramatically for females –from 8.4% in 1970 to 30.3% in 2000 (see Table 3). This reflects the changing social status of women, and the fact that women no longer need to get married for economic reasons. The access to formal education and paid work granted women economic independence from men, and allowed them to pursue life goals outside of marriage and parenthood.

The social construction of marriage took on a new form in contemporary society. Women now marry for intrinsic reasons like romantic love and companionship. Marriage is expected to provide self-fulfillment, and central to this ideal is the presence of the soul-mate. The search for Mr/Miss Right has become a serious challenge, and the difficulties compounded by a contest by paid work for young adults’ time and energies. In an era where courtship is critical for nurturing relationships build on mutual love and respect, time is a luxury that most young adults can ill afford as they prioritize nurturing careers over nurturing relationships. The result – delayed first marriages.

5. Rising Demands of Paid Work – The Dependence on Waged Income

One key factor that shaped social life as we know it today is the restructuring of work – from agrarian to new modes of production. With the advent of the new economy that transcends traditional geographic borders and crosses time zones, many organizations have adopted a 24/7 operation mode to stay competitive. This, together with the central role paid work plays in contemporary society has pushed family formation as a priority life goal into the background for most young adults. After all, achievements in paid work yield both financial gains and social prestige. Thus, the returns are perceived to be measurable and immediate. Family work, on the other hand, tends to yield intrinsic returns that cannot be measured in monetary terms, and childrearing in particular is a long term investment. As work and family lives become intricately intertwined, investment in one aspect inevitable incurs an opportunity cost in the other. As the returns to paid work are more immediate and visible than the returns to family life, it is no wonder that many are choosing to delay marriage, and family formation.

The dual-sphere ideology in sociology (see Lopata 1993) argues that the structure of paid work assumes that workers do not have other social obligations aside from demands from the work place. So when women entered paid work, they entered it on men’s terms. Family time became surplus work time. The notion of opportunity costs became important considerations. So women had to choose, and the more educated tend to choose work over family because the opportunity costs of reduced investment in paid work were perceived to be too high to bear.

Our dependency on a regular wage has enslaved us to demands of the workplace. As profit margins tightened in competitive markets, employees are forced to work longer hours to remain relevant, and they spend less time with their families. Wage labour ideology demands that employees give of their best to paid work, and that they should find self-actualization in work. This contradicts the ideology of marriage, which specifies that marriage should be the epitome self-actualization. Can an individual serve two masters?

Capitalizing on the advancement in technology, work in contemporary society was restructured to allow a blurring of spatial boundaries so that employees, wherever possible, were not strait-jacketed into rigid schedules. The aim was to encourage them to work when and where they can, so that they can also do family when they needed to. However, portability of work had resulted in an opposite effort – rather than encourage employees to free themselves for investment in non-work activities, it has created a mentality among employees that they should now be working wherever and whenever. In short, work in contemporary society has invaded family space and family time in an extended manner unsurpassed before. In addition to the dual-income family which propels both husband and wife into the public sphere of paid work, we are now also working longer hours, and for a longer period of our productive life. This trend is observed globally; our Japanese and Korean neighbours, for example, have recently passed legislature that mandated the taking of holiday leave. Time spent at work is time spent away from the family, and away from nurturing the marriage. This contest for our time is one contradiction that will require a mindset change to overcome. The recent uncertainties in the economic cycles, a tenuous global outlook and the dominance of contract work have contributed to a perception of vulnerability among workers. Many are unwilling to take any risk on their job security, and instead, have risked their marriage with over-commitment to work. But as long as demonstrated commitment to marriage comes at a personal cost, the outlook for the future will not yield any lapse in this tension between work and family. Work-family balance remains a challenge that faces marriage and family in the 21st century. Until this is resolved, it will continue to pose a challenge for young adults – how to manage nurturing a family, and concurrently, keeping abreast in the office.

6. Rising Demands of the Family – The Evolution of the Sacred Child.

One major barrier to increase fertility is the changing ideology of child, and how society views the social worth of the child. Zelizer's (1994) thesis sums up the evolution of this ideology. The traditional ideals of having children tend to be tied more closely with economic returns. Children were seen as potential labour, and therefore, couples would choose to have larger families to ensure that childbearing yields good investment. However, as societies progressed and the standard of living improved, the child in increasingly seen as having intrinsic worth. With infant mortality rate going down and changes in perception towards the child as potential labour, family size also shrunk. With fewer children, parents tend to give more to each child, and the expectations of parenthood transformed to one that is child-centered.

Hays (1996) traced how changes in the ideology of child affected societal expectations of motherhood in particular. She argued that contemporary women are drawn into a subculture where they are expected to be guardians of this “sacred”, helpless and precocious child, and to be on-call twenty four hours everyday (24/7) to meet the child’s demands and needs. The culture of intensive mothering conceptualizes the child as pure, scared, innocent and priceless, and of immeasurable value. Child-centered, expert guided and expensive methodology for child care are prescribed, and the mother is the “natural” primary caregiver. Hays (1997:228) argued that intensive mothering is a “moral commitment to unremunerated relationships based in affection and mutual obligation”, and something that is out of place in a competitive capitalist society. In fact, child-care experts actually prescribe that there be a full-time primary care giver for the first three years of a child’s life. In an era where women strive to gain equal excess to paid work, this creates tremendous work-family tension for mothers. So why does this ideology persist?

The ideology of intensive mothering is policed by various social agents in society – these include the mass media, popular culture, the state, capitalist enterprises, the family, and even other women. Such models of childrearing are a consequence of women’s relative powerlessness within patriarchal cultural, capitalist economic and rationalized political systems (Hays 1997). In particular, intensive mothering is a larger model of family life that serves state interests (Donzelot 1979). It also serves capitalism for women’s unpaid work at home produces labour power (that is, nurturing the child so that he grows up to be a contributing member of the labour force) at relatively low cost. Capitalism stands to gain from another stand point, when permissive child-centered ideology creates little consumers. From a gender perspective, intensive mothering serves men’s needs for it maintains women’s subordinate positions in family & society. In a recent study on Singaporean’s assets in the Central Provident Fund (CPF), a mandatory savings scheme that serves retirement needs, it was revealed that there is a tremendous gender gap in CPF saving, and women suffered lower savings because of their involvement in unpaid housework (Straits Times 15 Feb 2005).

Social class and ethnic boundaries also serve to valorize actors’ social position. In this case, women from upper social class buy into and perpetuate this expensive and expansive methodology of childrearing, and set expectations that lower class mothers cannot possibly achieve. This is a case of women policing women. Because of its dependency on expert prescription (be it pediatricians or other medical professionals, nutritionists, early life educationalists or other experts on child care), demands of intensive mothering increases women’s ability to claim that mothering role requires “analytical, interpretive & independent decision making capabilities of a professional” (Hays 1997: 304).

In short, the ideology of intensive mothering is the cumulative result of various social groups in action to exert supremacy over others, and socially constructed in conjunction with the ideology of the “sacredization of the economically worthless but morally & emotionally priceless” child in contemporary society (Hays 1997:305). It valorizes

innocence and purity of childhood, and at the same time, valorizes the work of mothers. Intensive mothering portrays mothers as selfless, self-sacrificing & devoid of self-interest, and depicts childrearing as a moral enterprise. Such is the demand on contemporary motherhood, it is no wonder that many women are thinking twice before venturing onto this life-long commitment. Interestingly, there is no similar ideology for fathers to uphold.

When we look at all these contesting ideologies – of family, parenthood, child, gender, and work in the context of a global economy – we can see how Singapore families are being pulled in different directions. Work demands have a tremendous hold on all for its rewards are immediate, extrinsic, and essentially for everyday life. Work in a global economy which crosses several time zones rewards those who demonstrate a 24/7 commitment. On the other hand, investment in family is a long-term investment, and the rewards are intrinsic and non-tangible. And the ideology of the family also requires family members to put family first, and commit 24/7 to the responsibilities of parenthood in particular. This is particularly difficult for women, who are expected to take on the role of domestic manager and primary childcare provider on top of their full-time involvement in paid work. Thus when it comes to the crunch, they either take on the overload – or increasingly, they choose work over family.

7. Social Structural Contradictions – Super Worker versus Super Mom.

Perhaps if the cost to family formation and child rearing is borne equally by both men and women, more women may be willing to take the plunge and have more children. However, child rearing in contemporary Singapore is still very much a woman's job, and thus, comes at a tremendous economic cost to women. The family is one of the most traditional social institutions in our society. This is especially so when couples enter parenthood and the women are laden with the responsibility of both homecare as well as childcare. As long as childcare is still disproportionately women's work, it is foreseeable that contemporary families will continue to shrink in size, and couples will focus on quality parenting to justify have fewer children.

In Singapore, data from the two recent surveys on marriage and family life found similar trends. In a survey on married women completed in 2000, respondents were asked who in their household was primarily responsible for 19 domestic tasks (which covered home care, child care, and elder care). On average, women reported that they were responsible for 7.2 domestic tasks (standard deviation 4.6), and their spouses were responsible for only 2.4 tasks (standard deviation 2). The average number of tasks shared equally by both husband and wife was 3.6 (standard deviation 3.7) (Straughan, Huang & Yeoh 2005). This unequal division of domestic labour persists even when the wife is working full-time (see Table 10). Wives continue to take on more sole responsibility of domestic chores even when they are engaged in full-time work. We see that regardless of the couple's work-status (i.e., either single or double-income); the husband's contribution remains somewhat the same (Straughan, Huang & Yeoh 2000). The survey on marriage and divorce completed in 2005 surfaced similar findings (see Table 11). Wives continue to carry a disproportionate load at home, and this role-overload causes marriage to falter.

The evidence showed that women who did more at home were more likely to be divorced (see Table 12).

The unequal division of domestic labour has resulted in the emergence of “the second shift” for working women, especially for those with young children. Hochschild & Machung (1989) detailed the emergence of the Super-mom syndrome. The Super-mom, an imagery of a woman who has successfully embraced the multiple roles of career woman-ideal wife-model mom, exemplifies how a single individual can absorb such a mosaic of responsibilities without help from others. Hochschild wrote,

"There is no trace of stress, no suggestion that the mother needs help from others. She isn't harassed. She's busy, and it's glamorous to be busy." (1989:23)

However, this image of the Super-mom serves only to suppress the problems inherent in the multiple responsibilities imposed on the working mother. It succeeds in highlighting the competence of women, and reinforces the message that women are special beings who are able to take on all the domestic responsibilities over and above that of her job. There is no mention of the presence of a sound social arrangement that enables the woman to embrace a career as well as to nurture a family (Straughan, Huang & Yeoh 2005). This imagery is constantly reinforced by popular culture, and as a result, the myth is perpetuated so much so that society assumes that working mothers need very little help to manage.

Thus, the conflict between work and family is assumed to be non-existent because Super-moms are expected to take care of everything. And if they cannot manage, perhaps they should reconsider their full-time status in the work force. So women end up having to choose between motherhood and career. While the returns to motherhood are tremendous, it is a long-term investment, and the rewards are largely intrinsic. Career investments, on the other hand, then to yield tangible results in a much shorter period of time. Increasingly, women are opting to invest in work, then in the family. This is demonstrated through the trend data on the proportion that remain single, and the proportion of childless married couples or DINKS (double-income, no kids).

Table 10. Work and division of domestic labour.

	Dual-Income Family	Single-Income Family
Husband's Chores	2.2	2.5
Wife's Chores	4.6	8.7
Shared Chores	4.5	3.1

Reference: Straughan, Huang & Yeoh 2000

Table 11. Division of Domestic Labour and Gender

Division of Domestic Labour	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Self Responsible for Chores	Male*	824	2.7	2.4
	Female*	1026	8.8	4.8
Spouse Responsible for Chores	Male*	824	6.1	4.2
	Female*	1026	1.8	2.0
Shared Responsibility for Chores	Male*	824	5.6	4.4
	Female*	1026	3.2	3.4

* Difference is statistically significant at 95% confidence

Reference: Straughan 2006

Table 12. Responsibility for Domestic Tasks & Status of Marriage – Females Only

	Marital Status	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Self Responsible for Chores	Divorced*	527	9.9	5.1
	Married*	499	7.6	4.2
Spouse Responsible for Chores	Divorced*	527	1.2	1.7
	Married*	499	2.4	2.0
Shared Responsibility for Chores	Divorced*	527	2.0	2.9
	Married*	499	4.5	3.6

* Difference is statistically significant at 95% confidence

Reference: Straughan (2006)

8. Challenges for the 21st Century – The State's Response

As marriage rates and fertility continue to fall, countries face two imminent crises: a fast graying population, and a shrinking population. In Singapore, the concerns over a graying population are very real. Currently, 8.4% of the population is aged 65 years and older. It is projected that by 2030, almost 1 in 5 will be an elderly person. Can Singapore society support this? What is the state's response to delayed marriages, declining fertility, and a fast graying population?

When we examine the Singapore family policies, we see clearly that the state promotes marriage, parenthood, and self-sufficiency. In general, family policies in Singapore serve to facilitate extended families and entry of married women in paid work. As a fairly traditional Asian society that is very much governed by patriarchy, the normal family ideology supported by the state also promotes a gender-based division of responsibility. Many family policies are designed to help women play their role in the family and sustain their position in paid work.

In the early post-independence years, the state was focused on curbing population growth to facilitate economic development. Birth control was made accessible as married couples were encouraged to stop at two children. However, as industrialization took off and Singapore was transformed very quickly into a cosmopolitan city-state, our demographic trends began to converge with other modernized nations. By 1975/1976, the total fertility rate (TFR) had dropped to replacement rate, and has remained at below replacement rate since. When the TFR fell to 1.4 in 1986, the government reversed its population control stance. Pro-natalistic policies were rolled in, and married couples were encouraged to have "three or more children" if they could afford it. The new population policies focused on four main dimensions: tax incentives, housing, delivery costs, and child care (see Lien 2002 for details). Tax incentives and housing incentives which were in place to encourage small families a decade ago were now restructured and refined to encourage those who could to have more children. To facilitate living arrangements for larger families, housing policies gave priority to large families for upgrade to larger HDB flats. The tax incentives were designed with a dual-intent: to encourage middle and higher income couples to have more children and to encourage women to stay engaged in the work place while they raise their children. For example, under the Enhanced Child Relief, a progressive increase in percentage of tax relief is given for each child based on the mothers' earned income.

Prior to the new population policies, couples could only use Medisave, a compulsory saving scheme for medical expenses, to cover delivery expenses for their first two children. The intent then was to encourage couples to stop at two children as delivery costs for the third child would have to be paid in cash. The new population policies extended use of Medisave to cover delivery costs to the third child.

To help working mothers manage the demands of work and family, a centre-based childcare subsidy was initiated and working mothers were given a set amount for each child they place in a licensed childcare centre (for the first four children). Various leave

schemes were also introduced in the civil service for married female officers only. These included no-pay leave for childcare up to a maximum of four years for each child below four years old, part-time employment for up to three years (regardless of the child's age), and full pay unrecorded leave of five days per year to look after a sick child below six years old.

These policies relating to maternal employment had a significant impact on the ideology of the family in Singapore. While the state's intent was to lure mothers back into the workforce to ensure that its manpower needs are met, the message sent to both men and women was very clear: childcare is the sole responsibility of the mother. The second significant consequence of the population policies is its philosophy of promoting self-sufficiency and encouraging those who could afford to have more children. Underlying this is the concern that all children have a right to a decent family life where their basic needs are met and they have a good chance of succeeding as adults. This philosophy will later reinforce the ideology of the sacred child where couples who are well-positioned economically believe that they cannot afford to have children because they perceive that they do not have sufficient resources to provide for the needs of a child. Taken together, these ideologies placed tremendous stress on women. The state upholds an ideology of childhood which requires that the child should be well-looked after, and the mother has been assigned this important role.

Up to this point in the population policies, fathers continue to be economic providers only. This will have serious implications for the fertility trends in Singapore as women continue to struggle between the economic benefits of paid work, and the demands of maternal duty.

In 2000, the government introduced what is popularly termed "the baby bonus" scheme, which was further enhanced in 2004. Under this scheme, a Children Development Account will be opened for a family upon the birth of the couple's first four children. A Baby Bonus of S\$3000 cash is given upon the birth of the first child, and for subsequent children, the Government will contribute S\$500 each year into the account and up to another \$1000 each year to match contributions dollar-for-dollar from the parents. This contribution will add up to S\$9000 for the second child and S\$18 000 for the third and fourth children (Ministry of Community Development, Youth & Sports, 2004). In addition to monetary incentives, the government also announced that working mothers will get twelve weeks of maternity leave for the first four children (Ministry of Community Development, Youth & Sports, 2004; Straits Times, 21.08.2000).

To fill the gap at home when the wife enters paid work, the state initiated the foreign domestic workers scheme which allowed families to employ full-time live-in maids from around the region (mainly from Indonesia and the Philippines). About 20% of households in Singapore hire foreign domestic maids to help manage their households. When a household hires a foreign domestic maid, a tax of S\$250 per month is levied by the state. To help dual-earner families cope with childcare and family responsibilities, tax relief for the Foreign Maid Levy was introduced to encourage working married women to have children (Ministry of Community Development, Youth & Sports, 2004).

Public housing allocation policies were also introduced to facilitate larger families. The Third Child Priority Housing Scheme was set up to give priority to families who wish to upgrade to bigger public housing (HDB) apartments upon the birth of the third child (Ministry of Community Development, Youth & Sports, 2004). While foreign maids are an option for dual-earner families, the state is mindful that this remains a temporary solution, and that families should seek a long-term solution that is more stable and not dependent on the availability of foreign labour (Huang and Yeoh, 1996). The logical solution to childcare needs lies in support from grandparents. This will ensure that the children are socialized by adults from the same cultural backgrounds. The Grandparent Caregiver Tax Relief initiated in 2004 to encourage grandparents as primary caregivers when the mother is engaged in paid work. To facilitate the three-generation extended family, several public housing policies were also initiated (see Ministry of Community Development, Youth & Sports, 2004).

Overall, the pro-family policies announced in 2004 under the new Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong addressed three main areas: family time, childcare options, and work-family balance (details of the new family policies can be found at http://fed.ecitizen.gov.sg/family_population.htm). One significant variation from previous policies is the removal of mothers' education qualification from the tax incentives. The fertility rate has slipped so low that it is no longer feasible to hold on to selective pro-natalistic policies.

Perhaps the most significant change in the post-2000 population policies is the ideological change on men's role in the family. Prior to this, childcare leave was only provided for mothers as it was expected that the mother is responsible for looking after young children. Fathers were expected to play the traditional role of economic provider. In 2000, paternity leave was introduced as part of the new population policies. Although it grants only three days of leave for fathers (compared to 12 weeks for maternity leave for mothers), the significance was symbolic because for the first time, men were directly involved in childcare. In addition, men are now eligible to take unrecorded childcare leave which was previously only available to their female counterparts in the civil service. This sends a clear message that childcare is a shared responsibility between husbands and wives. (Parts of the discussion on Singapore family policies are from a recently completed paper – see Straughan Forthcoming).

9. Future of the Family?

Given the size of the city state, the homogeneity of the population through the advancement of formal education, and the ease with which announcement of new state policies are effectively communicated to the population, the Singapore government has been fairly successful in using policies to police the normal family ideology that has been upheld by the state since post-independent Singapore. In particular, policies tied to public housing and tax incentives are very effective as the incentives are applicable to a vast majority of the population. This is because almost 85% of the population lives in public

housing, allocation of which are dependent on housing policies (Leow 2006b). Given that Singapore families are clustered around the middle-income range, income tax relief is an effective incentive for conformity to prescribed social norms.

However, while the population control policies of the 1970s were particularly successful, we must also be mindful that the curb of population growth in that period coincided with the advancement of industrialization and economic development in Singapore. The lure of rewards from paid work played an important role in shrinking family size, especially when women began entering the labour force. When the family policies shifted towards a pro-natalistic trend, the effect on the fertility rate is limited. Why is this so? I posit in the arguments presented above that changes in ideology play a significant role in fertility decisions. Expectations of marriage, expectations of parenthood, which are tied to changes in the ideology of childhood (specifically, the social construction of what child is, and what child deserves), gender role expectations (particularly the involvement of women in paid work), and expectations of paid work in an increasingly global economy in particular are the main ideologies which have confounded family life in Singapore.

So what can be done to reverse the falling fertility trend? One of the stronger barriers seems to be the prevalence of traditional gender roles in society. That women's roles are primarily homebound while men should be free to pursue gains in paid work is inscribed in patriarchy, the dominant ideology in Singapore. The Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew commented recently that values which emphasize a patriarchal outlook may have to make way for a more egalitarian one given the current social status of women in society (Straits Times 1 May 2005). An eradication of patriarchy would give wives and mothers a stronger voice at home, and result in a more equal division of domestic responsibilities. With husbands and fathers taking on a fairer share of homecare and childcare, the overload on women will ease and this will make larger families more attractive to the contemporary Singapore woman.

The discourse in this paper highlights the interweave between the ideologies of gender, work, and the family – in particular, expectations of parenthood and childhood. Another significant barrier to higher fertility is the contradiction in the ideologies governing work and the family. Global trends reflect women's foray into paid work, but the rules governing paid work continue to be structured around the assumed presence of a full-time domestic manager at home. The demands of the new economy which transcends different time-zones and national boundaries, aided by the advancement in technology have made the boundary between paid work and family time increasingly difficult to tell apart. Concurrently, expectations of motherhood have intensified in our child-centric society, where capitalism continues to propagate the ideology of the sacred child. What is needed is a serious re-look at the expectations we place on work and family, and initiatives on how we can protect family time without compromising overall economic productivity. If we do nothing, and continue to push for a 100% commitment to both, the attractions of paid work being immediate and extrinsic will always draw more followers than the intrinsic rewards of family life.

Do our new policies address these concerns? To a certain extent, but not quite enough. The five-day work week was a big step towards establishing a work-family balance. The institutionalization of paternity leave and extension of child care to fathers are both symbolic of an important ideological shift that includes fathers as caregivers to young children. However, there is more we can do to minimize the gender divide on domestic responsibilities. For example, the foreign domestic worker levy is still tied to female employment, and continues to perpetuate the message that the maid is there to take over the woman's responsibilities at home. Society must come to terms with the changing social status of women. To move forward, we cannot continue to lament that things would be better if women reverted to the traditional gender role of playing full-time domestic manager and stay-home moms.

If we allow demographic trends to continue on their current trajectory, the alarms have already sounded that we will not be able to sustain our social system (Sunday Times 10 July 2005). It is time to seriously rethink what "family" means in our society. Traditionally, the family invokes strong sentiments of reliability, social and emotional support, and is perceived as guardian of morality and champion of ultimate unquestioning love. However, increasingly, the young see family as a moral and economic obligation, and find it difficult to embrace family formation in the midst of the serious challenges outlined in this paper. For the family to sustain, we must take time to reconceptualize what family means.

So is there hope for the next generation? Certainly, as long as we are willing to restructure our economy to offer real choices for young couples. I am not talking about handouts, for those are expensive and only offer short-term relief. Rather, I argue that society must take a bold step forward, to reposition the family and all it stands for to a central position. Currently, paid work predominates, and therefore, we all structure our productive lives, including family planning, around our work schedules. Family work (that includes child birth and childrearing) take second place. For those who are not so willing to suffer personal sacrifices for their family lives, they plan everything from when to get married, when to have their first child, how many children to have, when to go on family vacations etc around functioning principle that paid work is not disrupted (least they be perceived as not 100% dedicated to their work place). As there is no stipulated economic worth to domestic work and child care, these are presumed to be private matters, and to be resolved by individuals within the privacy of their family.

Repositioning the value of family time in the capitalist economy requires society to tolerate short-term economic setbacks in exchange for long-term gains, the very advice we give to to-be parents. We must be prepared to put a dollar value to family time, and not allow it to be used as surplus work time. As long as there are economic payouts for overtime work, as long as we encourage long hours and extended commitment to the office, our young adults are going to choose immediate economic returns over investment in the family. There will be economic costs to this new paradigm shift, but the collective gains for the future are tremendous.

Just as we encourage young couples to invest in the family, we must also be active stakeholders in this enterprise. That may well be the only way we can reverse the fertility rate. The state's position on upholding marriage and parenthood as leading values has certainly raised the social profile of the family in our society. It is also important that at recent public speeches, state leaders have stood up for the social significance of the family.

“As a husband, a father and now a grandfather, I can only tell you that a family adds warmth and meaning to our lives. Friends are important, but a family is indispensable. We would be so much lonelier if we did not have a partner with whom to share our achievements and anxieties, our joys and sorrows. The house would be so much emptier without the laughter of children. How miserable we would be if we have no children to look after us when we grow old and weak.”

Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, 2000 National Day Rally Speech

It's fulfilling to bring up a child. You can have the most successful career, you can be the richest man on Earth or the most powerful man or woman on Earth, but if you don't have a family and don't have children, I think you're missing something. It starts off with missing changing nappies when you have a child, but then you miss watching a child learning to walk, learning to talk, going to school, getting sick, depending on you, walking with you, playing with you. You are teaching him, doing homework with him or her. Then you'll find that he's got his own temperament, character, personality, he's different from you. He's got his own ideas and after a while, one day, you are helping him or her do homework and he says, "No, no, you do it like this" and I look puzzled and I don't quite know what he is talking about, but he does and you know he's taken a step forward and he's on his own. And then they grow up a bit more and you have to, come a time when they ring up and say, "Can you pick me up at the cineplex?" Then you will worry whether they have found girlfriends or boyfriends. Then you will worry if they have not found girlfriends or boyfriends and you will think by the time they are 20 years old, they would have grown up, but actually, even when they are 50 years old, if I'm still around, I will still be fussing. "Drink your *pao shen*" (泡参 ginseng), take care of yourself, don't overstrain because my parents do that and I think if I'm still *compos mentis*, I will do that too.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, 2004 National Day Rally Speech

The much-anticipated TFR for 2005 – one year after the announcement of the new pro-family policies was promising. At 1.24, it was sustained at 2004's level and we could view it optimistically that the downward spiral had been at least momentarily arrested. Given the positive economic outlook for 2006 and 2007, there is hope that more couples will consider having children, and having more children.

In a recently completed project which involved focus groups interviews with young educated Singaporeans, my research team found the women caught between

contradictory ideals (Straughan et al. forthcoming). While they valued children and embraced intensive motherhood as posit by Hays (1996), they also embraced career aspirations and the privacy of nuclear families. Many articulated their perceived tensions of how they could ever manage to fulfill work demands and concurrently raise young children without invoking the help of their parents or in-laws. The general consensus was that one should not venture into parenthood unless one is prepared to be a committed and dedicated parent, and that childcare should be the primary responsibility of the mother. We probed these young adults on their reaction to the new pro-family policies. As expected, our respondents felt that the policies spoke to converts, and may not move those who are still deciding if they should enter marriage and have kids. For parenthood is perceived by these young adults as a life-long commitment that is costly in terms of both time and financial resources, and they see the incentives promised in the new polices as address short-term concerns only.

Clearly, unless we are able to eradicate the contradictions that makes committed parenthood such a difficult choice, young couples will continue to choose career advancement and economic security over the more altruistic call for family formation.

References

- Department of Statistics. <http://www.singstat.gov.sg>
- 2006 Key Indicators. <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/keystats/annual/indicators.html>
- 2006 Singapore 2006: Statistical Highlights. Ministry of Trade and Industry, Singapore.
- 2005 Statistics on Marriages & Divorces 2004. Ministry of Trade and Industry, Singapore.
- 2005 Key Indicators on Population Trends.
<http://www.singstat.gov.sg/keystats/surveys/popnindicators.pdf>
- 2004 Singapore 2004: Statistics Data Sheet.
<http://www.singstat.gov.sg/keystats/annual/poster.pdf>
- 2002 Twenty-Five Years of Below Replacement Fertility: Implications for Singapore. Singapore: Department of Statistics.
- Donzelot, J. (1979) The policing of families. New York: Pantheon Books
- Goh C. T. (2000) National Day Rally Speech. <http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/public/index.html>
- Hays, S. (1997) The ideology of intensive mothering: a cultural analysis of the bestselling 'Gurus' of appropriate childrearing. In Elizabeth Long (ed.), From Sociology to Cultural Studies: New Perspectives. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Ltd
- Hays, S. (1996) The cultural contradictions of motherhood. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Hochschild, A.R. and Machung A. (1989) The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home. New York: Viking.
- Huang, S. and Yeoh, B.S.A. (1996) Ties that bind: State policy and migrant female domestic helpers in Singapore. *Geoforum*, 27(4): 479-493.
- Lee H. L. (2004) National Day Rally Speech. <http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/public/index.html>
- Leow B. G. (2006a) General Household Survey 2005: Socio-Demographics and Economic Characteristics Release 1. Singapore: Singapore Department of Statistics.
- Leow B. G. (2006b) General Household Survey 2005: Transport, Overseas Travels, Household and Housing Characteristics Release 2. Singapore: Singapore Department of Statistics.
- Leow, B.G. (2004). Census of Population 2000: Households and Housing. Singapore: Singapore Department of Statistics.
- Lien, L. (2002) Marriage and procreation: to intervene or not – a policymaking perspective. Paper presented at Workshop on Fertility Decline, Below Replacement Fertility and the Family in Asia: Prospects, Consequences and Policies.

Lopata, H.Z. (1993) "The interweave of public and private: women's challenge to American Society." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 55: 176-190.

Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports. (2004). *Singapore – A Great Place for Families*. Singapore: Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sport.

Ministry of Manpower. (2005). *Report on Labour Force in Singapore 2004*. Singapore: Ministry of Manpower.

Ministry of Manpower. (1999). *Flexible Work Arrangements*. Occasional paper No. 1/99. Singapore: Ministry of Manpower.

Shumway D.R. (2003) *Modern Love*. New York: New York University Press.

Straughan, P. T. (Forthcoming 2007) "Family Policies: Interface of Gender, Work, and the Sacredization of Child". In *Social Policy and Social Engineering*, ed. Tong Chee Kiong and Lian Kwen Fee. Brill Academic

Straughan, P.T. (2006) *Till Death Do Us Part? A Sociological Insight into Marital Dissolution in Singapore*. Unpublished manuscript.

Straughan, P.T., Chan A. and Jones, G. (Forthcoming) *Where is the Stork? A Sociological Insight into Barriers to Fertility*. *Social Transformations in Chinese Societies*

Straughan, P.T., Huang, S. and Yeoh B S A. (2005) *Family Ideology and Practice: Implications for Marital Satisfaction*. Unpublished manuscript.

_____ (2000). *Work, family and marital satisfaction: Singapore women's perspectives*. Paper presented at Conference on Families in the Global Age: New Challenges Facing Japan and Southeast Asia, Singapore

The Straits Times. Various issues.

Zelizer, V. A. (1994) *Pricing the Priceless Child: the Changing Social Value of Children*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.