Family and Population Changes in Singapore: A unique case in the global family changes

Based on the publication in Routledge

Edited by Professor Wei-Jun Jean Yeung and Dr Hu Shu

Family and Population Changes in Singapore: A unique case in the global family changes, the recent book published by Routledge (2018), and edited by Dr Wei Jun-Jean Yeung and Dr Hu Shu, discusses the changes and challenges in Singapore's family and population structures since the country gained independence. It also sheds light on how related public policies can address emerging and future challenges.

Since the early 1990s, Asian family values have been placed to the core of the national ideology and shared identity in Singapore. As advocated by the founding prime minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, social order and economic development in Singapore is based on Asian family dynamics and value. In this aspect, ideal family in public policies has been defined as three-generational families and heterosexual two-parent families with children. The right to receive public benefit as a family adopts this definition and is reflected in the social policies promoting such family types, racial harmony, meritocracy, self-reliance, and population vibrancy. Singapore has experienced steep economic and social changes in the past few decades, what scholars called "compressed modernity". Throughout this transformation, Singapore has adhered to the Confucian values and regarded 'family as the basic unit of the society.'
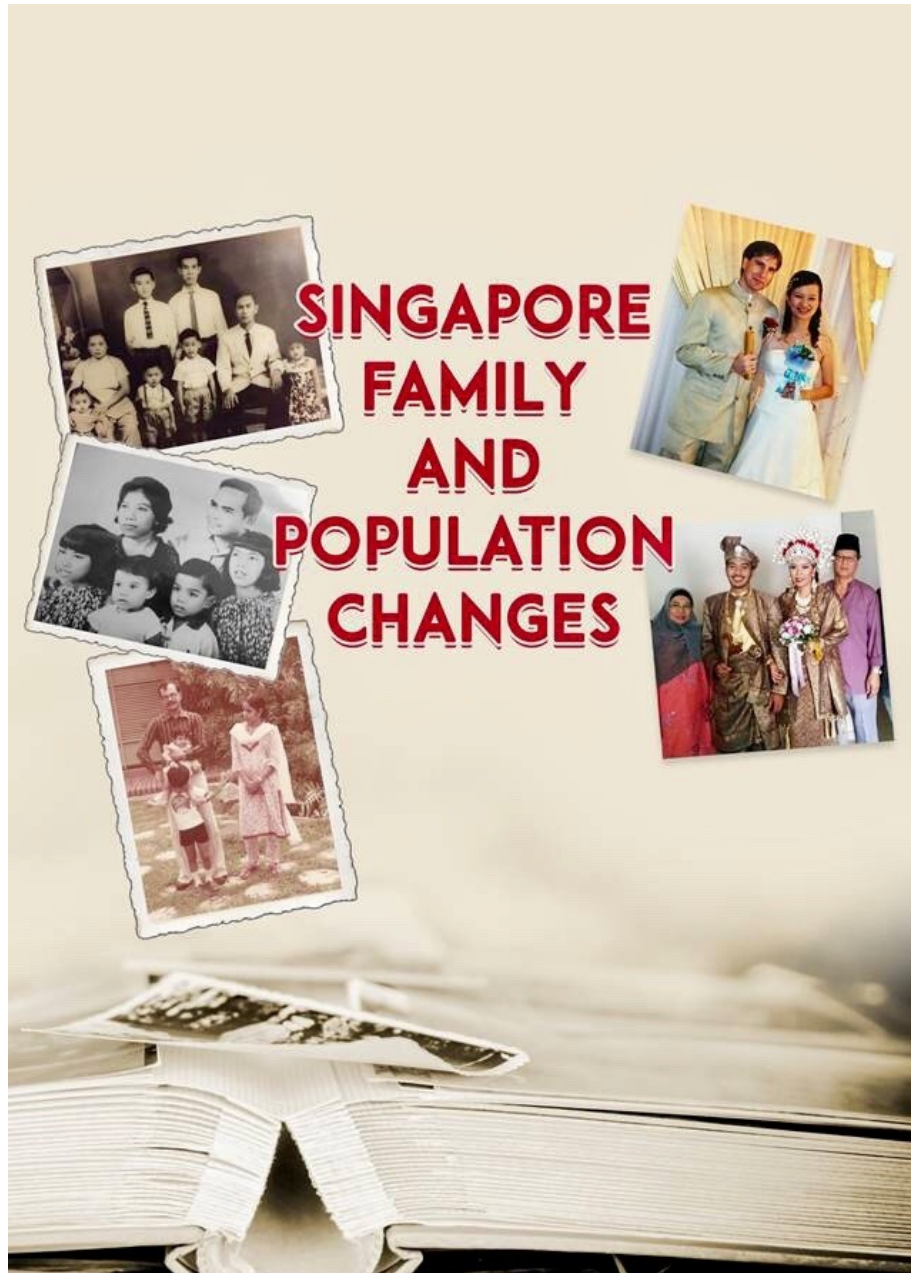
" In a matter of a few decades, Singapore had attained what many European countries took one or more centuries to achieve. It has earned the place of one of the wealthiest and most modern metropolis in the world and the female gross tertiary enrollment rate had increased phenomenally from 4 per cent in 1970 to 95 per cent in 2015, surpassing most Western countries (Government of Singapore, 2016)."

Over the last 5 decades, the population has tripled, more globalized, become much older, and more integration between racial and religious groups has taken place. Despite these changes, social policies and national identity in Singapore embodies multiculturalism with an emphasis on family.

However, Yeung and Hu note some emerging challenges that the country is facing to keep the balance between her developmental and social aspects. The ideational and structural transformation of the society and accompanying public policies have resulted in some unforeseen consequences like having one of the world's lowest fertility rates and highest childlessness rates, a high singlehood rate, a rapidly ageing population, a very high prevalence of cross-ethnic and cross-national families, and a workforce that consists of about one third of foreign workers.

Public policies have tried to address this issue of low fertility from various fronts and measures promoting marriage and parenthood. Yet the proportion of Singapore young adults remaining single is high by international standard. In chapter 1, the authors mention that the changes and contests in the definition of ideal family and its functions, gender roles, intergenerational relations and related policies in Singapore may have affected this scenario. This change in family system has led to a decrease in average number of children and increase in never-married adults and imposed Implication for elderly care. The prevalence of elderly population living alone and without an immediate family will ultimately depend more on the country's ability to support them, thus creating policy concern.

The authors argue that some fundamental cultural shifts and institutional adaptations to these changes are imperative to turn these trends. One of the areas to focus on for increasing marriage and fertility rate is to reduce gender inequality in employment advancement for women both before and after marriage. In Singapore, the rapid increase in the level of education women receive is negatively correlated with marriage and fertility rate. As women get more educated and have more options for their career and independent life, the opportunity cost of marriage and bearing children has increased. However, the societal expectations of gender roles have yet to adjust to the increased role of women in the labor market. Reducing gender inequality on the job market will help promote more egalitarian gender roles at home, hence make women to not see marriage as an impediment to career advancement and therefore encourage more women to marry.

The authors also urge Singapore to change the "Kiasu" culture by reducing work hours and relaxing pressure for competition for children and adults. Yeung and Hu observe that as young adults today attach different meaning and values to marriage and parenthood as they face a different set of life circumstances and constraints than their parents, it may be necessary for

❝ The childlessness rate has increased sharply. About one quarter of women born between 1966 and 1970 (aged 46–50 in 2016) were childless by 2016. In the global context, this rate is higher than that in USA and as high as the highest childlessness rate in Europe registered by German women born in 1968 – 23%. (Sobotka, 2017). Fertility rates in those countries are higher than that in Singapore because many cohabiting couples there have children together.❞

Percent of Childless Women and Percent of Childless Ever-married Women by Birth Cohort
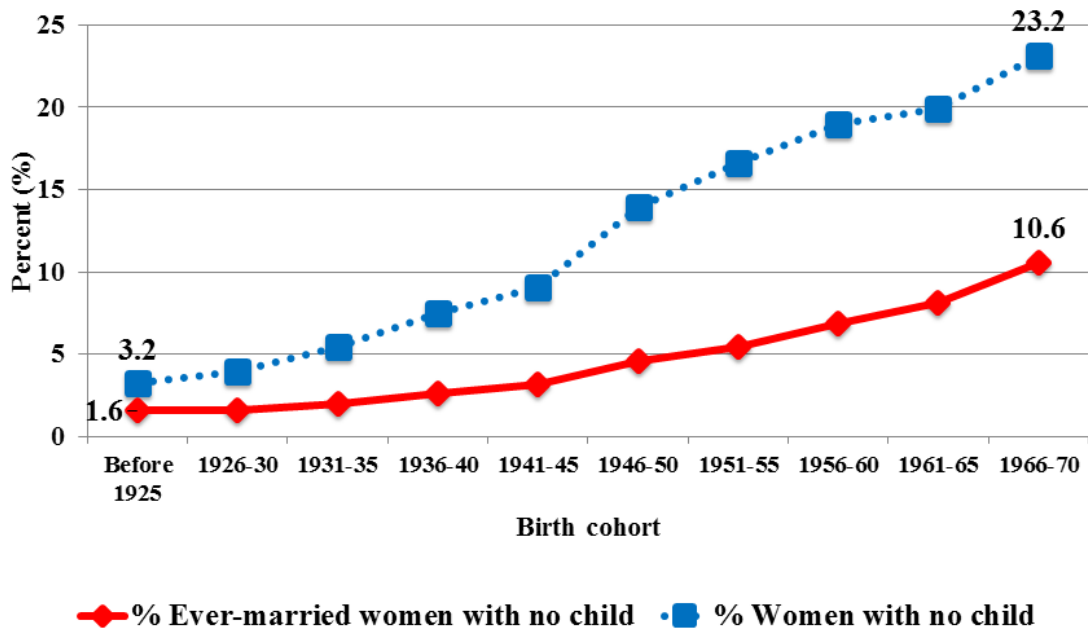
Data source: UNSD Demographic Statistics, 2016

policies to endorse a more diverse life circumstances and choices of family types. As the government adopts a relatively narrow definition of acceptable families, many subgroups including cohabiting partners, never-married and divorced single-parents with children, some foreign spouses, and same-sex partners have limited access to social support. The cumbersome process of divorce in Singapore seems to affect women's' decision to get married at all, which is why the authors mention the need for review of policies regarding the divorce.

❝ Relaxing divorce law might paradoxically increase marriages if young adults know there is a way out if the marriage does not work out or the possibility of leaving a marriage might keep their spouses on their toes. Or some may prefer to raise children outside of a legal marriage.

Thus it is important that family system in the changing Singapore is aligned with the emotional needs of the members and the changing socioeconomic context. Yeung notes that family system is being transformed everywhere but different countries are at different stages of the evolution. Open discussions about how Singaporeans view as desirable family norms and functions should occur to inform how public policies could adjust. The book also depicts the challenges emerging from having a large

number of immigrants and the growing inter-ethnic and inter-cultural marriages, accounting for 21.5 and 36% of all marriages in 2016. The authors note that given the current demographic landscape, immigration is necessary to help stabilize the work force. However, it poses challenges for social integration as many local Singaporeans perceive immigrants to be a threat to their employment opportunities and demand in infrastructure. Thus the immigration policies need to be monitored carefully. The authors also stress more support for inter-ethnic and cross- cultural marriages which tend to have higher divorce rates.

> " Only when institutions continue to adapt to prevailing social and economic changes can the family system in Singapore function effectively to provide both the private functions of fulfilling individual members' emotional needs as well as to serve the public function of maintaining sustainability and cohesion in the society."

Chapter 2 discusses the transition of families and trajectories of family behaviours and attitudes across the traditional ethnic diversity in Singapore. Chapter 3 examines the interaction between changing labour force participation and slow-to-change gender roles among Singaporean Malay families.

Chapter 4 discusses the heterogeneity of the Indian community in Singapore based on class, educational attainment and linguistic diversity.

Chapter 5 explores the difference in the capacity to perform idealized family roles depending on the magnitude of economic and social inequality faced by individual. For example, families with low income

may fail in terms of performing the idealized family responsibilities and the author suggests that this situation calls for policy implications.

Chapter 6 explores how gender and marital status influence the intergenerational support scenario. It also addresses the shift in intergenerational resource flows from 'children to parents' to 'parents to children', and that older generation is playing an increasingly supportive role instead of being burden on their family.

Chapter 7 addresses the need to reconsider policy in elder care given the changing family circumstances. Chapter 8 builds on in-depth interviews to examine the challenges faced by women-headed households i.e. policies on housing and children's education.

The challenges faced by cross cultural families are discussed in chapter 9 where the author explores the cultural meaning, expectation and practices of transnational married couples in Singapore. The chapter discusses the challenges these couples face in terms of one of them adjusting to a new culture, expectations and dominance in relationship, integrating in the local community and acquiring the sense of belonging.

Chapter 10 sheds light on challenges regarding same sex marriage accessing the public resources. As the government defines family as a unit of heterosexual couple, same-sex partnerships lack access to public housing, pension, health, immigration and other state policies benefiting heterosexual couples.

The study was summarized by Sumaiya Rahman (Research Associate, Center for Family and Population Research)

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