

FAMILY IN SINGAPORE

Sociological Perspectives

Second Edition
Revised
and Expanded

Stella R. Quah

TIMES ACADEMIC PRESS

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

The first edition of this book on the family in Singapore was published in 1994. In the brief span of five years important developments have taken place in Singapore that affect the family significantly. This second edition offers an updated and expanded analysis of the family structure, family behaviour and relevant aspects of social policy related to the family in Singapore towards the end of the 20th century. The book has ten chapters presented in three parts: the local situation, an international perspective, and the conclusion. Three of the ten chapters are new. The other seven chapters appeared in the first edition and have been updated here by incorporating new developments in the public and private spheres of life in Singapore. The three new chapters are Chapters 7, 8, and 9. Chapter 7 analyses the concept of social capital represented by grandparents in Singapore. Chapters 8 and 9 examine two important family aspects from a cross-cultural perspective: Chapter 8 focuses on the resilience of father and mother roles, and Chapter 9 discusses the main issues of family policy in the Asia-Pacific region.

The institution of the family gained international attention when the United Nations designated 1994 as the International Year of the Family. The preoccupation with family well-being continues throughout the 1990s in Singapore and in most developed countries. Trapped in the competitive duty of earning a living and advancing their careers, modern men and women seem to be less able than their parents and grandparents to nurture their personal relationships with their parents, their children, their spouses or their potential life partners. This problem is hinted by worldwide statistics on the postponement of marriage among educated and career oriented people; rising divorce rates; and increasing stress leading to violence in the family, to mention but a few trends. The similarities in trends across nations are striking and suggest that people today are finding it very difficult to have an enriching family life and to be, at the same time, satisfied with their working life. Problems faced by people in dealing successfully with family commitments are closely linked to the nature of modern life everywhere. Singapore is not spared from these tensions.

This book is written for policy makers, social scientists, sociology students and educated readers interested in the situation of the family in modern societies and in the characteristics of the family in Singapore. The main objective of this volume is to take a serious look at our families and deliberate on ways to protect and improve family life in the midst of rapid social, political and economic change. Consequently, I provide different kinds of documentation, data, and references on further sources of information whenever possible, so that interested readers may pursue their own line of inquiry.

The completion of this volume's first and second editions reflects the collaboration of many people to whom I wish to express my gratitude. The views expressed by Singaporeans interviewed in the studies discussed here provide invaluable information. Their collaboration is greatly appreciated. Officers from various ministries, in particular the Ministry of Community Development, have provided important details promptly and accurately on relevant government policies and regulations as well as on statistics not yet published. This study could not have been possible without their valuable cooperation. The cordial and most efficient assistance provided by the Librarians at the National University of Singapore Central and Law Libraries together with the Libraries' excellent resources, greatly facilitated my search for relevant documentation. I also wish to express my appreciation to Mr Mew Yew Hwa, General Manager of Times Academic Press, and his team of Editors involved in the production of the first and second editions, Ms Christine Chua, Ms Keri Fuller, Ms Evelyn Ng and Ms Irene Khng. I am happy to acknowledge that above and beyond all the support I have mentioned, the enduring encouragement and understanding of my husband, Jon, in the demanding process of researching and writing, have been and continue to be my most significant inspiration.

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January, 1998



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PART ONE



THE SINGAPORE SCENE



FAMILY THEORY AND RESEARCH IN SINGAPORE

Chapter 1

The development of family sociology in Third World countries, including Singapore, has been characterized, so far, by an emphasis on descriptive studies or empirical verifications of conceptual propositions rather than by theoretical contributions. This problem is not unique of family sociology, but it is a typical problem found in studies covering other areas of sociology and in other social science studies conducted in countries where research facilities and research funding are scarce.

The aim of this chapter is to provide an account of what has been accomplished in Singapore on the study of the family. As a Third World country, Singapore shares, to some extent, the problem mentioned above. Thus, it is relevant to dedicate the second section of this chapter to identifying the most salient aspects of Singapore as the setting where sociologists work. Following a chronological sequence, the third section will deal with the historical background of family studies, covering the work of pioneer researchers before Singapore's independence in 1965. The fourth section will deal with the period of consolidation between 1965 and 1979. The fifth section will discuss the main changes in direction and emphasis in the development of family research in Singapore from 1980 onwards. A summary of the main features in the development of family sociology and a note on future trends will be provided in the concluding section.

The other point that needs to be clarified in this brief introduction is how the family will be defined. I will follow the definition of family prevalent in Singapore and that has been used in sociological research conducted locally. The concept of family in Singapore requires some elaboration. In Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand, analysts and policy makers have recognized for some time already, the existence of a multiplicity of family forms (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1982; Sussman and Steinmetz, 1987; Moen, 1989; Kamerman and Kahn, 1989; Edgar, 1990; Koopman-Boyden, 1990). In contrast, the concept of family has undergone comparably minor variations in Singapore over the past 90 years. Yet, one needs to distinguish between ideal family and actual

family forms. This conceptual distinction introduced by Levy (1949, 1965) based on his study of the family in China, is highly relevant to the case of Singapore.

Over the decades, the major ethnic communities in Singapore — Chinese, Malays and Indians — have continuously followed and transmitted to their children their image of the ideal family as dictated by their respective cultural traditions. My personal observations over the past 20 years of family life in Singapore, of official pronouncements by political and community leaders and more formal accounts and descriptions of cultural traditions (Doolittle, 1986; Tan, 1986, 1990; Winstedt, 1981; Majlis Pusat, 1990; Husin Ali, 1981; Mani, 1979) indicate that, notwithstanding the cultural differences among these three ethnic groups, they are all inclined to regard as their ideal family the extended family, understood as a tightly knitted group involving at least three generations where parents, their married children — all, some, or only one child — and their children's children and spouses live in the same household.

The actual family, however, is that which people can afford according to the specific circumstances of their lives. During the past nine decades the ideal family has remained a cultural icon of Asian tradition while the actual family has been reshaped by the changing tides of social, political and economic development. Today, the legal arrangements covering public housing, income tax deductions and health care suggest that there is a certain awareness of the actual presence of different types of families such as three-generation families, nuclear families, and single-parent families born out of widowhood, separation or divorce. Yet, these are variations of a sole socially recognized legitimate family where parents are legally married and the children are born within such a legal union. Singapore has not yet recognized legally — or socially — other family forms not based on, or derived from, a legal marriage.

The Societal Context of Family Research

Every human community captivates the attention of sociologists, but Singapore is an especially attractive subject of study because of three attributes. The best known of Singapore's features is its particularly rapid pace of socio-economic development during the past three decades. The second characteristic of Singapore is its status as a city-state or island republic. And its third key feature is the ethnic and cultural composition of its population. All these three features are very relevant to our understanding of the perception and importance of family and kinship

networks, of the family's everyday life in the different ethnic and religious communities, and of the impact of social policies on the family. These three features are related and require some elaboration.

Singapore's rapid pace of economic development is a phenomenon that began after its relatively unassuming existence as a British colony for nearly 140 years until 1959, an agitated period of internal self-government, and a stint as a member of the Federation of Malaysia. In a peaceful but momentous transition in 1965, Singapore took charge of its own destiny as an independent republic. The basic structures of nation-building that had been set up during the first years of the 1960s took off in 1965 and have been consolidating and undergoing transformations ever since.

Being a former British colony is a very relevant aspect of Singapore's history in this discussion. Singapore experienced the British judicial and political systems and retained most of the properties of both systems after independence. The judicial system comprises the Supreme Court and the Subordinate courts. The English common law is followed in the Singapore legal system covering the non-Muslim population. Following the precedent set by the British crown during the colonial period, and cognizant of the heterogeneous composition of the population and of the differences in regulations ordering the lives of the Muslim community, the Singapore government established that the Muslim Law Act and the Syariah Court should rule most family and religious affairs of Muslim Singaporeans. Thus, Singapore has two legal systems working concurrently, the Muslim law and the non-Muslim law.

The presence of this dual legal system is one important indication of the Singaporean approach to ethnic relations. As the country strives to minimize the probability of ethnic conflict — the painful experience of racial riots in the 1960s has not been forgotten — the political and social importance of ethnic minorities is not measured by their numbers. Muslims are numerically a small minority. According to the 1990 census of population, the large majority of Singaporeans (77.7 per cent) are of Chinese descent, while 14.1 per cent are Malays, 7.1 per cent are Indians, and 1.1 per cent are people from a variety of other ethnic groups (Department of Statistics, 1991b:4). More importantly, there is an interesting overlap between religion and ethnicity, as major world religions tend to follow ethnic boundaries. Indeed, 99.7 per cent of the Malays are Muslims; 68 per cent of the Chinese classify themselves as Buddhist or Taoist; and 53.2 per cent of the Indians follow Hinduism. The Indian community shows the greatest variation in religious affiliation. After Hinduism, the next largest religion is Islam: 26.3 per cent of the Singapore Indians are Muslims; and 12.8 per cent of the Indians are Christians (Department of Statistics, 1991b:12).

This is the multi-ethnic and multi-religious setting shaping the everyday life of the 3,002,800 population (89 per cent of them residents) in the small island of Singapore. But the rich cultural diversity of its population belies the diminutive physical size of the country. The total land area, including the main island and about 58 offshore islets, is only 626.4 square kilometers (Ministry of Communications and Information, 1991:1). Considering that Singapore is a city-state with very limited land, and an independent republic that needs to look after its own economic and political survival, it is not surprising that one of the major concerns of Singapore is to attain an optimum utilization of the nation's physical environment and human resources. The size and political status of Singapore are relevant to the discussion of family and family studies because this concern with the link between physical space and human resources influences families in at least two main ways: the management of population growth and the provision of housing. As discussed later (Chapter 3), the concern with population growth has led to policies directed to influence decisions on the number of children a married couple wants to have. Similarly, the housing options for families are restricted — mostly high-rise apartments — on account of the scarcity of land. The 1990 census indicates that 85.7 per cent of Singapore resident households own and live in public housing high-rise apartments (Department of Statistics, 1991b:i).

Its rapid pace of economic development is another evident feature of Singapore. Reporting on her research, the British anthropologist Judith Djamour wrote in 1959 that she spent two years in Singapore, from January 1949 to November 1950, doing fieldwork in Tanjong, “a fishing community on the south-west coast and an urban area” (Djamour, 1959:1). If Djamour had returned to Singapore in 1990, she would have found that the old fishing villages have been replaced by modern neighbourhoods of high-rise buildings. As part of the national economic development design geared towards industrialization and urban renewal, villagers and their families were relocated to new public housing apartments mostly during the 1970s (Yeh, 1970, 1973; Chew, 1982). The rural south-west coast that Djamour visited is now part of the growing urban metropolis. Only 1.9 per cent of the total land area was occupied by farms in 1990 (Ministry of Communications and Information, 1991:1).

More importantly, the nature of the labour force has been transformed by the exigencies of a modern industrial economy. Djamour would find rather few fishermen today. In 1947, 8.8 per cent of the total male population were working as fishermen or farmers, but only 4.2 per cent of the males were in these occupations in 1990. Among the Malays, who were the subjects of Djamour's study, 6 per cent of Malay men were

fishermen and farmers in 1947, but this proportion dropped to 0.5 per cent in 1990. People working in professional and technical occupations made up only 2.7 per cent of the labour force in 1947. The proportion of professional and technical workers reached 15.7 per cent of the labour force in 1990 (Del Tufo, 1949:110, 519; Department of Statistics, 1991b:54).

A few additional indicators of rapid economic development will complete the picture. The indigenous gross national product per capita in 1977 was S\$5,712; it increased steadily to S\$12,584 in 1983, and to S\$17,909 in 1989. Annual electricity consumption per person was 1,938 kwh in 1977; 3,054.7 kwh in 1983; and 4,724.6 kwh in 1989 (Ministry of Culture, 1984:46; Ministry of Communications and Information, 1991:32). According to an international study of quality of life indicators by the 1990 Population Crisis Committee comparing 100 countries, Singapore ranked 1 in housing standards (availability of utilities), 1 in noise level; 5 in food cost as percentage of income; 6 in public health (based on infant mortality); 7 in traffic flow; 20 in public safety (based on murder rate); 20 in communications (number of telephones); 40 in education (percentage of population with secondary education); and 42 in living space (Economic Planning Committee, 1991:24).

These are, in wide brush strokes, the most significant aspects of the social context of family research in Singapore. The details will become clear as the discussion progresses, but this outline prepares the way for the subsequent analysis.

Historical Background: The Pioneers

As it is commonly found in other Third World countries with a colonial past, the concern for the collection of facts about the institution of the family was brought to Singapore by British colonial administrators, scholars, and missionaries (Quah, 1993). The British Crown acquired the island of Singapore in 1819, and in 1826 Singapore became part of the British Straits Settlements together with the island of Penang and Malacca — a former Portuguese colony. The British colonial government showed less curiosity on the cultures of indigenous peoples in the Straits Settlements, compared to the keen interest in gathering systematic information displayed by the Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese and American colonial powers ruling over other Southeast Asian territories before the Second World War.

Still, getting acquainted with the local customs of the various communities living in Singapore was important for the colonial

government. A major preoccupation of British colonial administrators was to maintain law and order while guaranteeing as far as possible to the local people — mainly the Chinese and Malay communities — the exercise of their respective customs, especially concerning family matters. This was not an easy task. The colonial administrators had to learn the key local customs, and that “the extent to which English law was to be modified to pay this respect to local usages was not clear” (Freedman, 1950:97). Perhaps as an outcome of this ambivalence, the British followed an unwritten *laissez faire* approach throughout the second half of the 19th century so that “the codes by which Chinese regulated their family affairs ... were beyond the reach of the [colonial] government” (Freedman, 1950:98).

Nevertheless, while there was no direct involvement of British colonial administrators in the study of family customs among the local peoples, two trends are identified. First, there were British scholars and missionaries who, on their own, observed and wrote about local customs and behaviour during the late 1800s and the early 1900s. Although these “pioneer researchers” were foreigners and did not have formal training in social sciences, their descriptions of local customs, daily life and physical settings still offer today data of great sociological interest (see for example, Buckley, 1902; Reith, 1907).

The second trend was for the colonial government to tap the expertise of British scholars, both officially and unofficially. An early indication of this trend was the appointment of British scholars studying China and the Chinese language to the office of “Protector of Chinese” created in 1869 to supervise “the Chinese community on behalf of the government”. The post of Protector was enhanced with statutory powers in 1877 (Freedman, 1950:98). In the handling of legal matters involving the Chinese, the colonial government also referred to the English translations of Chinese law under the Manchu dynasty and “call for the testimony of Chinese Consuls, Protectors of Chinese, and local Chinese of standing” (Freedman, 1950:98–99).

During the first half of the 20th century, British scholars were commissioned to write reports on more specific studies of family life, social customs and religious practices of local communities. The best example of this mode of collaboration between the British colonial government and British academics is the “Colonial Research Studies”, a series “intended for the publication of research studies by persons ... engaged in research in the Colonial sphere financed from Government sources” (Explanatory note on the back cover of Freedman [1957]). This early phase of social science research on the family — represented by the reports from the Colonial Research Studies series — was characterized

by two important features. The first feature is a preference for descriptive studies over conceptual analyses. The second is a twofold feature: anthropology was introduced to Singapore earlier than sociology and the earliest anthropologists had a tendency to dismiss disciplinary boundaries between anthropology and sociology. The latter has been an aspect of the British academic landscape for some time.

A good illustration of these two dimensions of pioneer social science research is the 20th Report in this series. It was published in 1957 under the title “Chinese Family and Marriage in Singapore” by Maurice Freedman, a Lecturer in Anthropology at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Freedman established the descriptive nature of his work as he indicated that his Report was

... to be read mainly by non-anthropologists. It follows that, from an anthropological point of view, a number of theoretical matters have been ignored or insufficiently discussed ... and that the combination of analytical and minutely descriptive matter makes the book more heterogeneous than an anthropological monograph written according to prevailing [academic] standards. (1957:5)

Freedman also dismissed, or was not aware of, any disciplinary differences between sociology and anthropology. His accentuation in the Foreword that his work was anthropological did not deter him from stating in his conclusion that his was “the first sociological exploration of the Chinese in Malaya” (1957:229), and indicating in the description of his anthropological fieldwork that “my study might eventually need to be weighted in favour of urban sociology” (1957:9). It is noteworthy that some British anthropologists who have worked in Singapore feel that there are no significant distinctions between the two disciplines.

Freedman’s book on the Chinese family covered the historical roots of family organization in China before proceeding to the detailed description of the situation he observed in Singapore between January 1949 and December 1950 concerning four aspects of family life. These aspects were the structure and functions of the household; the kinship system, including the clan and clan associations; the structure, formation and disruption of marriage; and the aspect of death and death rituals. The book is the published version of the report he submitted to the Government of the Colony of Singapore — through the Colonial Social Science Council — in 1953. He arrived in Singapore with the official assignment to conduct a study of the Chinese family and was “informally attached to the Department of Social Welfare” of the Colony “which generously put an office at my disposal and made some clerical help available” (Freedman, 1957:7).

Doing research for his previous study of Chinese culture and British colonial law (Freedman, 1950), Freedman had the opportunity to assess the dearth of information on the social and family life of the peoples residing in Singapore. He lamented,

As far as Malaya is concerned, our ignorance of social organization among the Chinese was well-nigh all-embracing before the recent studies of Dr Victor Purcell This absence of information is all the more surprising when we reflect that several generations of Chinese Protectors have passed since [the setting up of] the special agency for dealing with Chinese affairs in 1877. Documents have been piled up in offices; Protectors of Chinese and Secretaries for Chinese Affairs have amassed lifetimes of experience of Chinese problems; we have little access to either. When the Japanese took Singapore in 1942 they made a bonfire of the papers in the Chinese Secretariat, and now ... the detailed history of a remarkable political institution has gone for good. (1957:8)

Victor Purcell was a historian who studied the immigration of Chinese to Southeast Asia (1952). An earlier study was conducted by Braddell (1921) on Chinese marriage and the colonial Supreme Court, but this was an analysis of the legal aspects involved in the attempt to incorporate Chinese customary marriages and general Chinese custom into English law. Thus, Freedman may be considered as the first social scientist that conducted systematic research, albeit mostly descriptive, on the Chinese family in Singapore.

Maurice Freedman's wife, Judith Djamour, was the other pioneer anthropologist who contributed to the study of family in Singapore, but her focus was on the Malay family. Freedman reported that his wife, Djamour, "was commissioned to write a report on Malay family organization under the same auspices as myself" (1957:9). The Colonial government engaged the husband and wife team and both arrived in Singapore together and conducted their respective anthropological fieldwork concurrently from 1949 to 1950. Djamour submitted her report entitled "The Family Structure of the Singapore Malays" to the Colonial Government through the Colonial Social Science Research Council. This report served as the basis for Djamour's Ph.D. dissertation submitted to the University of London and was subsequently published under the title *Malay Kinship and Marriage in Singapore* (Djamour, 1959).

Just as Freedman's (1957) analysis of the Chinese family has become a classic reference in the study of the Singapore family, so it is with Djamour's (1959) book on the Malay family. However, the same limitation found in Freedman's (1957) work is also found in Djamour's

(1959). As an ethnography of the Malay family, her study was primarily descriptive and did not include a conceptual analysis of the social phenomena she observed. She declared that when she went to the field "I had no specific major theory which I wanted to test" (1959:1). Instead, she had two main objectives: on the one hand, she was interested in "the instability of Malay marriage and in the effects which [it] had on the divorced couples themselves, on their children, and on their respective kinsmen"; and on the other hand, having observed that Malays did not have effective community organizations and "no political representation as Malays", she wanted "to determine whether in contrast to the lack of corporate groupings there might not be special types of economic solidarity of an informal nature between a person and his close kinsmen" (1959:1-2).

As in the case of Freedman's study (1957), Djamour had the advantage of the recent data from the "Social Survey" conducted in 1947 by the Singapore Social Welfare Department, and the detailed information collected by the 1947 population census (Del Tufo, 1949) which helped her in her first chapter's description of the "structure of the Singapore Malay society." The second chapter was a description of Malay kinship which included a section on "emotional relations" that today we may see as child socialization and parent-child relations. Chapter 3 described the Malay household composition and physical setting. The other three chapters dealt with marriage; matters pertaining to children such as childbirth, adoption and socialization; and divorce.

In her concluding chapter, Djamour turned to what, in my view, constitutes the only conceptual aspect of her book, the exploration of "social and economic solidarity" between a Malay individual and his or her "kinsmen". Djamour did not define these concepts and did not review critically any pertinent social science literature. But, summarizing her observations, she reported that "there is in fact considerable solidarity (emotional as well as economic) between an individual and his close kinsmen" particularly between parents and children. The "strongest operative tie" among the Malays in this case is that "parents must be forever ready and willing to help their children in every way (even after they have married and settled in independent residences), and they expect little in return" (1959:143-44).

Furthermore, her observations of the Malay community led Djamour to suggest, in more general terms, that "in all societies where marriage relationships are unstable, and whatever the economy, one may expect to find a high degree of emotional and economic solidarity between a woman and her close kinsmen" (1959:142). However, it appears that her generalization would not apply to the Malay men. Predicting the future,