# Neoliberal Morality in Singapore

How family policies make state and society

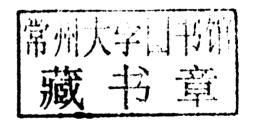
Youyenn Teo



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# **Neoliberal Morality in Singapore**

Using the case of Singapore, this book examines the production of a set of institutionalized relationships and ethical meanings that link citizens to each other and the state. It looks at how questions of culture and morality are resolved, and how state-society relations are established that render paradoxes and inequalities acceptable, and form the basis of a national political culture.

The Singapore government has put in place a number of policies to encourage marriage and boost fertility that has attracted much attention, and are often taken as evidence that the Singapore state is a social engineer. The book argues that these policies have largely failed to reverse demographic trends, and reveals that the effects of the policies are far more interesting and significant. As Singaporeans negotiate various rules and regulations, they form a set of ties to each other and to the state. These institutionalized relationships and shared meanings, referred to as neoliberal morality, render particular ideals about family natural. Based on extensive fieldwork, the book is a useful contribution to studies on Asian culture and society, globalization, as well as development studies.

**Youyenn Teo** is Assistant Professor in Sociology at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Her research interests include political sociology, political economy, the sociology of culture, and gender.

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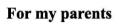
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## List of abbreviations

AWARE Association of Women for Action and Research

CDA Children Development Account

CPF Central Provident Fund GDP Gross Domestic Product

HDB Housing and Development Board

MCDS Ministry of Community Development and Sports

MCYS Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports

PAP People's Action Party ROM Registry of Marriages

ROMM Registry of Muslim Marriages SIT Singapore Improvement Trust

TFR Total fertility rate

UMNO United Malays National Organisation

# Acknowledgements

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Youyenn Teo Singapore December 2010

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# 1 Let's apply for a flat

## The state and family in Singapore

In the year 2000, Lyn Na really married. Three years after she and her partner formalized their relationship at the Registry of Marriages (ROM), and four years after they applied to buy a flat from the Housing and Development Board (HDB), they held a "customary" wedding, renovated their new flat, and moved into their new home. In the years between what she refers to as their "ROM" and "customary," Lyn Na lived with her husband—in separate bedrooms—in her widowed mother-in-law's flat.

She explains that their decision to apply for a flat in 1996 was prompted by several factors: she and her boyfriend had been dating for close to two years; they had heard from friends that the queue for these highly subsidized public flats was getting to be very long; she had already been working for a few years since she left school after her "O" levels (high school) and so had some money in her Central Provident Fund (CPF) account, and people around her were telling her the time was ripe to make plans toward securing a place to live. She cheerfully declared to me that, at the time of flat application, she and her boyfriend did not really talk about marriage, even though they were taking steps that implied it.

Soon after they put in their flat application, the deposit required for co-applicants who applied under the Fiancé-Fiancée Scheme went from S\$200 (US\$150) to S\$5,000 (US\$3,800). That year, given three months to decide if they wanted to legalize their relationship or pay the extra money, she recalls thinking that 21 was probably too young to be "really" married but "okay" for ROM. She had little doubt that she and her partner would stay together, but felt that their finances were not in good enough shape to be *fully* married.

Three years later, anticipating that their flat would be ready, the couple held a customary wedding, collected their keys, did some renovations on their new flat, picked an auspicious day, and moved in. When I spoke to Lyn Na in 2004, she recounted this process and also told me that she and her husband still live very close to her mother-in-law and have dinner with her every day. They had recently started to think about having kids—two or three but definitely not four since the Baby Bonus<sup>2</sup> (at the time of our conversation) was not granted to the fourth child. She felt that living together with her mother-in-law was difficult but that living close by was "more convenient," especially when they have kids and require childcare help.

#### 2 The state and family in Singapore

Lyn Na's story has its idiosyncrasies, but it also captures a pattern that Singaporeans alternately complain about and embrace. At a recent wedding I attended, the groom joked that he proposed by suggesting to his bride: "let's go apply for a flat." In the two years that I did my fieldwork and the subsequent years when I continued to live in Singapore, I could scarcely escape this "joke" whenever I described my project to people.

This sort of narrative informs one dominant understanding of the Singapore case: that the state is heavily involved in "social engineering." Indeed, people I interviewed for this project often lamented that the state plays too big a role in Singaporeans' lives and that it tries too hard to "control everything." This interpretation of the Singapore state also implies the relative lack of autonomy for Singaporeans.

This claim is not entirely inaccurate but it is incomplete. It is the sort of interpretation that discourages deeper analyses of state-society relations insofar as it presumes that there is an immensely powerful state controlling its correspondingly powerless citizens. The idea of "relations"—implying as it does interactions, negotiations, and political processes—becomes almost irrelevant. If, after all, the state is an overpowering social engineer, what is there to negotiate?

This book starts from a slightly different place. It begins with highlighting the significant contradictions and incoherencies embedded in the state's approach toward the familial. I draw attention to the fact that rather than being a successful social engineer, the state has largely failed to achieve its *ostensible* goals of reversing demographic trends toward later marriage and lower fertility. That its policies continue to seem highly influential *despite* this is interesting and worth further scrutiny. Suspending the presumption that the case represents straightforward social engineering forces a closer examination of how the policies actually work through their targeted citizens, and thereby a reconceptualization of the full range of their effects.

Family policies in Singapore generate important "latent effects"—effects that lie beneath the surface of obvious outcomes and which go beyond the parameters of specific policies and transcend the state's explicitly stated goals.<sup>4</sup> One important effect: in the process of negotiating the various rules and regulations, Singaporeans develop collective practices, habits, norms, ideals, and beliefs. These give content to the ties that bind Singaporeans to the state. They also link Singaporeans to one another and define the very boundaries and meanings of "Singaporean-ness."

An important aspect of this Singaporean-ness is nationalistic and indeed in keeping with certain neoliberal<sup>5</sup> ideals: people see themselves as part of a nation where the capitalist economy is paramount, where markets have logics of their own, and where the state is doing the best it can to *both* produce economic growth and "protect" valued "traditions" in the face of an imagined global (and therefore externally imposed) economic logic.

The institutional as well as discursive framework that results from people's negotiations of family policies is significant for accounting for the reproduction of state power; they produce concrete structures as well as imaginations of state-society relations, and corresponding ideas about legitimate and illegitimate