

# Neoliberal Morality in Singapore

How family policies make state  
and society

Yuyenn Teo



Routledge Contemporary Southeast Asia Series

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First published 2011  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada  
by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Teo, Youyenn.

Neoliberal morality in Singapore: how family policies make state and society / Youyenn Teo.

p. cm.—(Routledge contemporary Southeast Asia series; 37)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Family policy—Singapore. 2. Social engineering—Singapore.

3. Singapore—Social policy. I. Title.

HQ675.T46 2011

306.850973—dc22

2011001226

ISBN: 978-0-415-59397-7 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-203-80882-5 (cbk)

Typeset in Times New Roman  
by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk



Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham, Wiltshire

# 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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How family policies make state and society

*Youyenn Teo*



**For my parents**

# List of abbreviations

<b>AWARE</b>	<b>Association of Women for Action and Research</b>
<b>CDA</b>	<b>Children Development Account</b>
<b>CPF</b>	<b>Central Provident Fund</b>
<b>GDP</b>	<b>Gross Domestic Product</b>
<b>HDB</b>	<b>Housing and Development Board</b>
<b>MCDS</b>	<b>Ministry of Community Development and Sports</b>
<b>MCYS</b>	<b>Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports</b>
<b>PAP</b>	<b>People's Action Party</b>
<b>ROM</b>	<b>Registry of Marriages</b>
<b>ROMM</b>	<b>Registry of Muslim Marriages</b>
<b>SIT</b>	<b>Singapore Improvement Trust</b>
<b>TFR</b>	<b>Total fertility rate</b>
<b>UMNO</b>	<b>United Malays National Organisation</b>

# Acknowledgements

In the many years it has taken to write this book, I have chalked up a great deal of intellectual and emotional debt. It is with some relief that I find myself writing this part of the book.

I must of course first thank my respondents, who so graciously took the time to speak with me. Without their generosity and candor, this book would not have been possible at all.

The book originated as a PhD dissertation. I was able to complete the research with funds from the National Science Foundation and the Graduate Division as well as the Department of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. Additional work was made possible by a postdoctoral fellowship at the Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore, while the final writing was completed while I have been in the Division of Sociology at the Nanyang Technological University.

I have benefited and continue to benefit greatly from my association with each of these institutions. The staff, faculty, and graduate students at Berkeley provided a challenging and nurturing environment in which I learned to be a sociologist. I would especially like to thank my lovely dissertation group, Elizabeth Popp Berman, Hwa-jen Liu, Teresa Sharpe, and Lisa Stampnitzky, who, through long distances and disparate time zones, critiqued every draft of every piece of writing I did. I also want to thank Emily Beller, Natalie Boero, Michael Burawoy, Ryan Centner, Jennifer Chun, Troy Duster, Thomas Gold, Jerome Karabel, Isaac Martin, Stephanie Mudge, Josh Page, Smitha Radhakrishnan, Robyn Rodriguez, Elsa Tranter, Jennifer Utrata, Kim Voss, Loïc Wacquant, Kerry Woodward, and Jaeyoun Won for making my time in graduate school so very rewarding. C.J. Pascoe and Teresa Sharpe have been my “go-to” people for every idea, issue, and problem, both personal and professional—I thank them for their boundless indulgence.

The best teachers take the seeds of ideas—ideas that would not have gone anywhere on their own—and nurture them to life. Peter Evans and Raka Ray, co-chairs of my dissertation committee, have aided me in transforming numerous half-baked notions into full-fledged arguments. Their enthusiasm, curiosity, and insight helped push this project from the very beginning. I thank them for continuing to mentor me well after graduation. Ann Swidler and Gillian Hart also played crucial roles. It was Ann who first introduced me to sociology when I was

an undergraduate; I am continually inspired by her love for ideas. Gill challenged me, from the very first days of this project, to think about its broader implications. I am thankful to and inspired by my teachers.

I was fortunate to find an institutional home at the Asia Research Institute after graduation. At ARI in particular and NUS in general, I found a warm and diverse intellectual community. For their support and advice, I thank Birgit Bräuchler, Chee Heng Leng, Juanita Elias, Arienne Gaetano, David Hill, Jiang Na, Lai Ah Eng, Lenore Lyons, Michelle Miller, Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman, Sabina Rashid, Anthony Reid, Rachel Rinaldo, Alyson Rozells, Tricia Seow, Shen Hsiu-hua, Suriani Suratman, Monica Smith, Tan Beng Hui, Geoffrey Wade, Yan Hairong, Yap Mui Teng, Valerie Yeo, and Brenda Yeoh. I am grateful to Gavin Jones, Maznah Mohamad, Janice Newberry, Natalie Oswin, Rachel Safman, Eric Thompson, and Bryan Turner for reading and commenting on many drafts of my writing. Chua Beng Huat has strongly influenced my understanding of Singapore and I thank him for all the time and effort he's taken over the years to critique my work.

At the Division of Sociology at the Nanyang Technological University, I have also been fortunate to work with a great group of scholars and teachers who have provided a supportive environment in which to complete this book. I would especially like to thank Geoffrey Benjamin, Genaro Castro-Vázquez, Francis Lim, Shirley Sun, and Kang Yoonhee for their support of my efforts. Kwok Kian Woon has been advising me since I was a graduate student and I am thankful for his generosity in encouraging this project through the years. I have learned a great deal from our enthusiastic, interesting, and energetic undergraduates. I would like to thank in particular Ha Pham Doan Trang, Kelvin Chia Kwok Wai, and Muhammad Kamal Jauhari bin Zaini for their capable research assistance.

Finally but certainly not least, I would like to thank my friends and family. Chia-Chung Chen, Shauna Siew, and Sean Yeo have been my long-time cheerleaders. After I moved back to Singapore after ten years in Berkeley, my childhood friends—Denise Chak, Fu Xiuying, Guo Huiping, Serena Kwek, Eleanor Ng, Karen Ng, Ni Minqin, Tan Pei Pei, and Xu Liangqi—showed me the way home. My brother, Jinqchong Teo, and my Malaysian grandparents, cousins, aunts, and uncles have been more influential on my view of the world than they could possibly imagine. My husband, Chan Kin Kok, and our daughter Kaile, have given me a good home to come home to.

My parents, Teo Lai Seng and Siau Sik Kim, grew up in a world so radically different from mine that getting behind my choices has required great leaps of faith and much sacrifice. Their love and support have sustained me. It is to them that I dedicate this book.

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).<sup>1</sup> 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."<sup>3</sup> 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 straight-forward 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