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### Chinese Intergenerational Relations in Modern Singapore

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## CONFLICTS AND CONTRACTS



Kristina Göransson

# Conflicts and Contracts

Chinese Intergenerational Relations in  
Modern Singapore



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COVER

The Chinese character for filial piety (*xiao*)

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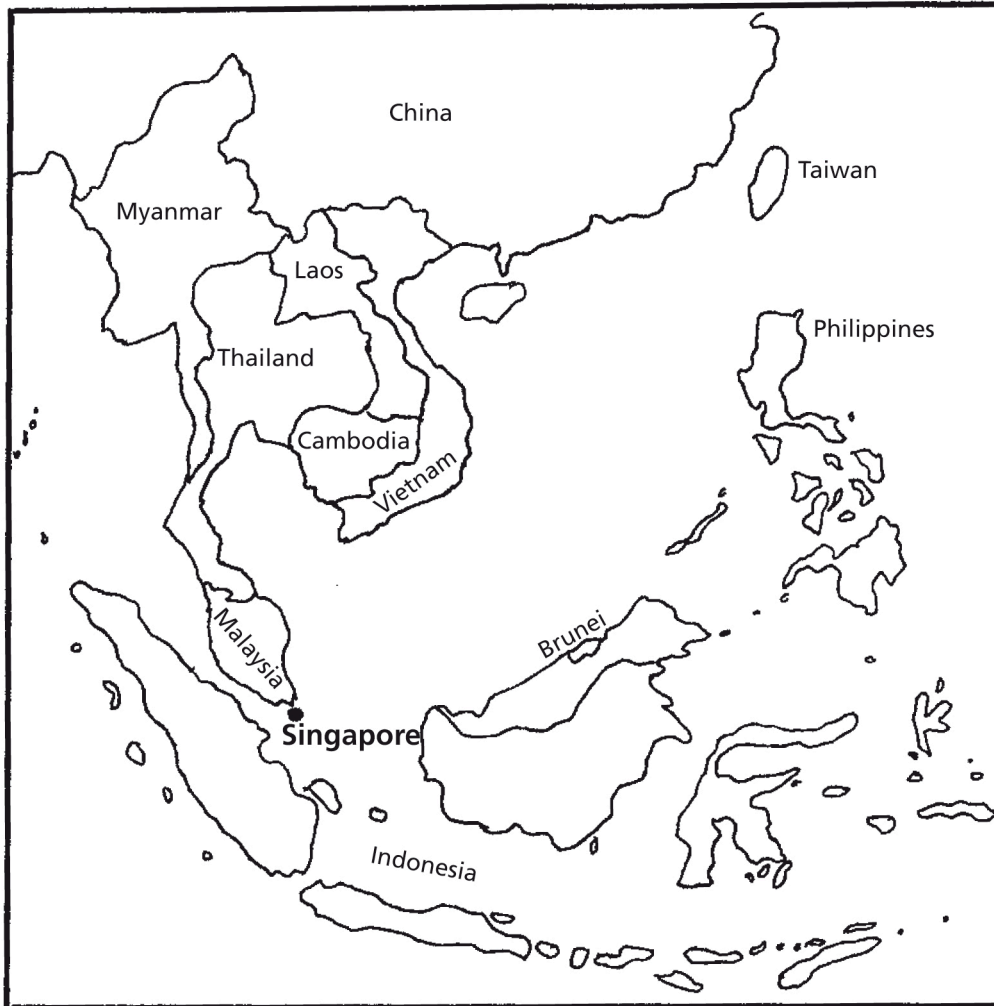
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Needless to say, the faults remaining are entirely my own.



Map 1 *Southeast Asia*



# Prologue

In July 2002 I went to Singapore to conduct ethnographic fieldwork on Chinese intergenerational relations. Singapore's dramatic modernization evoked my question of how the bond between generations has been affected. At an early stage of my fieldwork I got to know Bee Choo. She was a happily married mother of two children, and was pursuing a successful career as the deputy director of a family service center. During our conversations Bee Choo shared her life story with me, from her early childhood memories to her present role as a wife and working mother. I shall here let her narrative represent a microcosm of the issues that will be examined in this study.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Bee Choo's paternal grandfather and granduncle had left China to set up a fishing business in Singapore, where they hoped conditions would be better. The two brothers settled down in a small *kampung* (village) in Singapore and built a house for both their families to live in. Their new home soon got crowded with eight children on Bee Choo's grandfather's side and nine children on her granduncle's side. A couple of decades later, Bee Choo and her two brothers were born and raised in the same house.

Arranged marriages were still a common practice when Bee Choo's father grew up but when he was in his early twenties he fell madly in love with a young girl from the same *kampung*. Despite protests from their respective families, the couple persisted in getting married, and eventually they got their wish. The newly-weds settled down in the paternal home, and within a few years they had one daughter (Bee Choo) and two sons. In those days, three children was not a lot, but since the family was under economic pressure they could not afford too many mouths to feed. The fishing business that was set up by Bee Choo's grandfather had been passed down to the next generation, but the industrial restructuring of Singapore's economy in the 1960s and 70s subsequently wiped it out. While some of the sons found new jobs in a shipyard, Bee Choo's father was unable to take up any long-term employment due to a congenital heart disease. He ended up being the homemaker – and sometimes an object of ridicule among the villagers – and his wife had to play the part of breadwinner. She mainly worked as a housemaid in British expatriate



households, but during bad periods the family was forced to depend on government welfare. On top of the financial strains, the health of Bee Choo's father gradually declined and he went in and out of hospital. The situation went from bad to worse when Bee Choo's father finally passed away as a result of his heart failure. Barely nine years old, Bee Choo had to shoulder the burden of running a household. It became her lot to cook, clean, wash and look after her two younger brothers when her mother was working. Perhaps because Bee Choo had always been very close to her father, she now became the target of her mother's short temper and abusive actions. In the midst of all the hardship, the school was Bee Choo's only solace, the only place where she felt proud of herself. The government's modernization project included improvements to the school system and increasing possibilities for pursuing higher education. Even though Bee Choo's mother had never been given the opportunity to go to school, she never stopped Bee Choo from studying as long as she did not neglect her housework. Thanks to a good deal of assiduity and devotion she completed both primary and secondary school, and eventually obtained a university degree.

Bee Choo and her brothers grew up in a purely Hokkien-speaking family but were taught English and Mandarin in school.<sup>1</sup> As the years went by, these two languages – rather than their mother tongue Hokkien – became their major means of communication. Like so many others from Bee Choo's generation, she speaks mostly English with her own children. In fact, her children hardly understand any Hokkien at all, and have obvious difficulties in communicating with their older relatives. Compared to Bee Choo's grandparents' and parents' generations, Bee Choo and her brothers have made a dramatic leap in education, income and language use. In Bee Choo's case, we also find a generation gap in terms of religion. In the past, her whole family practiced Chinese religion (a fusion of Buddhism, Taoism and folk religion with elements of ancestor worship). As a teenager, Bee Choo was exposed to other religions and eventually she joined a Catholic group on campus. It is unusual for individuals, rather than families, to convert to Catholicism, but until today Bee Choo is the only Catholic in her family.<sup>2</sup> Apart from the fact that many of her peers were either Catholic or Protestant, Bee Choo was quite distant from her own family at this point of time, which perhaps made her more open to outside influences.

1 Hokkien is the largest Chinese dialect group in Singapore. Dialect belonging, however, is officially determined by paternal descent and does not reveal to what extent the person actually speaks the dialect.

2 The Protestant congregations, on the other hand, encourage isolated conversion of young people.

The family lived in the little *kampung* for many years, but things came to a sudden end in the early 1980s. Singapore's public housing authority, the Housing and Development Board, claimed the land area for urban development and all the village residents were relocated to different housing estates in the suburbs. As a result, relatives were dispersed and Bee Choo's family was broken up into two households. By the time of relocation, Bee Choo was in her early 20s and had married a man she had met during her tertiary studies at the polytechnic. Bee Choo and her husband moved into a unit of their own, while her mother moved into another unit with the eldest son and his wife, plus the youngest brother who was still unmarried. Although they decided to move into separate apartments, they applied to be relocated to the same housing estate. For understandable reasons, Bee Choo's relationship with her mother has always been strained. Still, she is happy that they are living only a few floors apart as it makes it easier to coordinate both practical and emotional family interaction. Usually the whole family gathers for dinner in Bee Choo's unit in the evenings and on weekends. Although Bee Choo's mother is retired, she is healthy enough to assist in looking after her grandchildren and to supervise the Indonesian domestic worker ("maid") who stays with the family. To juggle the hectic life-style and long working hours, an increasing proportion of middle-class families employ foreign domestic workers, predominantly from Indonesia and the Philippines, whose jobs include cooking, cleaning and looking after children. Meanwhile, Bee Choo and her brothers share the responsibilities of providing practical and financial support to their elderly mother. In Singapore, the state provides only a minimum of public welfare, which means that most elderly have to depend on their families. Bee Choo, like my other informants, sees it as her duty to take care of her mother in old age: "To me it's taken as given, that it is your responsibility to look after your elders."



## CHAPTER I

# Introduction

The point of departure for this study is the seeming contradiction between, on one hand, the rapid societal change and intergenerational disintegration, and, on the other hand, prevailing notions of traditional family values. Bee Choo's narrative is representative of many middle-class Singaporeans of her age group, as it illustrates the dramatic transformation of life that has taken place in Singapore over the past decades. After nearly 150 years under British colonial rule, followed by a short-lived merger with Malaysia, the Republic of Singapore gained independence in 1965. Massive efforts were put into modernizing the country, and together with Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea, Singapore soon became famous as one of the "Asian Tigers". Urbanization gradually transformed the island into the high-tech metropolis facing us today. Villages have given way to new towns, fully equipped with housing estates, MRT (Mass Rapid Transit) stations, neighborhood schools, shopping malls, post offices, child care centers, sports centers and cinemas. Since 1997, Singapore's economic growth has been hampered by the Asian financial crisis, the subsequent global recession in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the outbreak of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) and regional terrorism. Even so, the city-state is the most trade-intensive economy in the world and the richest country in Southeast Asia. Singapore now continues its reinvention by striving to establish itself as an international hub with a prominent role in finance and specialized services.

This study is a contribution to the anthropology of intergenerational relations in modern and rapidly changing societies. To date, anthropologists have been predominantly occupied with kinship and family in so-called traditional societies (e.g. Radcliffe-Brown 1924; Mead 1928; Simmons 1947; Goody 1969; Foner 1984). Although the contemporary anthropological research certainly includes the study of complex and urbanized societies, intergenerational relations is an undeveloped topic that needs to be greatly expanded. Singapore represents an ideal site in this regard, considering the immense pace of social change. This study is also an effort to contribute to the body of anthro-

pological research on Singapore society. Mention Singapore, and most people – fellow anthropologists as well as people in general – think of an orderly city and a shopper's paradise, skyscrapers and concrete jungle, severe fines for littering and the ban on chewing gum. The image of a society lacking authentic culture and history is an important reason why Singapore is a marginalized field within anthropology. Even Singaporeans themselves share this image. During fieldwork I got used to informants asking me why on earth I was interested in Singapore, and sometimes even advising me to choose a research site with “more culture”: “Why Singapore? The traditions are too diluted here. If you are interested in Chinese culture you better go to China.”<sup>3</sup> Precisely for those reasons, I would say, Singapore is a fascinating, and much needed, field of study.

Singapore's resident population, exceeding 3.4 million in 2004, is predominantly of Chinese (76 percent), Malay (14 percent) and Indian (8 percent) origin, which is a result of the regional immigration that followed the British colonization in 1819.<sup>4</sup> In this study, I address the question of how the extensive societal transformation has affected intergenerational relations among Chinese Singaporeans. The decision to focus on the Chinese population is not just because the Chinese are in numerical majority, but also because many kinds of generation gaps have hit the Chinese community in particular. Apart from the leap in education, income and consumption, a generational divide has arisen with regard to language, religion and social memory. Simultaneously – and perhaps then contradictorily – there is a worldwide image of Chinese as being “naturally” family-oriented and strongly adhering to filial piety. We certainly must be aware of the discrepancy between idealized representations and actual practices, but it is hardly an exaggeration to say that the family has been a pivotal feature of Chinese societies for centuries. In Singapore, this image was reasserted as a cornerstone of the government's Asian Values ideology in the 1980s. Singapore is well known for the political hegemony of the People's Action Party (PAP), which has governed the country without any interruption since 1959 (Singapore was granted a high degree of internal self-gov-

3 It is of interest that visitors from China often express the opposite perception, i.e. that Chinese culture in Singapore is more traditional than in China itself. This perception is by no means inadequate since many religious practices that were wiped out in the early communist era have lingered on in Chinese communities overseas. Another factor at play is Singapore's heritage of an immigrant society. The detachment from a “homeland” appears to transport cultural practices to an explicit level precisely because they are not taken for granted anymore, which spurs more conscious efforts to “keep” traditions alive in the new country.

4 In 2004, Singapore's total population (i.e. residents and non-residents) exceeded 4.2 million. The resident population (i.e. citizens and permanent residents) exceeded 3.4 million and was composed of approximately 76 percent Chinese, 14 percent Malays, 8 percent Indians, and 1.8 percent Others (Singapore Department of Statistics, <http://www.singstat.gov.sg> [accessed 22 August 2005]).

ernance in 1959).<sup>5</sup> The family is a subject of constant state intervention, and although the Singapore government no longer preaches Asian Values, a pro-family ideology is continuously advocated.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the following questions: How are Chinese intergenerational relations affected by the rapid societal change in Singapore? What are the forces serving to fragment as well as consolidate the relations across generations? How are the processes of fragmentation and consolidation articulated and negotiated in everyday life? How are intergenerational obligations and expectations within the family affected by the emergence of generation gaps? What circumstances challenge and/or sustain the continuity of those expectations and obligations?

In the literature, the term “generation” is used in several, and sometimes ambiguous, ways. At a societal level, generation generally means “age group” or “age cohort”, i.e. a group of individuals who roughly share the same period of birth. From an anthropological perspective, however, generation is not deducible from biological life course. Karl Mannheim’s (1952) classic formulation of historical-social generation units is of particular relevance in this regard. As Mannheim emphasizes, generation is a matter of “social location”, rather than a biological fact (ibid.: 291). Similar to class belonging, a generation consists of individuals who develop a group identity due to shared experiences (ibid.). In a family context, on the other hand, generation refers to the relative position in a kinship structure, which does not necessarily coincide with actual age. This study is concerned with generations *both* at a societal level (in terms of cultural continuity/discontinuity across generations) and within the family (in terms of intergenerational expectations and obligations). However, instead of conceptualizing the societal and familial as separate domains, I shall treat them as intersectional by examining how intergenerational expectations and obligations are challenged, reworked and/or reaffirmed in relation to the extensive societal change of past decades.

## Generations United, Generations Divided

Long ago, Margaret Mead addressed the problem of generation gaps in *Culture and Commitment* (1970), one of her less noted, and likewise less elaborat-

<sup>5</sup> The strong influence of the PAP government is reflected in their effective implementation of new policies and legislations. It is necessary to emphasize that some of the policies and/or legislations discussed in this study might subsequently have been changed or even been discarded.

ed, works. In this essay, Mead argues that the world has entered a new phase in history, in which the conditions of cultural commitment are radically different from the past. As a result of the breathtaking social change during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we have witnessed the emergence of a deep, unprecedented generation gap:

Today, suddenly, because all the peoples of the world are part of one electronically based, intercommunicating network, young people everywhere share a kind of experience that none of the elders ever have had or will have. Conversely, the older generation will never see repeated in the lives of young people their own unprecedented experience of sequentially emerging change (Mead 1970: 50).

In this modern world, elders cease being adequate sources of knowledge and identity; the basis of cultural commitment is no longer found in the past, it is to be found in the future (ibid.).<sup>6</sup> Margaret Mead, of course, is far from the only scholar who understands intergenerational disintegration as a contemporary phenomenon. The idea that modern society fundamentally changes the relations between elder and younger generations is widespread within academic and popular discourse. It is assumed that modernization – commonly defined in terms of economic and technological development, upward social mobility, urbanization and Westernization – has a fragmenting effect on intergenerational relations. The position of the elder generation vis-à-vis the younger generation is undermined by longer life expectancy, increasing levels of education, the breaking up of the extended family, and the decline of the religious significance of elders (e.g. ancestor worship) (Cowgill and Holmes 1972).

While intergenerational disintegration is extremely conspicuous in contemporary Singapore, the existing research overlooks the complexity of that disintegration as well as it overlooks the opposite of disintegration, that is, the ways in which intergenerational relations are being maintained and reaffirmed. This study therefore argues for the importance of an analytical framework that recognizes processes of intergenerational disintegration and consolidation, the levels at which these processes occur, and the ways in which they

---

<sup>6</sup> Mead (1970) makes a distinction between intergenerational relations in three different types of culture. A *postfigurative* culture, typical of non-industrial and small-scale societies, is characterized by slow social change and a seniority-based structure. A *cofigurative* culture, by contrast, emerges with rapid social change and movement causing intergenerational discontinuities. Since the experience of the young generation is fundamentally different from their forebears, they primarily learn from, and identify with, their peers instead of older members of the society. In Mead's view, however, a *cofigurative* culture is not sustainable and has to be replaced with a *prefigurative* culture, where young people acquire authority to guide the elders. In a *prefigurative* culture the generational divide is bridged by the acceptance by adults to learn from children.

are articulated in everyday life. As we shall see, a fragmentation of cultural continuity across generations does not necessarily imply the dissolution of the intergenerational obligations within the family. Bee Choo's case, which I portrayed in the prologue, serves as a witness of how various forms of intergenerational support cut across the generational divide. Modern societies are usually associated with a reversal of intergenerational resource flows (money, goods, services) to the advantage of the younger generation (Caldwell 1976). As the family becomes economically and emotionally nucleated, parents presumably spend increasing resources on their own children without expecting or receiving anything in return (see figure 1). This hypothesis applies only partially to Singapore. Whereas there is a substantial expansion of the resources flowing from parents to children among my informants, it has not implied the disruption of the support from adult children to elderly parents (see figure 2). In Singapore, the increasing pressure on young parents to sustain this double flow has given rise to the term "sandwich generation", referring to how they are squeezed between fulfilling responsibilities to elderly parents and to their own children.

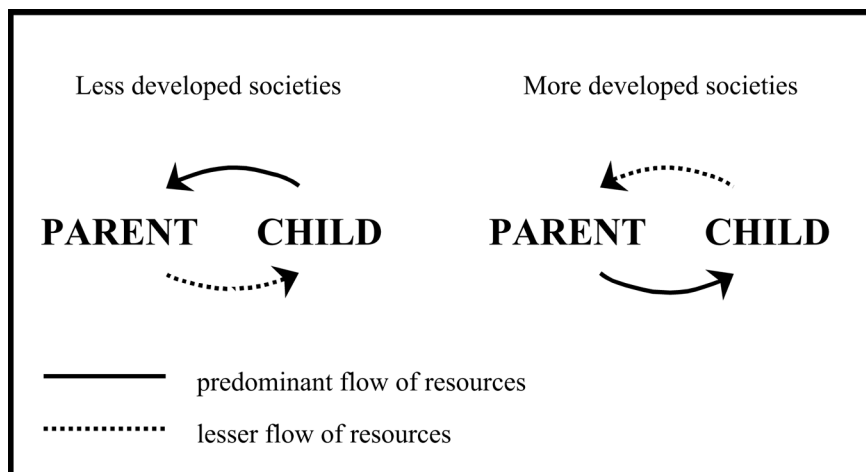


Figure 1 *Caldwell's model of intergenerational resource flows in developed and less developed societies as adapted from Croll (2000: 110, Fig. 4.1).*



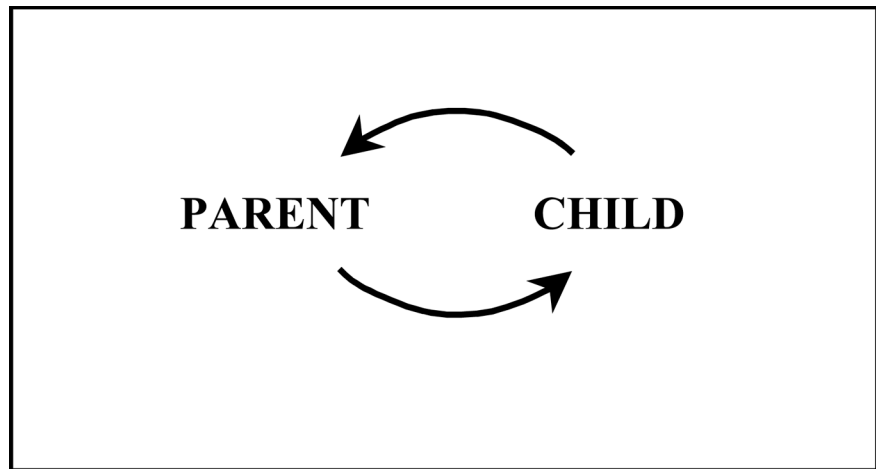


Figure 2 *Intergenerational resource flows among Chinese Singaporeans.*

Now, one important reason for the continuity of intergenerational support in Singapore and many other Asian societies is the minimal role of the state in providing public welfare (Croll 2000). The neglect of the impact of political regimes is a serious weakness of theories based on modernization, suggesting that the responsibility for supporting the elderly automatically shifts from the family to the state in modern societies (cf. Cowgill and Holmes 1972). This is by no means a self-evident change. Whereas a welfare state finances intergenerational support between age groups (since public welfare is largely tax-funded and channeled via the state apparatus), the Singaporean state locates the burden of intergenerational support at the level of the family. Their anti-welfare policy is rationalized on the grounds that the family represents a traditional pillar of Asian societies. This study emphasizes the importance of examining how the state seeks to reaffirm familial obligations, and how their strategies must be seen in relation to the wider political economy, as Singapore struggles to establish itself as a major hub in the global economy. However, while the continuity of familial obligations is reinforced by the state, the cultural logic of intergenerational support extends beyond the political and economic dimensions. The ways in which Chinese intergenerational expectations and obligations are maintained and/or renegotiated in the context of societal change and modern capitalism, I argue, must be understood against a specific cultural notion of the parent-child relation.

## The Intergenerational Contract

In this study I deploy the theoretical concept “intergenerational contract” for the expectations and obligations that bind the generations together. The intergenerational contract is not a contract in a legal sense, but primarily serves as a metaphor for norms of intergenerational obligations and expectations in a specific socio-cultural context (cf. Bengtson and Achenbaum 1993; Ikels 1993, 2004; Croll 2000). From this perspective, the intergenerational contract should be conceived as a social, rather than a juridical, contract between generations. The notion of a social contract can be traced all the way back to ancient Greece, but was especially salient in political philosophy during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the writings of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the social contract is what defines and legitimizes the rights and duties between the state and the people (Boucher and Kelly 1994).<sup>7</sup> A social contract, in this case between generations, presupposes that the different parties are *morally* obliged to fulfill the formal and informal expectations laid upon them.

As a theoretical concept, the intergenerational contract has a number of advantages for the purpose of this study. Apart from serving as a metaphor for existing obligations and expectations between generations, I suggest that the concept of a contract has particular relevance for understanding Chinese intergenerational relations in contemporary Singapore. Although my informants do not use the term “contract” with regard to these obligations and expectations, the *implicit* understanding of the Chinese parent-child relation does in effect resemble a contract, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. My informants unanimously describe the parent-child relation as inseparable from sentiments of indebtedness and repayment. Each child is indebted to his or her parents for being brought into this world and for being raised and cared for until adulthood. When reaching adulthood, the child is expected to reciprocate this debt through taking care of elderly parents.

The intergenerational contract, of course, is an analytical tool and should not be confused with my informants’ way of speaking about intergenerational obligations and expectations. In the Singaporean context, the relation between parent and child is intimately linked to the notion of filial piety, both as a term of reference in everyday life and as an ideological-political tool deployed by the state. Filial piety, which is the translation of the Chinese character pronounced *xiao* (or *hsiao*), is closely associated with the work of Con-

<sup>7</sup> Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, albeit they did not agree on all accounts, saw the social contract as a voluntarily agreement between the state and the people (Boucher and Kelly 1994).

fucius and his disciples.<sup>8</sup> Strictly speaking, filial piety refers to a set of ritual observances between parent and child, but the way the term is being used in contemporary Singapore is much broader. Even though the interpretation and practice of filial piety varies according to religion, generation and socio-economic status, there is a consensus regarding children's moral responsibility to provide support to their elderly parents (albeit this does not always translate into actual practice). Hui Min, a female in her mid-twenties, put it in the following way: "What do I mean by filial piety? Basically take care of your parents when they grow old and are not able to take care of themselves. That you will basically respect and honor them." Hui Min is unmarried and lives with her parents. Like most adult children, she gives her parents monthly allowances, so-called "pocket-money", as a gesture of her filial piety: "I know my mum appreciates it. She thinks it's good and in a sense I also think she sees it as, how should I say, that it is an expression of my filial piety to her".

The formalized character of intergenerational relations has deep historical roots in Chinese society. Filial obligations, such as the care of elderly parents, were not only established in various codes of conduct and under imperial law, many times they were also stated in so-called family division contracts (Cohen 1976, 2005; Miller 2004).<sup>9</sup> Unlike a conventional will, a family division contract usually took effect during the lifetime of the parents, and apart from settling the division of the family property among the sons, it also defined the sons' duties to their parents.<sup>10</sup> The rights and duties of each party, such as the amount of allowance each son should give his parent/s, were explicit and often written down in detail (Cohen 2005: 126).<sup>11</sup> Now, family division contracts are not found in Singapore, and I should certainly avoid making sweeping comparisons between China and Singapore. Indigenous Chinese customs were transformed in the Singaporean context, since they were incompatible with the British judicial system in colonial Singapore, as well as with the judicial system of the modern Republic of Singapore (Freedman 1979). Neverthe-

8 Confucius lived around 551 B.C. – 479 B.C. Confucianism was established as a state ideology in China far back in the Han dynasty (206 B.C. – 220 A.D.), and up to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Chinese education system consisted by and large of Confucian teachings, such as the *Classic of Filial Piety*, the *Juvenile Instruction* and the *Twenty Four Filials*.

9 The importance of written agreements throughout Chinese society is widely accepted among scholars, and what is interesting is that such agreements seem to permeate all spheres of social life, including the family (Cohen 2005: 252ff).

10 I shall make no attempt to analyze the conceptual and practical difference between contracts in the West and in China, albeit it is clear that these are not wholly equivalent (see Cohen 2005: 252ff).

11 It should be noted that such family division contracts still exist in China. Despite the fact that sons' and daughters' equal right to inheritance as well as their equal responsibility for aged parents is legally reinforced by the modern Communist state, daughters usually remain exempt from the family division contracts. In actual practice, however, daughters carry a substantial burden of parental support (Miller 2004).

less, the contractual relationship between parent and child is reproduced in other ways, both figuratively and literally speaking. The idea of a contractual relationship between parent and child is, as I have already pointed out, a fundamental component in the Singapore government's family ideology. In fact, children's responsibility to maintain aged parents who cannot support themselves is legally reinforced under the Maintenance of Parents Act, which came into force in 1995. (In this regard, of course, the notion of a contract between generations is not restricted to the Chinese community.)

While the intergenerational contract is being reproduced on many different levels, it is not a static entity. On the contrary, the ethnographic record of this study unfolds how intergenerational relations are being challenged and renegotiated in the context of extensive societal change. One of the most patent trends is the erosion of extended family units, and the trend of substituting co-residence with financial and material support. Another example is the redefinition of intergenerational obligations and gender, as daughters too have become an important source of support for their natal families (see also Graham et al. 2002; Teo et al. 2003). In Singapore, as in other societies across Asia, the increasing focus on young children and the declining status of elderly also gives rise to new strategies, whereby elderly parents may provide unpaid assistance to their adult children in exchange for the support they receive from the latter (Ikels 1993; Croll 2000). Recent research in Singapore has emphasized the mutual gains of the intergenerational contract by showing how elderly parents are in fact an important source of support for their adult children (Mehta 1999; Teo et al. 2003). The concept of an intergenerational contract is useful for highlighting this "binding nature" of mutual support between parents and children in the absence of sufficient public welfare (Ikels 1993: 307). However, although the intergenerational contract may be a gain for both parties (i.e. both parent and child), it would be misleading, at least with regard to Chinese Singaporeans, to conceive of it as an agreement made between equals. Instead, the ethnography in this study points to the existence of asymmetrical power relations in the negotiation of intergenerational rights and obligations. Nor can the intergenerational contract be said to result from a voluntary agreement. The notion of a contract underlines the standpoint that intergenerational relations are neither a natural fact nor immune to negotiation, but it is also a contract the parties are socialized into, rather than one that is explicitly agreed upon.

## Filial Children in a Market Economy

Studies of Chinese social life often emphasize the significance of gift-giving in the establishing and maintenance of social relationships, including family and kinship ties (Yang 1995; Yan 1996, 2002). Mutual obligations are thereby conceived as the basis for all forms of human relationships, whether these are distant or intimate. As we shall see, this also applies to Singapore. The palpable presence of notions of reciprocity in Chinese intergenerational relations gives renewed relevance to Marcel Mauss' theory of gift exchange. In his famous essay *The Gift* (originally published as *Essai sur le Don* in 1925), Mauss demonstrates the involuntary nature of gift exchange. While gifts may appear voluntary, because they "take place in the form of presents", they are, in reality, "given and reciprocated obligatorily" (Mauss 2000: 3). Although gift-giving and personal connections are prevalent features of Chinese society, these practices should not be reduced to Chinese culture. By the same token, it is necessary to see how the scope, form and significance of gift relations interact with the wider political economy.<sup>12</sup>

Singapore is in many ways a capitalist society in its extreme, whose existence is totally tuned with the global economy. Being a small city-state with few natural resources, the country has become very dependent on its capability of facilitating enterprise and attracting multinational corporations. As Singapore now faces increasing competition from neighboring countries, where costs of production are lower, the government is busy turning the country into a key site for specialized services and finance. Singapore's strive to become a financial hub is in line with Saskia Sassen's (1994) description of "global cities". However, Singapore is different in that it is a city-state. Whereas Sassen (ibid.) suggests that global cities partly substitute for the role of governments in the world economy, Singapore is at once a city and a state, which enables the government to supervise and, indeed, actively stimulate the building of a global city. In recent years, the Singapore government has taken a variety of measures to create a cosmopolitan environment, from tax reductions for companies and wage reforms to allowing bar-top-dancing, bungee jumping, 24-hour-liquor-licenses and casinos. Singaporeans, meanwhile, are urged to adopt a mindset tuned to the global economy; they have to accept sudden

12 In an informative study of Chinese social relationships, Mayfair Yang (1995) illuminates how the significance of *guanxi* ("personal connections") has intensified in the People's Republic of China over the past decades, as it arose as a way for people to defuse the regulations and restrictions imposed by the redistributive economy of the socialist regime. Singapore is not a socialist state, and, unlike Mainland Chinese, Singaporean Chinese seldom talk about *guanxi*. Nevertheless, social relationships, including intergenerational relations, are in practice very much governed by sentiments of indebtedness and repayment.

changes and learn how to adjust themselves to those changes. In this respect, the character of the Singaporean state is reminiscent of Philip Bobbitt's (2003) notion of the "market-state". In *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace and the Course of History*, Bobbitt traces the history and transformation of the modern state. He argues that we are currently witnessing a transition from the order of the nation-state to that of the market-state. The market-state "depends on the international capital markets and, to a lesser degree, on the modern multinational business network to create stability in the world economy, in preference to management by national or transnational political bodies" (ibid.: 229). Thus, contrary to the old nation-state, which takes its "legitimacy from the promise to better the material welfare of their citizens", the emerging market-state sets out to "maximize the opportunity of its people" (ibid.: xxvi).

Singapore may be a full-fledged capitalist society, but gift relations are certainly not extinct.<sup>13</sup> This is especially obvious with regard to intergenerational transactions. James Carrier (1996), in a critique of the separation between gift and commodity societies, mentions the family as one of the most obvious examples of how transactions are socially embedded even in capitalist societies. At the same time as the family is enmeshed in the larger capitalist economy (e.g. through employment and consumption), transactions within the family are not freed from social obligations in the same manner as are market transactions (ibid.: 88ff). Family transactions are not only vital for survival, but also for the "regeneration of relations within the household" (ibid.: 89). In this view, the private sphere of intergenerational obligations and expectations must be analyzed in relation, not opposition, to the market economy. Ara Wilson (2004) deploys the notion of "intimate economies" in highlighting the interaction and intersection between the market economy and the intimate realms of everyday life in contemporary Bangkok. The term "intimate" refers to "features of people's daily lives that have come to seem noneconomic", in other words, all those "deeply felt orientations and entrenched practices that make up what people consider to be their personal or private lives and their individual selves" (ibid.: 10–11). In the same sense, I argue for the importance of highlighting the intersection between the modern capitalist economy and the intimate sphere of the Chinese intergenerational contract.

In this study I suggest that the modern capitalist economy, despite representing a fragmenting force in terms of social mobility and individual thrift, also has an integrating impact on the intergenerational contract. Money, the

13 Whereas Mauss saw gift relations as typical of traditional societies, subsequent studies have questioned the dichotomization between gift societies and commodity societies in pointing to the existence of gift relations in modern societies (e.g. Parry 1986; Thomas 1991; Carrier 1995; 1996). (Mauss himself, to be fair, recognized that gift relations to some degree linger on in modern capitalist societies, even if they do not play a central role in the economic process.)

essence of capitalism, supposedly depersonalizes transactions, but the monetary transactions taking place within Chinese families are far from impersonal, as they reaffirm intergenerational roles and relationships. The ways in which the capitalist economy intersects with intergenerational obligations should also be seen in relation to the meaning of money in Chinese culture. Money (as opposed to wealth) is an important idiom of Chinese social relations, and is frequently exchanged as gifts among family members and friends. Not only do monetary transactions reaffirm the economic-practical significance of intergenerational relations, the transactions also reaffirm the emotional bonds.

The cultural importance of monetary contributions surfaced in a conversation with Auntie Teo, as we discussed the practice of giving parents a portion of one's salary. (In Singapore you never address senior people by name. Family and kin are addressed according to their correct kinship term. Unrelated senior people are usually addressed as "auntie" and "uncle".) Auntie Teo is in her fifties. She works as a primary school teacher and her husband has a contractor business. They live with three adult children in a nice semi-detached house, own two cars and employ a Filipino maid to do the housework. Although they fare well economically, Auntie Teo expects her working children to give her monthly allowances as a contribution to common household costs and as a "token of appreciation" (the notion "token of appreciation" was a recurrent expression among informants in this regard). As we spoke, Auntie Teo was curious to know how much money I give my parents. When I replied that I do not give them any money, despite having an income of my own, she could not believe her ears. "Why not?! Don't you love your parents?" she said.<sup>14</sup> "Of course I love my parents," I immediately protested. "But in Sweden we don't give our parents pocket-money, and when they are old they will usually move to a nursing home." Auntie Teo was appalled. While in Sweden there are no expectations on children to provide regular financial contributions to their parents, neither as a source of old-age support nor as a manifestation of affection and reciprocity, Auntie Teo perceives monetary contributions as a moral responsibility. Our contrasting views on this matter may appear prosaic, but reveal different ideas of the parent-child relationship, and different ways of expressing affection and gratitude. As such, it also illuminates how emotions are culturally articulated rather than "substances to be discovered in our blood" (Rosaldo 1984: 143).

<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that to use the term "love" in relation to intergenerational obligations is not entirely common for Chinese Singaporeans. The majority of my informants usually explained the practice of giving money to parents in terms of "duty" and "responsibility". Nevertheless, a number of informants, in addition to Auntie Teo, spoke explicitly about love.

## Other Literature

In contrast to anthropology, family and generations in modern, albeit mainly Western, societies have for decades been central topics in sociology (e.g. Burgess 1948; Mannheim 1952; Parsons and Bales 1955; Eisenstadt 1956; Berger and Berger 1983; Bengtson 1993). Sociological as well as historical accounts may provide comparative insights and theoretical entries, and will therefore figure in this study. I have already mentioned the importance of Karl Mannheim's (1952) notion of generation units, which emphasizes the ways in which generations are socially constructed and a result of shared experiences. An early attempt to analyze the organization and function of age groups in different societies is sociologist N. S. Eisenstadt's (1956) comprehensive study *From Generation to Generation: Age Groups and Social Structure*. Eisenstadt's study, which covers a range of traditional and modern societies, examines how societies transmit their heritage across generations. A major argument herein is that universalistic societies, of which industrialized societies represent the purest form, are characterized by an increasing significance of age-homogeneous groups at the cost of age-heterogeneous groups (i.e. intergenerational/vertical structures).

In the beginning of this chapter I pointed out the shortage of ethnographic studies of family and generational relations in contemporary Singapore. A number of informative studies were conducted in the 1950s and 1960s, in particular Maurice Freedman's work *Chinese Family and Marriage in Singapore* (1957), Alan Elliott's (1955/1990) study of Chinese spirit-medium cults, Barrington Kaye's (1960) sociological study of Chinese households in an urban area of Singapore, Ho It-chong's (1958) study on Cantonese domestic workers, and Judith Djamour's (1965) ethnographic account of Malay family life. Janet Salaff (1988) conducted a qualitative study of the impact of state policies and industrial restructuring on Chinese families in the 1970s and 1980s. An important contribution to the ethnography of modern Singapore is Tania Li's (1989) study of Malay kinship. While ethnographic studies may be scarce, there is a substantial body of sociological research on family-related issues in Singapore. The sociological literature is mostly quantitative (e.g. Kuo and Wong 1979; Chung et al. 1981; Chen et al. 1982; Kuo 1987; Chan 1997; Quah 1998), but there are some recent qualitative studies of the renegotiation of intergenerational relations (e.g. Mehta 1997, 1999; Graham et al. 2002; Teo et al. 2003). Studies of consumption and modernity in Singapore are also of significance in trying to understand the generational divide (e.g. Chua 2000).



For the purpose of this study, it is also useful to look at research into intergenerational relations in other parts of contemporary Asia. Some important contributions in this regard are Charlotte Ikels' (2004) edited volume on the practice and discourse of filial piety in contemporary East Asia, Janet Salaff's (1995) study of gender and filial piety in Hong Kong during rapid industrialization, and a number of studies on ageing and intergenerational relations in Japan and Korea (e.g. Sung 1990, 1995; Traphagan 2000; Thang 2001; Traphagan and Knight 2003). Elisabeth Croll's (2000) work on daughter discrimination across Asia makes an important contribution to the analysis of intergenerational resource flows and the renegotiation of intergenerational obligations.

## Organization of the Study

This study is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 2 provides a historical background of Singapore, from the pre-colonial period to the modern Republic of Singapore. Chapter 2 also contains a section on the history of Singapore's Chinese community as well as some features of Chinese family organization. In Chapter 3 I discuss the fieldwork and methodological issues, including the collection and interpretation of ethnographic data. Chapter 4 examines the consequences of rapid modernization on cultural continuity across generations. Despite the ideology of Asian family values, the continuity across generations faces huge challenges due to the rapid pace of social change in Singapore. The purpose of Chapter 4 is to discuss how those challenges are articulated in everyday life, but also to unfold the strategies people employ in negotiating intergenerational differences. In Chapter 5 I turn to the ways in which intergenerational relations are maintained and reaffirmed. To begin with, I discuss the ways in which the Singapore government uses notions of traditional family values for implementing strategies aimed at adjusting Singapore to the global economy. As we shall see, the government's anti-welfare policy has a consolidating effect on intergenerational relations in the sense that parents and children are dependent on each other for economic and practical support. Moreover, the government's family ideology serves to further reinforce preconceived ideas of Asian family values, and, consequently, to reinforce the pressure on people to live up to the ideal of cohesive family life. Whereas the role of the state and the political economy are crucial for explaining the continuity of the intergenerational contract, the ways in which inter-

generational obligations and expectations operate are culturally constructed. The second part of Chapter 5 therefore focuses on how the Chinese intergenerational contract is interpreted and practiced in everyday life. This later leads us into Chapter 6, where I examine how the intergenerational contract is renegotiated and transformed. Rapid social mobility across generations has weakened the position of elderly parents vis-à-vis their children in terms of economic capacity and social status. This development is accompanied by an increase of resource flows from parents to young children, which puts pressure on young parents to balance the amount of time and money spent on elderly and younger dependants. While these challenges have not yet led to the dissolution of filial obligations, Chapter 6 illustrates the ways in which the intergenerational contract is reworked and made relevant to contemporary society. In Chapter 7 I synthesize the different aspects of intergenerational disintegration and consolidation that have been examined in this study.



## CHAPTER 2

# From Temasek to the Republic of Singapore: A Historical Overview

To make sense of present-day Singapore, it is necessary to have some knowledge about its history. Singapore was under British colonial rule between 1819 and 1963. Although the historical and archeological records of pre-colonial Singapore are scarce, they do verify that settlements date back at least 600 years prior to 1819. The earliest reliable references to the small island are from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, where it is mentioned as Temasek in the Javanese *Nagarakertagama*. The name Singapore derives from the Malay word *Singapura*, which means “lion city”. The word *Singapura* appears in a story in the *Malay Annals* about a Sumatran prince who saw a creature he mistook for a lion (although lions are not found in Southeast Asia), and changed the name from Temasek to *Singapura*. Today, the lion – often in the shape of the Merlion, a statue with the head of a lion and the body of a fish – has become a national symbol of Singapore.<sup>15</sup>

Pre-colonial Temasek or *Singapura* was under the rule and influence of various polities, such as the Sumatra-based empire of Srivijaya, the Javanese empire of Majahapit, and the Kingdom of Malacca. When the Portuguese seized Malacca in 1511, the Sultanate relocated to Johore on the southern end of the Malaysian mainland and to Riau. Singapore remained an outpost of the Sultanate until 1819, when Sir Stamford Raffles and his party landed on the swampy mangrove banks of the Singapore River. It is impossible to get any clear figures of the pre-historic population of Singapore, but at the time of

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15 Written accounts of Singapore in the 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards primarily derive from Chinese traders, Portuguese historians and the *Malay Annals* (Lim 1991: 3ff).

British colonization the existing settlement was estimated as consisting of only a few hundred Chinese and Malays (Lim 1991: 3ff).

While Britain gained a firm position in India in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it was the Dutch who dominated in insular Southeast Asia. The British breakthrough in the Orient came with their acquisition of Penang in 1786, followed by Stamford Raffles's founding of Singapore in 1819. Subsequently, in 1824, an Anglo-Dutch Treaty was signed whereby the Dutch transferred the control of Malacca to the British in exchange for Bencoolen in Sumatra. The formation of the Straits Settlements – i.e. Singapore, Penang and Malacca – in 1826 cemented the British stronghold in Malaya (Wong 1991: 21). The Straits Settlements were administrated under India until 1867, when they became a separate Crown Colony. During the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, British rule was gradually extended to peninsular Malaya (Turnbull 1989: 76). The annexation of peninsular Malaya, together with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the development of steamships, established Singapore as a key port in the East-West trade. Its geographical location served as an excellent entrepôt, linking the sea routes between the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia and China. Singapore's scarce natural resources and local export goods (except for sago products, gambier, and pepper) were compensated for by its entrepôt trade, and from the 1870s onward Singapore's economic development was fuelled by the increasing demand for tin, rubber and petroleum exports from the Malayan region.

## The Migration of Chinese to Singapore

The high demand for cheap labor attracted people from the wider-region. Large numbers arrived from the surrounding Malay world and India, but they were soon outnumbered by the massive inflow of Chinese labor migrants. Chinese had been trading and even settling down in *Nanyang* (Southeast Asia) several centuries before the Europeans, albeit in small numbers. Malacca, in particular, had close contacts with China from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards (Pan 1994: 21f; Purcell 1967: 17f).<sup>16</sup> The first Chinese who moved to Singapore after 1819 were primarily merchants and/or cultivators from Malacca and elsewhere in the region. This group of local-born Chinese – known as *Straits Chinese* or *Baba Chinese* – differed both economically and culturally from the

<sup>16</sup> The Chinese term *Nanyang* means “South Seas” and refers to the geographic region of Southeast Asia.

labor migrants arriving in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. By and large, the Straits Chinese emphatically distinguished themselves from the *sinkeh*s (“new-comer” in Hokkien). Unlike the labor migrants, who mainly derived from the poor peasantry, the Straits Chinese were merchants or cultivators who had settled down in Southeast Asia and adopted many features of local Malay culture, including the language.<sup>17</sup> Wealthy Straits Chinese who were familiar with Malayan society came to work closely with the British and often acted as middlemen in trade and business (Wang 1992: 166ff.) The growing demand for manpower in the plantations and mines was, on the other hand, filled by Chinese labor migrants, so-called coolies. Unable to finance the journey themselves, coolies were recruited under a credit-ticket system, whereby an agent financed their passage from China. The coolies were thereby bound to work for their agents for a certain period of time once they reached their destination. The Chinese labor migration intensified massively from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century as the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire created a demand for indentured labor. Far from being a win-win agreement, coolies were often exploited by their agents and forced to work and live under harsh conditions.

Most of the Chinese migrants in Southeast Asia originated from the coastal regions of southeastern China, primarily the provinces of Fujian and Guangdong. There are a number of reasons why this limited geographical area came to serve as the main supplier of migrants. A rapidly growing population at the time was a major push factor for migration. In addition, hostile relations between the imperial regime and the southeastern provinces caused disturbances and occasional outbreaks of violence, such as the Taiping Rebellion in the 1850s. At the same time, the pressure from Western imperialism grew stronger and seriously strained the economy of south China, which hit the poorer strata in particular. We must also remember that traders and travelers from these regions already had frequent contacts with *Nanyang* (Purcell 1967: 4ff; Wang 1992: 168). As stressed by historian Wang Gungwu (1992, 2001), the Chinese migration to Singapore during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was largely of a sojourning nature. In contrast to settlers, the sojourners departed with the intention of eventually returning home. Chinese had moved in and out of Singapore long before the British colonization even, but it was the establishment of Singapore as a free port that markedly intensified the influx of Chinese sojourners. Except for the Straits Chinese community, a more permanent migration pattern was not really established until the 1950s (*The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas* 2000: 205).

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17 Besides trade, early Chinese migrants in Singapore set up gambier- and pepper-cultivation as well as vegetable gardening (Purcell 1967: 88f).

Overseas, the Chinese immigrants set up their *kongsis* (mutual-benefit organizations) based on dialect, district, or clan/surname. The purpose of the *kongsi* was to assist new migrants, settle disputes, arrange religious rites and funerals, and forge business partnership (Purcell 1967: 79; Yen 1985: 45ff; Trocki 1990: 11). The *kongsi* worked by and large as a substitute for the family and lineage that the immigrant had broken away from. The southeastern provinces of Fujian and Guangdong, where most of the immigrants originated from, were distinct in their strong lineage organization. There the traditional lineages functioned as political, economic and social entities; they controlled land (the foremost kind of property), organized labor, funded education and social welfare, religious ceremonies and ancestral halls, graveyards, maintained law and order, and so forth. As a result of patrilineal and patrilocal exogamy, lineages were highly localized. Villages sometimes consisted of a single lineage, minus the daughters married out and plus the wives married in from other lineages (cf. Kulp 1925; Lin 1947; Hu 1948; Freedman 1957, 1971). But, the localized lineage organization of southeastern China could not be replicated overseas. Clan associations formed in overseas societies were based on broader denominators such as surname, place of origin, or dialect, and supplanted the safety net originally provided by the lineage (clans are not lineages in the strict sense of the term as they are based on fictive kinship). The various clan associations found in overseas societies were thus not an equally prominent part of social life in rural China, where the localized lineage organization was intact (Freedman 1971: 165f).

The secret society or triad was another prevalent feature in the lives of Chinese migrants. Victor Purcell (1967: 79) distinguished the overseas *kongsi* from the secret societies, which were of a more political nature and cut across district or dialect belonging. Other scholars, in contrast, have argued that it is difficult to draw any clear lines between them since some *kongsi* applied ritualistic practices similar to secret societies (Trocki 1990: 11f). Far from being an overseas phenomenon, secret societies were endemic in the southeastern provinces of China, known for their strong anti-dynastic sentiments (Purcell 1967: 4f). These rebellious groups were highly problematic to the Manchu regime, and fractions of them, such as the Triad Society, were likely transported to overseas Chinese communities in Singapore and elsewhere. But the triads in overseas communities transformed into syndicates that increasingly came to control gambling, prostitution and the opium excise farming (Pan 1994: 118).

Secret societies were also influential agents in Chinese labor migration, which, in contrast to the government-sponsored Indian labor migration, was largely in the hands of private entrepreneurs (Yen 1986: 112). Despite its un-

lawful activities, the secret society represented a stable structure for newly arrived immigrants who had left family and kin behind. It is also important to note that the early colonial government saw the secret societies as an effective tool for controlling the Chinese community. It was not until a few decades later that the colonial authorities began to voice concerns about the growing power of secret societies (Warren 1986: 17).

As the colony of Singapore grew, so did social and political disturbances. In the Chinese community, tensions between different dialect groups and secret societies sometimes escalated into bloody riots.<sup>18</sup> Nineteenth-century Singapore was in many ways a society torn by crime, riots, piracy, opium smoking, illegal gambling and thriving secret societies. In an attempt to take command of the anarchic situation, the government declared the existence of “dangerous” societies illegal in 1890. The extension of British protection to the Malay States from 1874 onwards was a part of the attempt to tighten control over political and social issues (Turnbull 1989: 87ff).

## The Chinese Family and the Problem with Tradition

The family has for centuries been a pivotal theme in the representation of Chinese culture. These images, however, are highly exaggerated, especially in the Singaporean context. To begin with, it cannot be assumed that the family culture transported from China to Singapore was “traditional” in character, nor can it be assumed that it was reproduced in the Singaporean context. Even the migration itself contradicts the image of excessive Chinese family orientation. To leave home was considered an “unfilial” act because it interfered with taking care of aged parents, performing ancestral rites and visiting family graves (Pan 1994: 21). This prejudice against emigration was further emphasized

18 It is often assumed that these conflicts were of inter-ethnic origin, but the riots were also linked to socio-economic factors. Carl Trocki (1990) draws an interesting correlation between the penetration of a global capitalist market based on opium trade and the emergence of local syndicates competing to dominate the retail distribution of opium, the so-called opium farms. Chinese merchants purchased rights from the colonial government to sell opium to the local market, which in turn found a growing number of consumers among the Chinese laborers. Opium addiction became a major social problem in particular for poor laborers, who ran into debt and failed to remit money to their families in China. The struggle between the different actors involved in the opium trade during the 19<sup>th</sup> century “actually lay at the roots of most of the secret society fights, riots, or conflicts that marked the history of Chinese Singapore” (Trocki 1990: 5). The opium farm system lasted until 1910, when a complete government monopoly was implemented. A final prohibition on opium smoking by the British government was not made until 1943, by which time the whole of Malaya was under Japanese occupation (ibid.: 214f).



through an imperial ban on traveling outside China, which lasted until 1893 when a new edict allowed Chinese subjects overseas to return home. Migration entails a disruption and reformulation of both kin and family ties. As I mentioned above, the clan organizations established in Singapore were no replicas of the localized lineage organizations in the homeland, nor were family arrangements identical.

The classic Chinese family is commonly imagined to be a large joint family where several generations lived under the same roof. A joint family arises when all married sons and their parents live in the same unit (minus daughters who married out). If the sons remain in the same unit after the senior generation has deceased, it is called a fraternal joint family. By now it is widely accepted that with the exception of wealthier households this ideal notion rarely corresponded to actual practice. The majority of Chinese families were in fact stem or elementary units (Hsu 1943; Freedman 1970; Baker 1979). A stem family is formed when only one married son remains with the parents and all the other sons move out upon marriage (and, of course, all the married daughters too). An elementary family (also called nuclear or conjugal family) consists of only spouses and their unmarried children. In any case, however, family structures vary in size and composition through time, and cannot be seen as static entities. For instance, partition of property among the sons upon the death of their parents usually results in the dissolution of the household into elementary units, and these units might in time develop into stem or even joint families. It is also essential to recognize that there are different dimensions of family organization. The economic family – i.e. where members are tied to each other by common budget and property – is not necessarily limited to the domestic unit. Labor migrants have many times contributed to the survival of the domestic unit by sending home remittances. In fact, this was an important reason for parents to encourage some of their children to find work abroad. Thus, while such families were geographically dispersed, their economy partly remained inclusive (cf. Cohen 1970, 1976). This also applies to contemporary Singapore, where economic support takes place between family members living in different households. It is hence important to note that the family and household unit are not necessarily synonymous.

It is certainly the case that large joint families were never a prevalent feature in Singapore. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese migrants consisted primarily of able-bodied men who came to work while their families were left in China. Women migrated on a much smaller scale and were vastly outnumbered by the male population, which obstructed any prospects of a conventional family life. The asymmetrical sex ratio did not even out until the 1950s, but even when migration began to stabilize, most

Chinese households in Singapore consisted of elementary families, i.e. parents and their unmarried children (Freedman 1957: 28). While able-bodied men formed the bulk of the early migrant community in Singapore, there were also women going overseas to work. A distinct feature of Chinese labor migration were the Cantonese domestic servants (*amahs*) and the so-called *samsui* women who worked at construction sites. (The term *samsui* refer to the Samsui area near Guangzhou (Canton) in China from where many of them originated (Kaye 1960: 32f).) For *amahs* and *samsui* women, going abroad was sometimes a way to escape marriage and lead an independent life. “These amahs viewed marriage as the ‘gate to slavery’; to get married was to become a slave, to ‘work till death’” (Ho 1958: 132).<sup>19</sup> Not all *amahs* in Singapore were unmarried, but many of them were so-called spinster-servants (*majies*), who had taken the oath of celibacy.

Like their male counterparts, the female labor migrants hardly led a conventional family life. A study of lower income households in the city area of Singapore in 1953–1954 showed that multi-generation households were not typical. Households with husband, wife and children made up one third of all households while single-person households made up another third. The average number of persons per household was estimated at 3.7 (the average figure is of course reduced by the high frequency of single person households and does not reveal the variation in household size) (Goh 1958: 41ff).<sup>20</sup> Urban areas displayed a higher frequency of smaller households than the countryside (Kaye 1960; Tan 1965). To bypass the shortage of housing, landlords subdivided units into small cubicles with communal kitchens. For rickshaw-pullers, and other poorly paid coolies, the small and unhygienic cubicles were the only affordable option. The cramped living conditions caused a lot of strain and sometimes led to the breakup of families, and the scarce financial means made it crucial to limit the number of mouths to feed (cf. Warren 1986).

19 It is interesting to note that unmarried women seem to have had a comparably recognized role in the Canton Delta in Guangdong by the presence of formalized spinsterhood. Women who out of some reason chose not to marry could take the vow of celibacy and thereby join a Spinster’s house. This formalized character implied a legitimized step away from childhood without entering marriage (Ho 1958: 24f; Stockard 1989: 72). The relatively strong position of women in this region is related to the employment opportunities in silk production in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Since daughters could be an important source of labor for the family, marrying them off was not necessarily the best deal. Besides marriage resistance, a special form of marriage, described as the “delayed transfer marriage”, was common in the Canton area. In this marriage system, newly married daughters remained for a period of time with their natal family (usually for a three-year period or until the first pregnancy) before they settled in the husband’s family. In this way, the natal family was compensated for the loss of their daughter’s labor (Stockard 1989: 3ff).

20 In Barrington Kaye’s study (1960) on Chinese households in Upper Nankin Street, single person households made up the majority.

## The Ethnic Landscape of Colonial Singapore

The growing Asian population in colonial Singapore earned their living in various ways: as construction workers, rickshaw pullers, domestic servants, boatmen, tailors, hawkers, fortune-tellers, and prostitutes. An interesting feature of the Chinese community during this period is the dialect specialization in economic activities, which was an outcome of the recruitment of new workers through kinship networks. The Hokkiens, who were particularly involved in the mercantile life, soon became the economically most influential dialect group (which also relates to the fact that the Hokkiens were the largest dialect group by numbers). The Teochews had a strong presence in the agricultural sector, especially in gambier- and pepper production, while the Cantonese and the Hakkas engaged in various kinds of crafts and personal services. Hainanese immigrants often worked as domestic servants in European and wealthy Straits Chinese households, or entered the coffee shop business (Cheng 1985: 89ff). The low-paid, but yet so hardworking, rickshaw pullers were primarily recruited from the minority groups of Henghua and Hockchia (Warren 1986: 36). This dialect specialization in economic activities tended to dissolve over time, but the heritage remains to some extent. Hainanese, for instance, are still reputed to be good chefs, and my Singaporean friends knew precisely which hawker-centers served the best Hainanese chicken rice.

Sir Stamford Raffles had the ambition of building a well-planned city, where the migrants were allocated separate residential areas on an ethnic basis. The ethnic segregation was also enhanced by the tendency among migrants to cluster near their different religious institutions and mutual benefit organizations. If we start out from the Singapore River, the heart of the island, the colonial administrative district grew up on the north bank and the commercial center was established on the south bank. The Chinese immigrants dominated the old Chinatown area south of the river. Indian immigrants lived predominantly around the Serangoon Road–Kampong Kapor area, while the Malay population clustered in *kampungs* on the northern city fringe. The luxurious European villas were mainly found near the colonial city center and in the western suburban areas (Yeoh 2003: 40ff). As for the heterogeneous Chinese community, the tendency of different dialect groups to conglomerate was facilitated by the colonial government's strategy of segregating the population along ethnic lines. Thus, the Hokkiens gravitated to Telok Ayer Street in Old Chinatown, where they also began to build their huge Thian Hok Keng temple in 1839. The Cantonese came to dominate the Kreta Ayer area, while the Hainanese concentrated around Beach Road (Cheng 1985: 28ff). Ethnic res-

idential segregation has been counteracted since 1989 through a quota system that limits the percentage allowed of each ethnic group in public housing estates. Historical districts such as Chinatown, Little India and the Malay/Muslim areas around Geylang and Kampong Glam have been restored and work as symbolic ethnic markers.



**Map 2** *Location of historical districts in relation to the Singapore River.*

## Becoming an Asian Tiger

The prelude to Singapore's independence was the outbreak of WWII and the subsequent Japanese occupation. The Japanese occupation of Singapore between 1942 and 1945 came as a shock to Britain, which had seen Singapore as its invincible fortress in the Far East. The crushing defeat of the British troops by the Japanese seriously weakened people's respect and confidence in the colonial regime. When the British authorities returned after Japan's surrender, they found it impossible to re-establish their former supremacy. The Straits Settlements were dissolved in 1946. Malacca and Penang subsequently merged with peninsular Malaya, to form the Federation of Malaya, while Singapore alone was reconstituted as a crown colony.

Faced by growing anti-colonial sentiments, the British authorities made plans for a gradual introduction of self-governance. When Singapore was

granted internal self-governance in the 1959 elections, Lee Kuan Yew and his People's Action Party won a clear victory. The PAP had been formed in 1954 by a group of English-educated middle-class Singaporeans and among them were Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Keng Swee and S. Rajaratnam. Joined in a socialist and anti-colonialist vision, the PAP's English-educated wing was backed up by a Chinese-educated left wing. The support from the leftists had been crucial in reaching out to the Chinese-speaking masses, but in 1961 the internal differences had been aggravated to a point where the leftist fraction broke away to form a separate party, Barisan Sosialis. Despite the PAP losing important links to the grass roots, they managed to stay in power thanks to the growing suspicion of communist threats, and the arrest of several pro-communist politicians, by both the British and Malayan authorities (Turnbull 1989: 251ff).

Singapore's lack of natural resources, its tiny size and the seething political unrest convinced the PAP leadership that independence could only be realized in union with Malaya.<sup>21</sup> After tedious negotiations, Singapore joined the Federation of Malaya and the British territories in Borneo, with the exception of Brunei, to form the Federation of Malaysia in 1963. Singapore was allowed to keep substantial control over finance, labor and education, while foreign affairs, defense and internal security were transferred to the central government. The Malayan government had been ambivalent about the merger with Singapore because the Chinese would outnumber the Malays (43 percent respectively 41 percent of the total population), but the risk of a communist-controlled independent Singapore was seen as a greater threat to Malaysian security than including Singapore in the Federation. However, disagreements regarding finance, trade, and taxation caused further tensions, especially Singapore's unwillingness to give up its free port status, which put the Federation at a disadvantage because of their higher tariff walls. The situation grew from bad to worse when the PAP decided to contest the federal elections in 1964, despite having said earlier it would stay out of the election. Although the PAP declared its support for the central government, its attempt to take a more active role in federal politics was perceived as deceit. The merger proved to be an utter failure, and after two years of political discord and racial riots, Singapore was expelled from the federation in August 1965.

At this point of time, Singapore faced an economy weakened by the decline in entrepôt trade, high rates of unemployment, poverty, and a growing population (Turnbull 1989: 268ff). Lee Kuan Yew's memoirs, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story: 1965–2000* (2000), begins with a description of the

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21 Singapore even has to import fresh water from neighboring Malaysia.

anxiety and ambivalence of being ousted from Malaysia. He writes on the first page:

All of a sudden, on 9 August 1965, we were out on our own as an independent nation. We had been asked to leave Malaysia and go our own way with no signposts to our next destination. We faced tremendous odds with an improbable chance of survival. Singapore was not a natural country but man-made, a trading post the British had developed into a nodal point in their worldwide maritime empire. We inherited the island without hinterland, a heart without a body (Lee 2000: 3).

The anxiety following the separation from Malaysia is the prelude to the ideology of economic pragmatism, the trademark of the PAP, whereby “[t]he economic is privileged over the cultural because economic growth is seen as the best guarantee of social and political stability necessary for the survival of the nation” (Chua 1997: 59). The PAP government justifies its stern control of Singapore in terms of this economic pragmatism, but it should be remembered that, in consequence, the PAP’s political legitimacy is highly dependent on its capacity to secure economic growth. As early as 1961, Singapore had begun a vigorous plan for industrial development in collaboration with both UN and World Bank experts (Turnbull 1989: 275). In addition to industrial development, the modernization project included massive improvements in law and order, healthcare, education and housing. Singapore’s break from Malaysia made economic development more acute than ever. Another major challenge to Singapore’s economy was the withdrawal of the British troops in 1971, which had accounted for a substantial percentage of the GDP (about 20 percent).

Through an ambitious industrialization program, manufacturing, commerce and transport arose as the motor of economic growth in the 1960s and 1970s. Foreign and local investors were attracted to Singapore by the geographical location and excellent financial infrastructure, a disciplined labor force and generous government assistance in the form of tax exemptions and favorable leasing contracts (Cheng 1991: 199ff). However, we should not overlook the fact that Singapore has long been directly dependent on the international economy, and the “willingness to accept foreign enterprise from the late 1960s continued a long tradition of adaptability” (Huff 1997: 36). As well as facilitating the industrialization process, the government also got directly involved in enterprising, through the Ministry of Finance Incorporated and statutory boards. The government’s investment arm, Temasek Holdings (founded in 1974) owns stakes in – and controls – many of the country’s largest companies, such as Singapore Airlines (SIA), Singtel, DBS Bank and Singapore Technologies. In the late 1970s, the PAP government embarked on a

“second industrial revolution” to speed up technology-intensive industries (ibid.: 108). Singapore’s economy remains very dependent on exports in electronics and other manufactures, but since the 1980s the financial service sector has grown in importance. Other key industries are petroleum refining, chemicals, ship repair, rubber processing, life science, transport and commerce.

## The Hegemony of the People’s Action Party

According to many commentators the world has entered a global post-national era, where modernity is increasingly fluid and borderless (cf. Appadurai 2000). However, while images and aspirations of modernity are shaped at many different levels, Singapore is a striking example of the continuous role of the state. An important detail in this regard is the political dominance of the People’s Action party. The PAP has been governing Singapore since 1959 without interruption, and currently (2005) holds 82 of the 84 elected seats in parliament. This political dominance has resulted in a peculiar fusion between the PAP, the government and the state. Singaporeans seldom talk about the “state”. Instead they refer to the state as the “PAP” or the “government”. Singapore’s founding father, Lee Kuan Yew, remained Prime Minister until 1990, when he stepped down in favor of Goh Chok Tong. In 2003 Singapore got its third Prime Minister when Lee Hsien Loong – son of Lee Kuan Yew – took over the position from Goh. Meanwhile, both Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Chok Tong have remained members of the cabinet (as Minister Mentor and Senior Minister, respectively).

The PAP government has been variously described as authoritarian, paternalistic, and even undemocratic because of its different strategies for curbing political opposition and controlling the media. Singapore has been criticized by the Amnesty International on a number of accounts, such as the death penalty, curbs on freedom of expression and detention without trial (*Amnesty International Report 2005: Singapore*).<sup>22</sup> The death penalty, executed by hanging, is mandatory for drug trafficking, murder and treason. In fact, Singapore is believed to have the highest rate of executions per capita in the world. There is no public debate about the death penalty, and the government is restrictive about publishing statistics on death sentences. Amnesty International reports likewise criticize the strict governmental control of civil society organizations

<sup>22</sup> The Amnesty International reports are available online, <http://www.amnesty.org>.

and the press, as well as the practice of defamation suits against opposition politicians. Bankruptcy deprives a person of his or her right to stand for election to parliament. One of the most notable cases is the series of defamation suits against the former leader of the Workers' Party, J. B. Jeyaretnam, who after having been declared bankrupt was expelled from the parliament in 2001. Suffice is to say here that the PAP's uninterrupted governance of Singapore has enabled them to exercise heavy social engineering whereby citizens are molded for the sake of the larger society.





## CHAPTER 3

# Fieldwork in the Metropolis

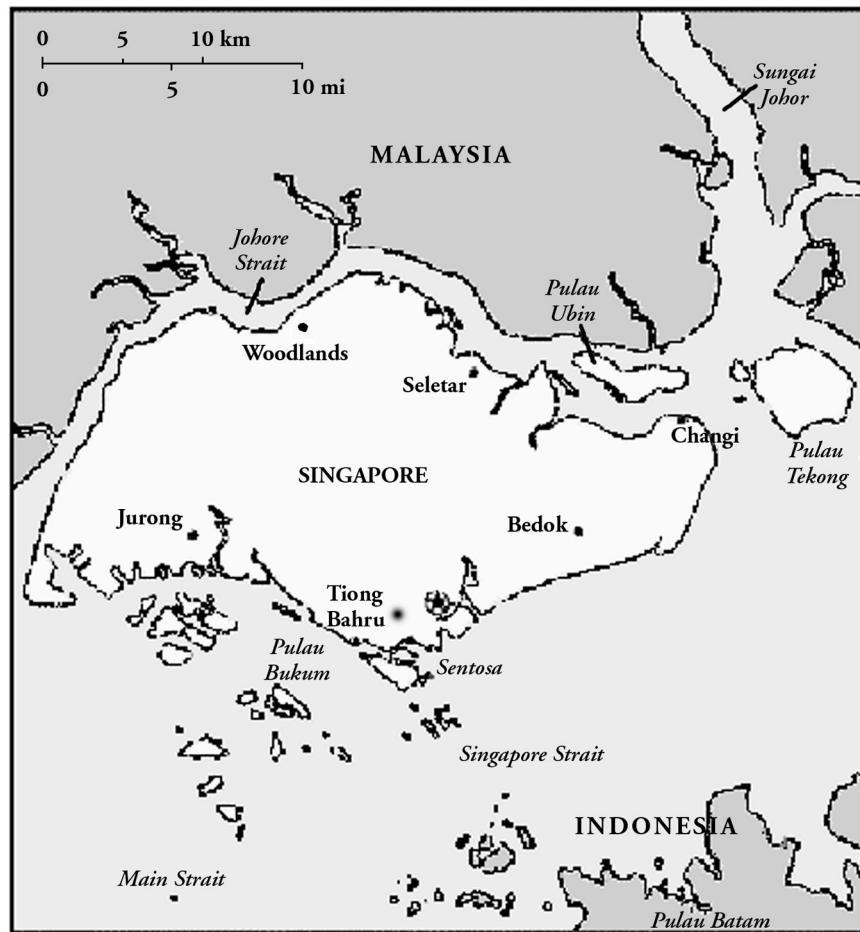
The tiny island-state of Singapore is located at the southern tip of the Malaysian peninsula, immediately north of the equator. Currently, the total land area amounts approximately to a mere 700 square kilometers, or less than half the size of Hong Kong. It would be misleading to give an exact figure, since Singapore's land area is growing constantly due to land reclamation, i.e. creation of new land where there was previously water.<sup>23</sup> Anyone who arrives at the sophisticated Changi Airport and continues the journey through the urbanized, well-planned landscape would find it hard to imagine the tropical lushness that once covered this island. Singapore is today a full-fledged metropolis. The urban field obviously requires a different ethnographic approach compared to the traditional ethnographic site. Life in flats and high-rise buildings implies a clear separation between the privacy of the home and the world outside; entering the closed door occurs through invitation, whether you are an anthropologist or a friend. Moreover, the mobility of urban existence is an obstacle to capturing all aspects of each and every informant's life. Singaporeans in general are extremely busy, struggling to combine long working hours with family life and other social activities. The hectic life-style of my informants meant that interviews and meetings usually had to be planned and conducted according to their schedules.

Fieldwork in Singapore was conducted in three different stages between 2002 and 2004, altogether a period of twelve months. The ethnographic data were obtained through interviews, informal conversations, participation and observation. The conditions of the urban field, as well as my objective of integrating different domains of intergenerational relations called for an ap-

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23 Statistics on land area are available at the website of the Department of Statistics, <http://www.singstat.gov.sg> (accessed 22 August 2005).

proach integrating multiple sites of activities. George Marcus's (1998) notion of a multi-sited ethnography is useful for stressing the movement across both sites and levels of society. The notion of a multi-sited ethnography is not limited to sites in a purely spatial sense. A multi-sited ethnographic approach can be differently designed and does not necessarily mean following mobile subjects. On the contrary, "some ethnography may not move around literally but may nonetheless embed itself in a multi-sited context" in trying to "understand something broadly about the system in ethnographic terms as much as it does its local subjects" (ibid.: 95). The fieldwork may thus be locally situated, but integrate factors beyond the spatially defined site. In my fieldwork, I collected information on intergenerational relations in various contexts, such as the household, at special festivities, in the public sphere at large, in politics, and in the media. C. Wright Mills (1959), in his ambition of the sociological imagination, stressed the importance of making visible the interrelatedness between the individual and the historical and socio-cultural context. That the intimate sphere of everyday life has to be analyzed in relation to wider economic and political structures is extremely evident in Singapore, where the family is a subject of meticulous social engineering.



Map 3 *Singapore*



*The Singapore River and financial district.*

## The Sandwich Generation

Singaporeans often liken their multiethnic society to a popular local dish called *rojak*. A *rojak* is a salad of mixed vegetables covered by peanut sauce, thus the different vegetables symbolize the ethnic variety and the sauce symbolizes the shared Singaporean identity. From another angle, however, ethnicity in Singapore is thoroughly shaped and each ethnic category homogenized by the official multicultural system (cf. Benjamin 1976; Lai 1995). At birth, each Singaporean is categorized according to “race” (“race” is the local term of reference, in everyday language as well as politics), such as “Chinese”, “Malay” or “Indian”. A person’s ethnic identity is determined by paternal descent, i.e.

if the father is Chinese, his child will automatically be classified as Chinese.<sup>24</sup> This multicultural system inevitably conceals intra-ethnic diversity. Looking at the Chinese community, there are internal differences with regard to language use, dialect belonging, religious affiliation, and class. Many of these intra-ethnic diversities appear at the intergenerational level, although they are also found within the same generation.

During the first months of fieldwork, I aimed to get a broad understanding of Chinese intergenerational relations and family life through engaging informants of various backgrounds and age. I interviewed working adults, elderly people, youths, and even children as young as primary school age. Eventually, however, I came to focus in particular on middle-class Chinese Singaporeans born in the 1960s and 1970s, the so-called sandwich generation (without restricting my work strictly to this category).<sup>25</sup> These informants are especially interesting, as they have experienced rapid social change and intergenerational discontinuity. Today, they live comfortable lives in modern high-rise estates, are well educated and draw good salaries, communicate frequently in English, and not uncommonly have converted from traditional Chinese religion to Christianity. The present life-style of this generation stands in sharp contrast to their childhood, when many of them lived in villages or cramped urban areas surrounded by many siblings and relatives. Their poorly educated parents generally struggled to make ends meet, and in most families daily conversations were carried out in dialect. It is important to note that the sandwich generation is a class-related phenomenon, which does not apply to all members of this age cohort. The sandwich generation – and the strains of double responsibility – is directly linked to a massive upward social mobility and the emergence of an affluent middle-class.<sup>26</sup>

24 This essentialist notion of ethnicity is not a postcolonial construction but dates back to the British colonial categorization of Singapore's Asian population. When Singapore gained independence, the PAP government adopted multiculturalism (or "multiracialism") as the formula to groom a national identity in an ethnically heterogeneous society (PuruShotam 1998a). While the ethnic categorization is very much a colonial heritage, the ethnic labels have been modified in different ways over time. One example is the category "Straits-born" (i.e. Straits Chinese), which appeared in censuses in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In contemporary censuses there is no category for Straits Chinese. Singaporeans who culturally and linguistically identify themselves as Straits Chinese are incorporated into the category "Chinese" (ibid.: 71ff).

25 In Singapore the notion "sandwich generation" has become a common term of reference in both popular and academic forums. The phenomenon sandwich generation arises in phases of rapid change and social mobility. By the same token, a sandwich generation arises at different points of time in different societies.

26 The burden of double responsibilities associated with the sandwich generation might not arise in families where elderly parents are wealthy enough to support themselves. However, for the majority of Singaporeans born in the 1960s and 1970s, their parents are from a working-class background with no means to support themselves after retirement.

Singapore is often described as a middle-class society, on the basis of the high rate of homeownership, the low unemployment rate and the high rate of upward social mobility (cf. Tan Ern Ser 2004). While the image of a middle-class society glosses over existing social differences (Chua and Tan 1999), the ideas associated with this image permeate Singaporeans' interpretations of, and aspirations for, a middle-class lifestyle. Bee Choo, for instance, described her own family as a typical middle-class family "who lives in HDB flat [i.e. public housing], who owns a car, gets a maid. Not extremely rich but not living from hand to mouth".

The ultimate acknowledgement of a successful life in Singapore is to achieve the "five C's", namely cash, credit card, car, condominium and country club membership. If you have already achieved the five C's, there are other ways of boosting your status, such as buying property instead of a government-subsidized flat, or driving a Mercedes instead of a Nissan. Owning a car is extremely expensive in Singapore due to the government's attempts to limit traffic. Anyone who wants to buy a car has to bid for a Certificate of Entitlement (currently at S\$10,000 – S\$20,000), as well as paying vehicle taxes, road taxes and registration fees.<sup>27</sup> Cars, homeownership, and the increasing emphasis on children's education are all intertwined with what Nirmala PuruShotam (1998: 129) calls a "middle-class way of life". This middle-class way of life encompasses the striving to "ensure the continued production of upward mobility", including the acquisition of better material goods and expectations "that children will do better than their parents" (ibid.). Singapore's rigid and competitive education system drives parents to invest heavily in their children's academic performance, and Singaporeans are constantly reminded by the government of their dependence on human capital for survival. The efforts made by parents range from paying for extra classes and private tuition to actually taking leave from work to drill and prepare their children for the exam period. In this light, it is not surprising that young parents feel squeezed between fulfilling responsibilities to elderly parents and to their own children.

## Life in a High-rise Neighborhood

During fieldwork I was helped tremendously by an invitation to stay for five months with the Tan family, whom I had met through my aunt in Sweden.

<sup>27</sup> The local currency is the Singapore dollar (SGD), usually abbreviated as S\$. The current exchange rate is 1.606 SGD per 1 USD (9 April 2006).

Carole and Alan Tan, a married couple in their early thirties, had been living in Sweden for two years due to Alan's job as an engineer in the Singapore navy. They had gotten to know my aunt at the maternity ward when she assisted in the delivery of their little son. When Carole and Alan later returned to Singapore, they bought a new public housing flat in Tiong Bahru, an area in the central part of Singapore. Most Singaporean families, about 85 percent of the population, live in public housing estates run by the government-linked Housing and Development Board.<sup>28</sup> Carole and Alan's unit has three bedrooms, a spacious living room, two bathrooms and a kitchen. As in all newer apartments, the rooms are equipped with air-conditioners to fight the humid, tropical heat. Each household has its own washing machine, and the laundry is hung out to dry on thick bamboo poles from the windows. The countless rows of laundry fluttering in the wind are a peculiar feature of the urban environment in Singapore, but hanging out the wet, heavy laundry is not without risk, and accidents do sometimes occur. (People have even fallen from windows while hanging out laundry poles.)



*High-rise complex, Tiong Bahru.*

28 Figures on homeownership are available at the website of the Singapore Department of Statistics, <http://www.singstat.gov.sg>.





*Laundry hung out to dry on bamboo poles.*

Moving to the ground level of the housing estate, there is a so-called void deck with benches and tables for residents to socialize with each other. The void decks are also used for various types of functions, and every now and then passers-by will be able to spot funeral wakes or colorful Malay weddings. (Chinese do not hold their wedding dinners on the void decks but usually at a restaurant or a hotel.) Close to the housing estate are a few green areas and a play-

ground for children. Here and there fireproof containers have been set out for religious rituals involving the burning of joss papers and incense. The fumes of burning offerings get especially thick during the seventh lunar month, when Chinese observe the Festival of the Hungry Ghosts (Zhong Yuan Jie). At this time of the year, the gates of hell are flung open, allowing hungry ghosts to roam the world. To please these restless souls – and prevent them from causing any trouble – Chinese offer them food, prayers and joss papers symbolizing gold and silver throughout the whole month. Even my Christian informants and friends took certain precautions during the seventh month. I was told by Carole, who is a devout Christian, that regardless of what faith you belong to, mysterious things do happen during the seventh month. It is considered extremely unwise, for instance, to hold festivities or to renovate houses, as the noise may disturb the spirits.



*The void deck under an apartment block.*

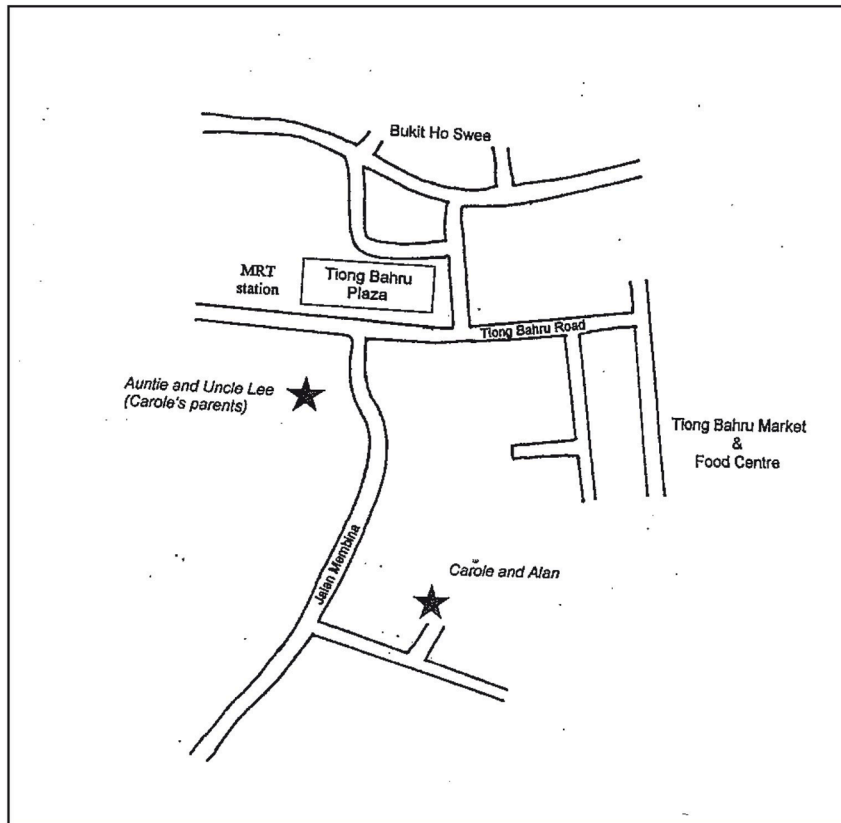


*Burning of incense and “hell money” during the Hungry Ghost Festival. Burning is a mode of transferring money to the spirits. Offering hell money is done to appease the spirits and keep them from causing trouble.*

Tiong Bahru is one of Singapore’s older urban areas and was historically dominated by working class Chinese. Since 1989, a quota system for public housing whereby each ethnic group is allocated a certain quota of the total number of apartments per estate has been used to prevent the formation of ethnic residential enclaves. Even though this quota system has adjusted the ethnic composition, Tiong Bahru is still perceived as a Chinese neighborhood.

When I stayed in Tiong Bahru I was struck by the contrast between the “old” and the “new”. The efficient MRT station is connected to Tiong Bahru Plaza, a multi-story shopping mall complete with air-conditioned cafés and restaurants, hair salons, a travel agency, pharmacy, supermarket and a gym. Carole and Alan lived in one of the new housing estates, looming large, south of the Plaza. On the other side of the Plaza, Bukit Ho Swee, most housing estates are rather old and run-down. Many of the residents living there are elderly people and, as a result, funeral wakes are a common sight. Chinese Singaporeans, whether they are Buddhist/Taoist or Christian, pay their last respects to their deceased by holding a funeral wake, after which the coffin is carried to the burial ground or the crematorium. The length of a funeral wake ranges from three to seven days, but it is always held for an uneven number of days because even numbers symbolize joy. To ensure that the deceased will live comfortably in the netherworld, Chinese (unless they are Christians) burn an-

everything from paper houses and paper cars to paper servants and paper credit cards at the funeral.



**Map 4** Sketch-map of Tiong Bahru

A five- or ten-minute walk from the Plaza is the old Tiong Bahru Market. This is an open-air market containing a food center and a “wet” market selling everything from fresh vegetables and fruit to seafood and meat. Old aunties, dressed in traditional *samfoo* (a trousers and jacket combination), come here to do their daily marketing. Old uncles sit around the tables enjoying a cup of coffee or a beer while chatting with friends. At noon and in the evenings, white-collar workers and families with young children also head for the market to eat lunch or dinner. Despite the fact that these old markets are run down and without air-conditioning, they remain popular among Singaporeans for the excellent cheap food and the relaxed atmosphere. At the time of my fieldwork, the Tiong Bahru Market was soon to be renovated, and I was encouraged to visit the market before its demolition. While electric fans strug-

gle against the hot and humid air, the hawkers are busy cooking their chicken rice, Hokkien mee (noodles), rice porridge and fried carrot cake. It is not without reason that Singapore has the reputation of being a food paradise. Wherever you travel around the island you are sure to find an eating-place around the corner, be it a fast-food outlet, a hawker center or a posh restaurant. At the market there are also a few drink stalls where you can get sugar-cane juice, pineapple juice, soft drinks, beer, tea and coffee. The coffee culture in Singapore is certainly much older than the cappuccinos and café lattes served at Starbuck's and other popular coffee chains downtown. At the local *kopitiam* (coffee shop) people sip *kopi* (coffee with sweetened milk) or *kopi o* (black coffee). Suffering from a sweet tooth, I immediately became very fond of this local coffee.



*View over Tiong Bahru Plaza and surroundings.*

When I moved in with Carole and Alan, their son, Timothy, was barely two years old. During the final stage of my fieldwork, Carole gave birth to their second son. Carole had been forced to resign from her job as a customer service employee when she and Alan moved to Sweden, and at the time of fieldwork she was still at home to take care of the children. This meant that I was

able to spend a lot of time with her. I often joined Carole in visiting her parents, who live only a few blocks away together with her second brother. Carole's eldest brother lives next door to the parents, together with his wife, two sons and an employed Indonesian maid. In the mornings I went down to the nearby *kopitiam* for breakfast. While imbibing the buzzing atmosphere and fragrances from the frying and cooking in the different food stalls, I had my *kopi* and *kaya* bread (bread with coconut jam). Every now and then I visited the fruit stall next door and practiced my halting Mandarin when asking for the price of different fruit. – Uncle, *duo shao qian? San kuai?* [– Uncle, how much does it cost? Three dollars?]

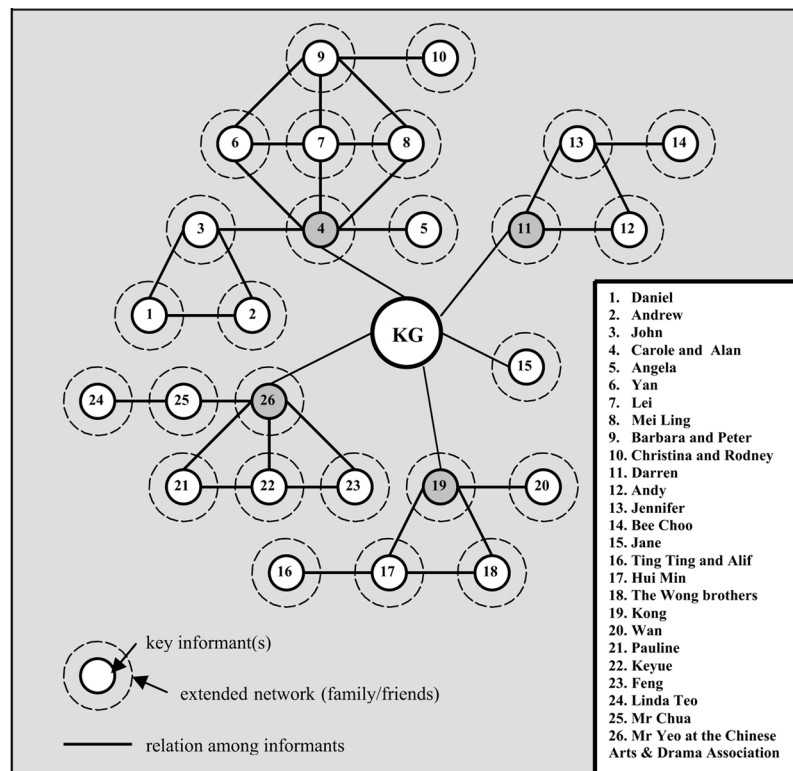
Staying together with the Tan family and participating in many of their activities afforded insights into the everyday life of a middle-class Chinese family in a typical high-rise neighborhood. As Carole and Alan introduced me to their family and friends, they helped me to link up with other people. I subsequently managed to establish a network of informants who generously assisted me in my work. At another stage of my fieldwork Carole also arranged for me to stay for a few months with her church friend Yan, an unmarried woman in her forties who was living in Clementi in the western part of Singapore.

## Working with Informants

Since informants will be more closely introduced and referred to in different parts of this study, I give here only a brief account of the different clusters of people I worked with (see figure 3). I have already mentioned Carole's family. Whereas interaction was frequent with the latter, I seldom met Alan's parents and siblings, who live in another area of Singapore. Carole and Alan are members of a charismatic Christian congregation and Sunday mornings are dedicated to the church. After the service they usually go for lunch with their church friends. As I accompanied them on Sundays, I got to know their friends, some of whom became nodes in my network, such as Mei Ling, Angela and Lei, (all of them unmarried females), and the married couple Barbara and Peter. Barbara and Peter, in turn, introduced me to Peter's colleague Rodney, and his wife Christina.

Through Carole I also got to know John, a man in his early thirties working as an insurance agent. John and Carole were old friends from polytechnic and still met up every now and then. John linked me up with two of his colleagues

– Andrew and Daniel – whom I also got to work with. Bee Choo, who appears in the prologue, was part of another cluster of informants. I was initially introduced to Bee Choo through her colleague Jennifer. Jennifer, in turn, I had gotten to know through Darren. Darren also introduced me to Andy and his family. Jennifer, Darren and Andy, all of them in their mid-twenties, had been studying together at the university. In particular Andy and Jennifer opened up their homes to me and arranged for me to meet and interview family members and friends. I established contact with yet another group of informants with the help of Kong. Through him I was introduced to Hui Min, a woman in her mid-twenties. Hui Min, in turn, linked me up with Ting Ting, who is married to Alif, a Malay man. Thanks to Kong I also got to meet Uncle Wong and his brother, both around sixty years old.



**Figure 3** *A diagram showing the informant network surrounding the present author (KG). Informants 4, 11, 19 and 26 (filled circles) have acted as “gateways” to more distant parts of the network. Thick, solid lines indicate contacts established already before this investigation was undertaken. In some cases, a single circle is used for more than one informant.*

Some of the people I worked with became key informants, whom I met on a regular basis throughout the fieldwork. They invited me to gatherings and

outings, and to join them for reunion dinners and “home visiting” during Chinese New Year. This gave me good opportunities to follow up on interviews or clarify previous information through informal conversations. I also got to interact with them in their home environment and to meet their families and friends.

Apart from the informants I met on a regular basis, I also conducted several occasional interviews regarding family life and intergenerational relations. I managed to collect a good sample of interviews with young parents who sent their children to extra-curricular speech and drama classes run by a branch of a Chinese clan association. This kind of extra-curricular “enrichment” activity is very popular in Singapore – be it Mandarin, English, piano, swimming or drama lessons – but because the classes are also costly they generally cater to middle-class and even wealthier families. The director of the association, Mr Yeo, allowed me to interview students and to both observe and participate actively in the various classes, such as the calligraphy and Mandarin classes for primary school children. I spent several hours at the association during my fieldwork, and was able to conduct interviews with many couples while they waited in the coffee-room for their children to finish classes. One couple, Mr and Mrs Chua, with whom I developed an especially good rapport, invited me to their home for a family gathering on a Sunday afternoon. Coincidentally, Mr Chua’s brother-in-law had also invited a new acquaintance to the gathering, Linda Teo and her family. Linda, a 25-year old university graduate, came to the gathering with her mother and her sister. They were keen to discuss my fieldwork and by the end of the afternoon we had agreed that I would visit them the very next week. As we continued to meet up, Linda and her family became important informants in my research. Through the Chinese Arts & Drama association I also established a close relation with some of the staff, especially three young women: Pauline, Keyue and Feng. Other people who assisted me in my research are various “experts” in different areas. I interviewed social workers at family service centers, youth workers, staff at the Singapore Action Group for Elderly (SAGE), teachers, and people involved in Chinese clan associations. These people provided me with valuable information concerning their respective field of expertise.



## Interviews

Singapore has four official languages, namely English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil. English is the language of administration and, since 1979, the first language and medium of instruction in all schools. The majority of the interviews were conducted in English. When I interviewed persons who spoke only Mandarin or a dialect I was assisted by an interpreter. A substantial number of interviews were recorded on tape. Taped interviews are extremely useful as the interview can be thoroughly examined afterwards, but it was not always possible or even favorable to use a tape recorder. In cases where informants were uncomfortable with the tape recorder or during informal and/or occasional conversations, it would have been obstructive and inappropriate to insist on a tape recorder. I therefore recorded much information by taking notes and making observations.

All narratives in this study are real-life stories, but the informants' names – including those already mentioned – are fictitious for the purpose of securing their anonymity. The transcriptions of taped interviews are unaltered reproductions except that some grammatical mistakes have been corrected for readability. In common parlance, Singaporeans speak a creolized version of English called Singlish, which is characterized by a non-conventional grammatical structure and a mixture of colloquial words and phrases. One peculiar trait of Singlish is to emphasize a statement or phrase by ending it with *lah*, for instance, "I know, *lah*". Another characteristic of Singlish is to not distinguish between present tense and past tense by inflecting the verb. Instead it is common to refer to past events by adding "last time" and future events by adding "next time", for instance, "last time I eat a lot of ice-cream". I have chosen not to convert the interviews into "proper English", but to avoid misunderstandings I have done minor editing. With regard to Chinese names and terms, I have chosen to spell them according to local usage, which means that certain names/terms are Romanized in dialect instead of the standardized *hanyu pinyin* system, which is based on Mandarin.<sup>29</sup>

The fact that my fieldwork sometimes probed into the most private spheres of family life naturally posed some difficulties. It would be tempting to explain my difficulties in getting access to this private sphere as a matter of Chinese "face", but I believe the hesitant attitude towards a *kaypoh* ("busybody") anthropologist is of a more universal kind. Whether one's linen is dirty or not, most people consider it safer not to wash it in public, whether they are Chi-

<sup>29</sup> *Hanyu pinyin* is the official system of Romanization for the Chinese language based on Mandarin. The *hanyu pinyin* system is also the official system in The People's Republic of China.

nese or Swedish. On the other hand, my role as an outsider had certain advantages, in the sense that many informants opened up more easily precisely because I was not related to their family. It turned out to be problematic, though, to get to interview all members of the same family, which, I suspect, is related to the risk of intra-family tensions surfacing if the whole family were to become involved in the process of ethnographic mapping.

## Some Methodological Points on Understanding the Other

Anthropological research is not limited to practices, but includes the way practices are and become meaningful. The meaning context of observable events and actions, in turn, can only be grasped through the representations and interpretations of the actors. A substantial part of my ethnographic data therefore consists of personal narratives and life histories. Personal narratives and life histories are not merely accounts of isolated individual experiences, but also reflections of the socio-cultural structures they are embedded in. Vincent Crapanzano's well-known portrait of *Tuhami* (1985) is an illustration of how the narrative of a single man "carries implicitly, if not explicitly, the Moroccan values, interpretational vectors, patterns of associations, ontological presuppositions, spatiotemporal orientations, and etymological horizons that are embedded in his idiom" (ibid.: 7).

Life histories are also ethnographically valuable for enabling us to interpret a person's attitudes and behavior in relation to his/her past and present experiences. A methodological problem in relation to narratives is veracity and reliability. Ethnographic situations sometimes reveal discrepancies between what informants say and what they carry out in practice, that is, discrepancies between speech and action. Discrepancies, however, must not necessarily be dismissed as lies. If we seek to understand the intentionality behind an act, it is necessary to apply a broader notion of truth, which is not defined by the degree of correspondence between a person's statement (interpretation of the course of events) and what the observer perceives as the actual course of events. Intentionality can be grasped only insofar as we take seriously the ideas guiding the actor, whether these seem rational or not from our perspective.

Exchange of information, of course, is always a subject of interpretation and misinterpretation. My understanding of another person's subjective sphere is ipso facto approximate and limited. This dilemma is not confined to the ethnographer–informant relation, but permeates all social relations. The

possibilities of understanding each other hence require the establishing of a shared dimension, or what Gadamer (1960) calls a “fusion of horizons”. This shared dimension is not a fixed space but might be conceptualized as a process of constant interpretation, misinterpretation and reinterpretation (cf. Agar 1986). The methodological framework should therefore be directed towards “inter-subjective understanding” (Schutz 1967), that is, shared structures of thinking, expressing and interpreting social phenomena. The issue of giving parents pocket-money, which I mentioned in the Introduction, is one example of how my personal experiences affected my interpretation of my informants’ behavior and vice versa. Only through exchanging ideas and opinions with informants did I manage to grasp a different interpretation of monetary transfers and intergenerational obligations.

On a more practical level, the establishing of a shared dimension means adjusting oneself to the social environment. Adaptation is a gradual and not always conscious process. During the fieldwork this adaptation did not only take place at an intellectual level, i.e. in terms of interpretation, but also in terms of behavior and gestures. When my sister came to visit me in Singapore, one of her first remarks was that “it’s strange but somehow your gestures and style of walking look Singaporean”. I thought about her comment for a while and – whether it can be called “Singaporean” or not – I realized that my style of walking had actually changed; whereas I normally walk very fast and with determined steps I now walked slower and moved my sandal-covered feet in a slithering manner. Indeed, the hot and humid climate in Singapore makes it quite unwise to walk too fast and to take too big steps, at least if you want to avoid extensive perspiration. A more obvious way of adapting myself was the style of talking. It did not take long until I had an unmistakable Singaporean touch to my English, in grammar as well as accent. The fact that I was an *ang moh* [Westerner] whose English sounded Singaporean caused a lot of amusement, and in some instances confusion.<sup>30</sup> On one occasion I made a phone call to enquire about a room rental, and when I explained that I was a Swedish student, the man on the phone burst out, “Swedish?! But how come you speak like a Singaporean, *huh?*” One young man I spoke to, a Chinese Singaporean graduate student, suggested that the reason why I was so “adaptive” is because I am a female. In his view, it lies in females’ nature to adapt themselves to their social environment.

Meanwhile, I also gained ethnographic knowledge from the situations where I *failed* to adjust myself. In Sweden it is common for young people to move out of their parents’ home shortly after graduating from high school (at

30 *Ang moh* means “red-hair” in Hokkien and refers to Caucasians. Although it was originally a pejorative term, it is now used as a harmless reference for Westerners.

the age of eighteen or nineteen). Usually they rent a flat and support themselves through either paid employment or student loans for pursuing tertiary education. In fact, most Swedish parents insist that their children should live on their own as a necessary part of the process of becoming fully adult. I am myself a typical case. I moved away from my parents at the age of nineteen to study at a university located 200 km from my hometown. At the time of the fieldwork I had lived away from my parents for over five years. I was earning my own money, paying my own bills, and I perceived myself as an independent adult (although, admittedly, I sometimes get financial and practical assistance from my parents). In Singapore, by contrast, I was often conceived of as less independent than I was accustomed, which I found very hard to accept. One example is my relation to Carole and Alan, with whom I lived for a long period. Carole is only five years my senior, and in my eyes we were “equally” adult. It did not take long until I realized that she did not entirely share my view.

One evening I had decided to watch a show at the cinema together with Angela, a woman from Carole’s church. The show finished around 11pm, after which I headed home. While I was on the bus, Carole sent me a message asking where I was. I replied that I was on my way home, and did not think more about it. A few days later I found out that Carole had been very upset with Angela for being out so late with me, and that she believed Angela should have known better. Carole’s reaction initially seemed very awkward to me. I had already informed her about my evening plans, and it had not crossed my mind that I should have called her to confirm what time I was coming home. I also found it strange that Angela, regardless of the fact that she is older than me, would bear any blame for the incident. Carole and Alan never confronted me directly on this issue, but Angela reasoned that since I was their guest they expected Angela to take responsibility for me if we went out together. It should also be pointed out that, although this was unspoken of, Angela was not a close friend of Carole and Alan. They belonged to the same “cell group” in church, but Angela often complained to me that she felt excluded and that she was not always invited to join the rest of the group in activities outside the church. Had I been out with any of Carole and Alan’s other friends, they might have reacted in a different way than they did in this case. While Carole might have had the best of intentions, I felt frustrated over what I experienced as a restriction of my mobility and a depreciation of my capacity to look after myself.

Beyond my personal frustration, however, the incident reveals something about differing understandings of adulthood. In many ways, the Chinese idea of adulthood is entwined with civil status rather than age, and only those who

are married are considered fully adult. My position as a young unmarried female seemed to place me in the category of “not fully adult”, regardless of whether I was living on my own or not. In Singapore, the significance of married versus unmarried status is also reflected in housing. Most of my informants live with their parents until they get married, and some couples continue residing with their parents or parents-in-law even after marriage. This pattern of residence is not exclusive to the Chinese population, but applies to the whole of Singapore. It can be partly explained by public housing policies, where unmarried persons under the age of 35 are not eligible for flats, but even so, there is a strong social pressure involved. That unmarried children should live with their parents is deeply rooted in the logic of Chinese family life (cf. Chapter 2), and even today, parents would take it as an offense if their children persisted in attempting to move out before they were married

## CHAPTER 4

# Modernity and the Generation Gap: The Singapore Experience

This study argues the importance of rethinking the structural correlation between modernity and intergenerational relations. The emergence of modernity is usually associated with a set of characteristics, including industrial capitalism, commodification, social differentiation, individualism, democracy, the nation-state, secularization, democracy, alienation and social movements. Above all, modernity is associated with the experience of a break between past and present forms of social life (Friedman 1994). While the experience of a break-up of old structures is potentially universal, the context in which it occurs, and the ways in which people deal with it, are not. Our contemporary world should be understood as “a story of continual constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs”, which give rise to “unique expressions of modernity” (Eisenstadt 2000: 2). Modernity, no doubt, in many ways poses a challenge to intergenerational ties, but, as we shall see, it may also imply consolidation and the establishing of a new order. In the chapters to come, I shall trace those processes of fragmentation and consolidation, from the macro-level of ideology and political regimes to the intimate sphere of everyday life. The massive modernization of Singapore, from a third-world country to a sophisticated financial hub is indeed astounding, or terrifying, depending on how you look at it. But that is merely the shell. What is interesting is how this transformation manifests itself in people’s everyday lives, and the impact it has on cultural continuity across generations.

Modernity was for a long time seen as inseparable from the West, but the rapid and successful modernization of non-Western societies, including Singapore, has come to challenge this assumption. The idea of modernity as a co-

herent development has given way to theories of “multiple modernities” (Eisenstadt 2000), “global modernities” (Featherstone 1997), “alternative modernities” (e.g. Knauff 2002), “other modernities” (Rofel 1999), and “modernity at large” (Appadurai 2000). Such notions of plural modernities have been especially popular in describing the rapidly modernizing societies of East and Southeast Asia, including Singapore. In the 1970s and 1980s, analysts and commentators increasingly attributed the economic miracle to Asian culture, where a Confucian ethos played a role similar to that of the Weberian Protestant Ethic in the origin of capitalism in Western Europe (Evers 1973; Kahn 1979; Tham 1981; Tu 1984, 1997; Lodge and Vogel 1987; Rozman 1993).<sup>31</sup> Unlike the individualistic culture associated with Western modernity, Asian societies, supposedly, were guided by “group orientation, acceptance of authority, deference, dependence, conflict avoidance, interest in harmony, seniority consciousness, and dutifulness” (Rozman 1993: 30).<sup>32</sup> A predominant role was ascribed to “filial piety, ancestor reverence, patriarchal authority, female subordination, respect for the elderly, intergenerational continuity, long-term planning, and fear of collective dishonor” (ibid.).<sup>33</sup>

However, far from being an Orientalist discourse controlled by the West (Said 1978), the vision of an Asian modernity was promoted and instrumentally deployed by political leaders in the region itself.<sup>34</sup> As pointed out by Eisenstadt (2000: 15) the expansion of modernity to non-Western societies has been “characterized particularly by a tension between conceptions of themselves as part of the modern world and ambivalent attitudes toward modernity in general and toward the West in particular”. This ambiguity has been especially pertinent in Singapore. While steadily seeking to modernize the country, the PAP government, under the leadership of Lee Kuan Yew, became a viv-

31 One of the first to speculate on a connection between Confucian traditions and economic growth was the well-known futurologist Herman Kahn (1979: 122): “As opposed to the earlier Protestant ethic, the modern Confucian ethic is superbly designed to create and foster loyalty, dedication, responsibility, and commitment and to intensify identification with the organization and one’s role in the organization. All this makes the economy and society operate much more smoothly than one whose principles of identification and association tend to lead to egalitarianism, to disunity, to confrontation, and to excessive compensation or repression”.

32 It should be noted that the individualized culture commonly ascribed to “Western” societies is far from primordial. In nineteenth century Western Europe, for instance, loyalty to family and nation was idealized to a much higher degree than in contemporary times (cf. Berger and Berger 1983).

33 As Arif Dirlik (1997: 71) reminds us, the new faith in the Confucian ethos was “a reversal of a long-standing conviction (in Europe and East Asia) that Confucianism was historically an obstacle to capitalism”. It should also be noted that the intensified interest in Asian Values that emerged in the 1970s and 80s corresponds to a general tendency of challenges against the dominance of the West, manifested by religious movements, ethnification, and indigenous revival movements (cf. Friedman 1994).

34 The Asian Values ideology has been analyzed as a case of “reverse Orientalism” (Hill 2000), on the ground that Asian Values were to a large extent reasserted by local actors, such as Singapore’s political leadership.

id spokesman of Asian Values.<sup>35</sup> The Asian Values ideology arose at a time when Singapore's rapid development had begun to evoke concerns about cultural dilution, fragmentation of families, and increasing crime rates. Singapore's founding father and former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew expressed his fears that Asian societies – including Singapore – would end up like “poor imitations of the West, with all the fads and fetishes, the disorders and aberrations of contemporary Western societies” (Lee Kuan Yew, quoted in Chen 1977: 22). Parallel to a liberal economy with an investment-friendly and export-oriented profile, the Singaporean state sought to consolidate the cultural sphere in accordance with Asian Values. In practice, of course, Asian Values hardly covered the multiplicity of cultural life in the vast region geographically referred to as Asia. The Asian Values ideology had a conspicuously Confucian flavor, which must be understood against the background that the Singapore government saw Confucianism as very adequate not only for the Chinese community, but for Singapore as a whole. They were backed up by a vast number of academic publications that praised the advantages of selected Confucian traditions for the urban-industrial society, especially its emphasis on family, filial piety, seniority, collectivism, respect for authority, and a consensus-oriented culture (e.g. Chen 1977; Rajaratnam 1977; Tu 1984; Kuo, 1987). Although the Asian Values ideology set out to combat undesirable Western influences, it was not a resistance to modernity as such. On the contrary, it was a strategy to build a uniquely Asian modernity; to anchor modernity in tradition and to secure cultural continuity. In Singapore's case, the Asian Values project was also an attempt to build a viable base for national consciousness in a post-colonial society with a multi-ethnic and multi-religious immigrant population (Hill and Lian 1995).

The Singaporean modernity project is remarkable in the contradiction between, on one hand, the need to adjust to an ever-changing world, and on the other hand, the project of establishing cultural continuity and national consciousness. What is most striking, perhaps, is how the notion of an Asian modernity firmly anchored in tradition, stands in sharp contrast to the increasing isolation between generations that has emerged with the enormous societal transformation over past decades. My informants never spoke of themselves as being part of an Asian modernity, nor did they feel particularly connected to their heritage. On the contrary, they were most aware of how rapidly the world is changing, and that they constantly have to adjust themselves to that world. Of all the countless definitions of modernity, none is here more pertinent than Marshall Berman's (1983: 15) famous similes of the experience of modernity as a “maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of strug-

35 Malaysia's former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad was another major advocate of Asian Values.



gle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, 'all that is solid melts into air'. People who find themselves in the midst of this maelstrom are apt to feel that they are the first ones, and maybe the only ones, to be going through it; this feeling has engendered numerous nostalgic myths of pre-modern Paradise Lost."

During my fieldwork in Singapore I was struck by the patent consciousness among people of a break between past and present, between traditions and modernity. This consciousness, I suggest, should be understood in relation to different, but interrelated dimensions of modernity, including socio-economic development, ideology and the political regime, as well as subjective aspirations and experiences of being modern. A major argument herein is that intergenerational fragmentation cannot be understood merely as a result of economic development (as commonly assumed in theories based on modernization), but also as the result of agency and "the appreciative search for new meaning in the daily features of a differentiated social world" (Knauft 2002: 5).

In this chapter I shall focus on the causes and consequences of the generational divide, and how it is articulated and managed in everyday life. Singapore's progression from a "third world country" to a fully industrialized society within only three decades has resulted in massive upward social mobility. One result, as pointed out by Chua and Tan (1999: 142), is that "it is common to find in one household university-educated children with professional occupations and parents with no formal education who are employed in informal sector jobs". The intergenerational leap in education, income and consumption applies to most Singaporean families. Recall, for instance, Bee Choo's mother is illiterate and Carole's parents run a hawker's stall, while they themselves have academic degrees and white-collar jobs. Meanwhile, there are other types of generation gaps that do not result directly from socio-economic development, but from political strategies and subjective aspirations of being modern.

The ethnography exposes serious problems in the interaction between generations, but, as we shall see, there are also ways in which those differences are negotiated and bridged. In this regard the sandwich generation is of particular interest. Not only do they struggle to balance their responsibilities to elder and younger dependants (i.e. aged parents and young children), this generation also, in many ways, constitutes a link between the old world and the new, as they have experienced the rapid transformation into an industrial high-tech society. My informants often described themselves as navigating between "old traditions" and the "modern world", and how they represent a bridge between the generation of their parents and the generation of their own children. Thus,

in addition to examining the obstacles to intergenerational continuity, this chapter also illuminates some of the strategies people use in managing intergenerational differences in their everyday lives.

## Kampung Life and Social Memory

As Karl Mannheim (1952) once pointed out, each generation is defined through its particular position in the course of history. A generation is thus a social phenomenon, based on shared experiences and shared memories, rather than a biological fact. Although societies are never static, it is reasonable to postulate that the establishment of such historical-social generation units is intensified in periods of rapid social change, where the experiences of different cohorts are radically different. For those who have lived through the dramatic transformation of Singapore, from an undeveloped former colony to the metropolitan hub of today, the past and the present may represent two different worlds. The world they grew up in is erased and exists only as a social memory.<sup>36</sup> In nearly every conversation touching upon the “old” Singapore, the *kampung* appears as a point of reference. *Kampung* is a Malay term for “village”, which has also come to imply the spirit of solidarity, trust and neighborliness associated with village life. Even to young people who themselves have never lived in a village, the idea of the *kampung* symbolizes the pre-modern Singapore.

Most of the early *kampungs* in Singapore were either fishing villages located along the coast and rivers, or inland villages engaged in cultivation. Under the British colonial regime, migrants from around the region were drawn to Singapore and new settlements sprang up across the island. It was rather often that the *kampung* came to be dominated by a particular ethnic group. The ethnic character of a *kampung* was visible in the architectural style of the houses; Malay houses were usually built on stilts or pillars, while Chinese houses were built on earthen platforms. Another typical feature of rural Chinese houses was that they faced south, because in Chinese geomancy, or *feng shui*, the south represents good luck. Above the main door one would often find an inscribed board telling which part of China the family’s ancestor came from. Social activities and gatherings took place in the living room, usually located im-

36 However, it should be recognized that the discontinuity of social memory across generations is not unique to the post-industrial generation. Singapore is an immigrant society, and for all those people who left their homeland to seek greener pastures in Singapore, social memory and family history were likewise interrupted, albeit for other reasons.

mediately by the front door. This was also where the family altar was placed. The kitchen, by contrast, was often shared by several families (*Kampung Days* 1993: 10ff).

Mr Chua, whom I frequently met at the Chinese Arts & Drama association (his two children attended classes there), was born and raised in a *kampung*. His father and two uncles ran a farm together. They were living in a long rectangular house divided into three sections. Each brother lived in one section with his respective family. Mr Chua himself is the youngest of eleven siblings. Like many other marriages in those days, Mr Chua's mother and father had married through matchmaking. Although the preference among the Chinese community was to marry within the same dialect group, marriages across dialect boundaries were not uncommon. Mr Chua's mother, who was a Teochew, thus married into a Hokkien family. Although she adopted the language of her husband, she brought with her other customs from her own dialect group, such as the typical Teochew cookery. Mr Chua recalled how his mother cooked Teochew porridge – a plain watery rice porridge that is usually served with side dishes, such as vegetables, fish or meat) – for the family. Teochew porridge was cheap food (depending on the side dishes, of course) and was suitable for ordinary days. Meat and other delicacies were limited to Chinese New Year or to offerings during the Festival of the Hungry Ghosts.

In 1984, the village area was claimed for urban development and all residents were relocated to public housing estates. The extended family, which had been living in the same house, was scattered. At that time, Mr Chua was still unmarried and moved into a flat with his parents. Now, twenty years later, Mr Chua is married and has two children, one daughter and one son. His father has passed away, but his old mother still lives with them. Mr Chua had found it difficult to shift from the village to a modern high-rise estate; he missed the open air and verdant surroundings as much as the warm social atmosphere. The readjustment was even harder for his parents. By the time of relocation, they were already retired. Since the children were working, they had to spend most days alone in the flat. Although the void decks of the modern housing estates are meant to be some kind of meeting place, social interaction was much easier in the *kampung*, where friends and relatives lived nearby. Mr Chua said that many elderly people got depressed and even committed suicide when they were forced to move into high-rise flats, which sounds reasonable although I cannot verify it.

One evening when I was invited to dinner at the Chua's, Mr Chua showed me photographs of their old farm and spoke with fondness about his childhood. In the *kampung*, there was always something to do, fishing in the pond, playing with the cousins, feeding the animals or pottering about in the garden.

Mr Chua compared this life-style with children of today, who grow up in a hyper-urban society. This rapid transformation has caused a discontinuity in the memory across generations. “My children have never experienced the *kampung* days, so this is our memory only, not theirs,” he said. Mr Chua also expressed disappointment with the younger generation’s lack of interest in their history. In fact, he is sending his two children to the Chinese Arts & Drama association with the hope of inspiring them to cultivate their Chinese heritage. Even so, they show no interest in learning about the past. “They are not interested,” Mr Chua shook his head, “they want air-con and McDonalds.”



*Kampung house at Pulau Ubin.*

Mr Chua is far from the only one acting ambivalently towards modern consumer society. Singaporean children of today have to visit the nature reserves or the zoo to get a glimpse of wildlife. Even mosquitoes and bugs have become a rare thing. I can hardly recall seeing any bugs at all at Carole and Alan’s home, except for one occasion, when Alan used an electric fly swatter to exterminate some sort of winged insect that had found its way into their flat on the 16<sup>th</sup> floor. Singaporeans who wish to experience a piece of *kampung* life usually take a trip to Pulau Ubin, a small island just off the northeastern coast. Pulau Ubin is often said to be Singapore’s last *kampung*, but while the island

has escaped urban development, it has been turned into a National Park and is now a popular getaway for local tourists. A handful of the villagers still depend on farming and fishing, but the tourist trade is an increasingly important source of income. That Pulau Ubin would be Singapore's last *kampung* is not wholly true. There are actually some remote rural settlements left on Singapore mainland, but those places were unknown even to my informants. At one point during fieldwork, the local media reported about the flooding of Kampung Lorong Buang Kok, a village near to Hougang in the northern part of Singapore. When I asked Singaporeans about this village, they were not aware of its existence: "A *kampung* in Singapore? I find that very hard to believe, the nearest you will get to a *kampung* is Pulau Ubin."



*An old-style Chinese opera stage at Pulau Ubin.*

## From a Cubicle in Chinatown to High-rise Living

Daniel is only in his late thirties. Like Mr Chua, he has personally experienced the rapid transformation of Singapore. Daniel's paternal grandparents were immigrants from the Guangdong province in China. Although Daniel has no recollection of his grandparents, who passed away long ago, he knew that his grandfather had come to Singapore at the age of seventeen to seek greener pastures. He and his wife had settled down in old Chinatown, where many other labor migrants lived. From the very start until the day he died, Daniel's grandfather worked as a coolie in Boat Quay and Clarke Quay. Daniel was born in the same area of old Chinatown in the 1960s. He lived there with his parents and his younger sister until the age of ten. The whole family squeezed into a so-called cubicle (single room), while sharing bathroom and kitchen with the rest of the tenants on the same floor. Despite the cramped living conditions and absence of modern conveniences, Daniel has fond memories of his childhood in Chinatown.

Oh yes, I think those days were really wonderful because Chinatown is within the heart of Singapore, and you could see a lot Chinese gathering there, especially during the Chinese festivals. Those were the days when you could have firecrackers, you know, fired off into the sky, and you see really traditional lion-dance.<sup>37</sup> It was really wonderful. You got to see processions going on and on throughout the night. And in those days the marketplace was very vibrant compared to nowadays. You didn't get things like supermarkets in those days. It was basically open-air, fresh, and all these little stalls that just operated uncontrolled, a lot of illegal hawking around, a lot of illegal touting as well. A very colorful picture I would say.

Most Singaporeans say that the dramatic improvement of the material standards of living has occurred at the cost of the simple but relaxed life-style of the past. Thirty years ago, Daniel said, things were more back to nature: "There was a warmer community spirit. We lived in a flat with seven other families and we didn't close our doors. We didn't close our doors, but there were no theft, no robberies, nor crimes. Even if there was [a crime], you would know who committed it, because basically we all knew one another very much, very well." Daniel's statement contains the implicit comparison with today's Singapore, where people lock their doors rather than interact with neighbors. The thorough restoration of Chinatown in recent years has not succeeded in evoking the atmosphere of pre-industrial society. Rather the opposite. With polished buildings and souvenir shops, the restored areas bear more resemblance to a touristy theme park than a true replica of the past.

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<sup>37</sup> Fireworks are now prohibited in Singapore.

In the 1970s, Daniel's family was relocated to a modern public housing flat, although still within the Chinatown area. When Daniel married his wife nine years ago, they decided to apply for a separate flat. The main reason was the lack of space in his parents' flat, which has only two bedrooms. Daniel and his wife now have five children, which would make it even harder to live with his parents. Having five children is very rare for young middle-class families, as most of them limit the number of children to two. Daniel himself has only one sister, so when he got married, he and his wife wanted to have a lot of children. "Our plan was to have four [children], the fifth one just came naturally", Daniel laughed. Another reason for buying a separate flat was simply that Daniel and his wife wanted to have the privacy of independent living. The same went for his sister, who likewise moved out from the parental home when she married her husband. However, Daniel and his sister are giving their parents, who both are retired, regular financial support. So far, their parents manage without much personal assistance, but if the situation changes Daniel will have to consider moving them over to his own flat. Despite having separate living arrangements, Daniel visits his parents on a daily basis because his children eat lunch at their grandparents' home after school. Daniel usually collects the children in the afternoon, but if he has an important meeting to attend, his parents look after the children until the evening.

Daniel began his working life in the army. He stayed in the army for eight years, at which point he decided to change career, and has for the past ten years been working in the insurance business. In contrast to the situation in most middle-class families, Daniel is the only breadwinner. Instead of employing a maid, his wife stays at home to run the household and mind the children. An important incentive for this arrangement is that a foreign maid would do only basic child minding, not supervising homework or preparing children for major examinations. Daniel is very explicit about the importance of guiding their children in their schoolwork.

It's very difficult for her [my wife] to work full time and to look after five children. If you're aware that the Singapore government is very concerned about education for children, so whenever there's exam fever you can see everybody being stressed out. So there's no way that she can work and look after the children and to guide them in their studies [at the same time]. So henceforth, she's not working at all. She's looking after the children full time, in their well-being and their studies as well.

Daniel, who is Cantonese, grew up in a dialect-speaking home, and still communicates in Cantonese with his parents and sister. (Daniel's wife is Hokkien so they usually communicate with each other in English.) However, because English is the medium of instruction in school, Daniel and his wife conscious-

ly speak English to their children. Occasionally they will speak Mandarin, the compulsory second language for Chinese students, although their children are less comfortable and fluent in that language. Meanwhile, the knowledge of dialect inevitably suffers. Due to the lack of exposure, Daniel's children do not speak any dialect. "Not at all," Daniel said. "It's sad, but not at all." Most Chinese Singaporeans express sorrow over the decline of dialects, but see it as a necessary trade-off. Although dialects, more than any other language, carry sentimental value, proper training in English and Mandarin is seen as necessary to secure a good life in Singapore.

## The Language Gap and the Paradox of the Asian Values Ideology

Whereas many of the generation gaps discussed in this chapter spring from socio-economic change and/or individual aspirations of being modern, the shift in language use is a direct result of state intervention. I have already mentioned how the rapid modernization of Singapore triggered an ideological revival of Asian Values in the 1980s. The Asian Values ideology was an attempt to mold a modernity anchored in tradition. At the same time, it was an attempt to remold tradition by favoring certain cultural features while excluding others.<sup>38</sup> The Asian Values ideology is an excellent example of how the "gardening ambitions of the state" (Bauman 1993: 15-16), symptomatic of the modern project, also include the ordering of tradition. With the object of restoring the cultural heritage of the Singaporean people, the government appointed Mandarin and Confucianism as the core traditions of the Chinese community. The paradox, however, is that neither Mandarin nor Confucian Ethics are historically representative of Chinese cultural life in Singapore. The scholarly reading of Confucianism was typical of the upper classes rather than the peasantry, from which most of the Singaporean immigrants are derived. Likewise, it would be difficult to talk about Confucianism as a singular religious system among Chinese Singaporeans because it is fused with elements from Taoism, Buddhism and folk religion (Elliott 1990: 24ff). And with regard to Mandarin: the ancestors of most Chinese Singaporeans originated from the Southeastern provinces of China. In this part of China, the native tongue is not Mandarin but various dialects. The distinction of Mandarin as

38 See also Hanna (1973) for an interesting account of modernization and constructions of culture in Singapore.



a “language” in contrast to “dialects” is largely superficial. In fact, Mandarin and most dialects are mutually unintelligible in verbal form, with the written character being the common denominator.<sup>39</sup> The five major Chinese dialect groups in Singapore are Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochew, Hakka and Hainanese. In addition there are a number of minor dialect groups, such as Hockchia, Henghua, Foochow and Shanghainese. Although Mandarin was no more native to Chinese Singaporeans than was English, the government argued for the imperative of a common Chinese language. This paved the way for a revision of the national education system in 1979, which prescribes Mandarin as the compulsory second language for Chinese students (while English is the medium of instruction). From this it follows that all Chinese students must study Mandarin as their “mother tongue”, regardless of the actual language they speak at home. In addition to the curricular reforms, dialects are banned from media and an annual Speak Mandarin Campaign is continuing.

There were several political reasons for initiating the bilingual curriculum and Speak Mandarin Campaign. First, the decision to initiate the campaign was justified on the grounds that a common language was necessary to bridge communication and enhance integration within the Chinese community. Second, there was a clear instrumental agenda in having a proficient Mandarin speaking population who could help Singapore benefit from the ascending Chinese economy. Third, it was argued that Mandarin was the superior vehicle for inculcating and preserving Chinese traditions.<sup>40</sup> The reason why Mandarin, not dialects, should provide this vehicle leads us to a fourth aspect: the image of Mandarin as more sophisticated and civilized than dialects.<sup>41</sup> Through the years, the launch speeches of the annual Speak Mandarin Campaign have depicted dialects as crude semi-languages that do not encourage civilized behavior, as in Goh Chok Tong’s (then Minister for Defense) launching speech in 1986, where he referred to a survey on the use of Mandarin in public places:

...it was noted that customers of departmental stores and restaurants who spoke in Mandarin tended to be more polite than those who spoke in dialects. Why is this so? Is the relationship more than just casual? Can the use of Mandarin also help the Courtesy Campaign? If so, when we promote the Speak Mandarin Campaign, we also re-

39 In some cases, such as Hong Kong Cantonese, even the written characters differ from Mandarin.

40 An evaluation of the Speak Mandarin Campaign was published in *A Decade of Mandarin: 1979–1989* (1989) and *Mandarin: The Chinese Connection* (2000).

41 The portrayal of Mandarin as a vehicle to civilization and sophistication is by no means a new phenomenon. In China itself, Mandarin was the official language, and even though the majority of Chinese Singaporeans were from dialect-speaking provinces, Mandarin was the common medium of instruction in the local Chinese-stream schools in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

ceive an additional bonus in the form of courtesy (*Speak Mandarin Campaign Launching Speeches, 1979-1989* 1989: 58-59).

The distinction between Mandarin and dialects in terms of high-class versus low-class is clearly reflected in the public sphere. Contrary to the government's ideological emphasis on filial piety and seniority, there is a general tendency in Singapore for dialects and other practices associated with older generations to be perceived as irrelevant to modern society. This perception is certainly heightened by the government's attempt to stamp out dialects, which literally marginalizes a large number of elderly Singaporeans in the public sphere. The declining status of the elderly, which is intertwined with socio-economic status, education, religion, and language, is not merely symbolic. It also has serious practical implications. Not only are elderly dialect-speaking Chinese alienated through the ban on broadcasting dialects in media, they are also barred from many workplaces and are usually seen in unskilled occupations, such as cleaning or hawking. Dialect-speaking elderly who are unable to communicate in English or Mandarin are also in a very vulnerable situation with regard to access of information. This problem was laid bare during my fieldwork in 2003, when Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) hit Singapore.<sup>42</sup>

During the SARS crisis, it became evident that the information going out to the people in the four official languages – English, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil – excluded a large proportion of the dialect-speaking elderly. Despite a 25-year period of bilingualism and Speak Mandarin Campaigns, approximately 600,000 Chinese Singaporeans use dialect at home (*Straits Times* 7 May 2003). The number of dialect-speaking persons is not insignificant considering that Singapore's Chinese population is only about 2.6 million. There is no difference between Mandarin and dialect in written form but the fact that many elderly Chinese are illiterate prevents them from accessing any written information; or verbal information unless it is in dialect. It should be pointed out that not all elderly Chinese are dialect-speaking and/or illiterate. Those who were educated in an English or Chinese-stream school are, of course, less affected by the ban on Chinese dialects. However, according to a national survey of senior citizens released in 1996, over 85 percent of Chinese Singaporeans aged 55 and over are dialect-speaking. In addition, the majority of Singaporeans aged 55 and over lack educational qualifications while 38.5 percent have at least primary education (*National Survey of Senior Citizens in Singapore, 1995* 1996: ix). Even though this information does not provide any

42 SARS emerged in China at the end of 2002 and spread to other parts of the world. Among the worst hit areas were China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Vietnam, Singapore and Canada.

figures specifically for the Chinese community, the data give an idea of the general level of illiteracy among the elderly in Singapore.

The serious risks of insufficient spreading of information during the SARS crisis resulted in a temporary straying from the ban on dialects. The Singapore government, whose efficiency in tackling the SARS epidemic gained wide recognition, eventually decided to permit broadcasting of SARS-related issues in dialect. MediaCorp Radio broadcasted health announcements in dialect from April 17, followed by a number of forum talks on national TV-stations from the 30<sup>th</sup> of April onward (*Straits Times* 30 April 2003). A forum broadcasted by Media Works' Channel U, "Everyone's Talking", had translators available in Teochew, Hokkien, Hainanese, Cantonese, and Hakka. Yet, only about 10 percent of the show was in dialect, the greater part being in Mandarin. Some dialect-speaking elderly later expressed their disappointment with the limited time given to dialect in the show, which makes it uncertain whether the information was successfully conveyed or not (*New Paper* 1 May 2003).

The language shift is also causing problems in the communication between family members of different generations. Jane, an unmarried woman in her forties, described how she had been struggling to explain the SARS epidemic to her mother. Her mother is illiterate and speaks only Cantonese. Although Jane and her mother live in the same household and converse in Cantonese on daily basis, Jane compared her communication abilities in Cantonese to a six-year-old. Because Jane went through an English-stream school and now has a white-collar job where she mainly speaks English, her only exposure to dialect is with her mother and old relatives. Although her Cantonese vocabulary is sufficient for daily conversation, it gets complicated when having to discuss medical terms or issues of the rare kind. Despite those limitations, Jane at least can understand, and make herself understood in Cantonese. A more extreme consequence of the language shift is found in families where young children completely lack knowledge of dialect. Since dialects are banned from the official school curriculum, the only chance of children learning dialect is through parents and other adults. However, in families where the principal medium of communication is English or Mandarin, parents are unlikely to pass on dialect to their children.

Most of my informants did not bother to teach their children any dialect, perhaps just a few words and phrases. Some of them even consciously discouraged their children from speaking dialect, usually with the argument that dialects are obsolete or even vulgar (see below). Another common argument is that they want to spare their children the burden of learning yet another language, on top of English and Mandarin. One man whom I interviewed subscribed wholly to such a pragmatic approach. "Chinese are pragmatic people,"

he said, “and to me, since dialect doesn’t have any pragmatic point, I don’t care whether it will fade away.” Consequently, he does not bother to teach his children any dialect. The severe competition at school and the expectations on children to excel in their academic achievement are reasons enough for putting all the efforts into learning English and Mandarin, rather than dialect. Under those circumstances, the only way young children can verbally communicate with dialect-speaking elders is by means of an interpreter. During fieldwork, I encountered several cases where grandchildren and grandparents were completely unable to understand each other language-wise. In a way, this is a situation typically found in immigrant communities, where the new generation is born and raised in a context different from their parents. However, in Singapore this situation has arisen as a result of a state propelled modernity project.

### “Speak Amah-kong”

The language shift described above implies a shift in identity, where dialect belonging no longer plays a significant role for the younger generation. Let me depict a conversation I had with a Chinese Singaporean man in his early forties. He and his wife had grown up in purely Hokkien-speaking homes with limited exposure to either English or Mandarin. The husband’s only schooling consisted of a few years in an English-stream school, but according to himself, he never cared much about studying, meaning that his English is weak. His wife is in a similar situation, albeit she went through a Chinese-stream school. Having felt the disadvantages of insufficient language skills, they decided to speak only English and Mandarin with their own children. However, since the husband’s mother is living with them, the children hear their father and grandmother conversing in Hokkien. “Because of that, my daughter has learned to understand some Hokkien,” he explained. In fact, his daughter even expresses an interest in listening to the dialect, sometimes asking her father to speak “amah-kong”. The phrase “amah-kong” is Hokkien and can be translated as “grandmother says”. The young girl’s freely composed reference to Hokkien as “amah-kong” reflects her perception of dialect as a language belonging to grandmother’s world, with no immediate significance for her own self.

Children growing up in English-speaking homes not only have difficulties in relating to dialect, they even have difficulties in relating to Mandarin as

their mother tongue. Feng, who works as a teacher at the Chinese Arts & Drama association, is appalled at her students' poor skills in Mandarin:

They don't even know Mandarin, not to say their own dialect. I asked them 'which dialect group are you from?' None of them knows! They know nothing about this. They only know they are Chinese, and some of them can even tell me 'I'm not Chinese, I'm English'. They will insist that they are English.

The students at the association where Feng works, of course, are not representative of all Chinese children. They are sent to the association by their parents precisely because they need to improve their Mandarin, as most of them are from English-speaking homes. That children growing up in an English-speaking environment perceive themselves as being "English", not "Chinese", is actually quite logical as they are most comfortable in speaking English. Meanwhile, this creates a dilemma in the Singaporean context where, according to the official multicultural system, identity is a matter of race; being Chinese is not so much a matter of language and cultural practices as of blood ties and physical appearance. This static notion of ethnic identity is also reified on the ground. Chinese parents get really frustrated if their children suggest that they are English. "How could you be English? Look, yellow skin," they would say and pinch their arm.

Language usage is not a purely generational issue, and despite the fact that all students now study English as first-language, the language spoken at home varies. If you go to an old-style hawker center or market, most Chinese people, young as well as old, speak dialect (albeit the younger ones might know English from school). Chinese culture in Singapore is obviously not a homogeneous entity, but contains variations and contradictions. There are, nevertheless, clear symbolic markers attached to language skills and language preferences. Dialects are generally associated with the underclass and gang culture while English represents the gateway to career advancement and social status. Auntie Lim, Andy's mother, purposely spoke only English to her own children, "because, you see, at that time [when my first son was young] we were staying in a HDB flat [public housing flat], and the neighbor had five children who used those vulgar words in dialect. 'Oh dear', I said to my husband, 'I can't speak dialect to my son. He will learn [those vulgar words] from them.'" Their second son speaks slightly more Hokkien than the first son because he was taken care of by Uncle Lim's mother, who spoke neither English nor Mandarin, when he was a baby. The chances that children will be exposed to dialect are naturally higher if there is an elderly, dialect-speaking member of the household, but the reverse scenario, where grandparents pick up English or Mandarin to communicate with their grandchildren, is also common.

## Religion and the Importance of Being Modern

In addition to upward mobility and shifting language usage, religion is yet another area of intergenerational change. In Singapore, there are many Chinese families with religious differences due to the increasing trend of conversion to Christianity. This was the case with Daniel, whom I quoted in the beginning of this chapter. Daniel was raised in a Taoist family, but as an adult he felt strongly inclined to Christianity. He is not yet baptized and does not belong to any specific denomination, but calls himself a “Christianity practitioner”. Daniel’s family is unusual in that his father also recently converted to Christianity, while his mother has remained a Taoist. In most other cases I encountered, both spouses had the same religious affiliation. Daniel’s father had embraced Christianity during a crisis of sickness, which nearly took his life. Six months later he got baptized. Of course, an important reason for his conversion was the influence from Daniel and his sister. “My dad was influenced by us,” Daniel explained to me. “He was convinced because everybody prayed for him in the hospital during his dark times. So I think he was convinced. He was healed. That’s what made him accept Christ.” The hospital has become the archetypal conversion scene in Singapore, and several people convert to Christianity in situations of crisis. Daniel claims that despite his mother and father having different religions, they do not fight about it. However, when his father got baptized, he decided to discard the idols and the altar table from their home. Daniel’s mother, the only remaining Taoist of the family, is not compelled to convert, but her religious practice is inevitably restricted by her husband’s decision to remove the altar.

Since Chinese religious beliefs and practices in Singapore contain elements from Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and ancestor worship, it is, as suggested by Vivienne Wee (1973: 3), more appropriate to apply the term “Chinese Religion”. In *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas* (2000: 80) Chinese religion is described as “a heterogeneous mixture of ancestor worship with elements of Buddhist, Daoist [Taoist] and Confucian sources as well as from traditional Chinese folklore and religious practices indigenous to the places where the Chinese have established communities”. Even informants who themselves practice Chinese religions are unclear about the differences between Buddhism and Taoism. Although, on inquiry, they might classify themselves as Buddhist, in practice they worship ancestors as well as Taoist gods. This fusion is also reflected in the many temples around Singapore, which usually house both Buddhist and Taoist sections within the same building. Many self-proclaimed Buddhists pray to the Taoist gods too, if only to be on

the safe side. Whether we talk about worship in the temples or domestic worship (i.e. at home), the ritual is characterized by the use of joss sticks for praying. It is easy to tell which households are practicing Chinese religion by the small altars nailed up next to the front door. Inside their homes they usually keep an altar with ancestral tablets and various idols, and also here a pot in which to put burning joss sticks.



*A Chinese altar found outside homes in Singapore.*

Contrary to my initial assumption, the practice of ancestor worship does not seem to increase people's genealogical knowledge, at least not in Singapore. The forbears they pray to are only the more immediate ones, such as parents and grandparents.<sup>43</sup> Young people in general have very little knowledge of their ancestors back in China. Some of my informants were totally indifferent to their genealogy, while others pointed to the lack of sources. One informant

<sup>43</sup> Maurice Freedman (1970a) has pointed out the difference between domestic worship (household) and extra-domestic worship (ancestral hall or temple). Whereas "domestic ancestor worship is a necessity, ancestor worship in halls is a luxury", as the halls are markers of economic wealth and status (ibid.: 168). Unlike extra-domestic worship, which honors the lineage, the domestic ancestor worship is usually restricted to individual kin whom one knew in life.

excused himself on the grounds that his parents had not passed down the history: “You can say that the younger ones, they don’t bother to find out [about their family history], the other perspective is [that] our parents never bothered to tell us. In both perspectives nobody gets to know the history.”

In recent decades, considerable numbers of Chinese Singaporeans have converted from the Chinese religion to Christianity.<sup>44</sup> The evangelical churches are by far the fastest growing and account for the greater part of the Christian converts. According to the Census of 2000, approximately 16 percent of the Chinese population is Christian while approximately 64 percent is Buddhist/Taoist. Nearly 19 percent of the Chinese population claim to be without religious affiliation. In the statistical report the category “Christianity” is subdivided into “Catholic” and “Other Christians”. With regard to the Christian Chinese population, Catholics account for slightly more than 29 percent while “Other Christians” account for slightly more than 70 percent (*Census of Population 2000*). In everyday parlance, Singaporeans also make a distinction between “Catholicism” and “Christianity”. The latter mainly refers to evangelical Christianity. Although they share the same religious foundation, evangelical congregations consider Catholics to be too eclectic and lax in their religious conduct. For instance, whereas the evangelical churches strongly object to any practices related to non-Christian faith, such as burning joss sticks for the deceased, many of the Catholics I met would carry joss sticks when honoring deceased followers of Chinese religion.

The far most important recruitment base for the rapidly growing evangelical churches is the young and well-educated Chinese who feel little identification with Chinese customs and traditions in general.<sup>45</sup> In Jesus, they find unconditional love and security. The attractive force of the evangelical denominations lies in their practical approach to religion as well as the image of a vibrant and youthful faith. Housed in new and air-conditioned premises with high-tech equipment, these churches certainly give an impression of staying relevant in the modern context. The fundamental message in their teachings is that by practicing your faith, by doing good deeds, you will get rewarded both spiritually and materially. Asceticism is not in the picture. Admittedly, the idea of material reward fits in nicely with modern consumer society; just

44 Unlike the Malay community, where Islam remains strong, the Chinese community has been prone to conversion to Christianity.

45 In recent years there has been a growing trend of elderly converts, made possible by the fact that the churches increasingly arrange services also in dialects and Mandarin. Some churches have been operating in Mandarin and various dialects since before WWII, but mainly for those who were already Christians back in China. The English services I attended together with Carole and Alan, however, were dominated by young and middle-aged middle-class Chinese.



as you can pray for good health, so too can you pray for money to buy that new TV you have craved.

The churches, like other religious societies, reach out to the community through setting up welfare organizations and donating large amounts of money to charity. The image of Christianity as a hip and “happening” faith is enhanced by the way many churches incorporate show business into their activities. One of the largest churches in Singapore, the City Harvest Church, is famous for its “singing pastor”, Ho Yeow Sun, who alongside her career as a pastor has become a successful pop artist. The City Harvest Church and other new churches may be attractive but they have also been criticized for being run like businesses and pouring money into the construction of grand buildings. All of the above activities, including the devotion to mission, now require large sums of money. The answer to the need for money lies in tithing, whereby members are encouraged to donate ten percent of their income to the church. In fact, the City Harvest Church is currently building a gigantic church complex in Jurong West, a suburb in the western part of Singapore. The construction of the church, including the land purchase, amounts to a whopping S\$47.6 million; money that has been raised entirely from the congregation.<sup>46</sup>

Alan and Carole’s congregation, an evangelical charismatic church, was located a ten minute drive from the city center. Alan and Carole usually attended the Sunday service in English, which was led by a very energetic pastor. In addition to sermon and prayers, the service is dedicated to singing gospel songs, accompanied by a live band and with lyrics rolling on big screens. During the songs people rise to their feet, sing along and clap their hands. The atmosphere is relaxed and there is no particular dress code. Most churchgoers wear casual clothing, such as jeans, shirt and sneakers (while they instead manifest their social status by arriving in polished cars).

Carole and her friends, when explaining the reason for their conversion, assert that Christianity is far more rational than Chinese religion. A recurrent argument among my Christian informants is that Chinese religion is more concerned with ritual than reading, and that the followers do not know *why* they are performing this or that ritual. That Chinese religion lacks scriptures is a misconception, but the Chinese religious practice in Singapore is more temple-based than scripture-based.<sup>47</sup> Since many elderly Chinese are illiterate, the scriptures do not constitute a basis for their worship. Christian followers, by contrast, place the reading of scriptures at the center, and many church

<sup>46</sup> See the City Harvest Church’s website, <http://www.chc.org.sg> (accessed 1 Jan 2006).

<sup>47</sup> Followers of Chinese religion can turn to the vast array of Buddhist scriptures and Taoist philosophy.

members whom I came to know were joining Bible study groups to further their spiritual understanding.

The image of Christianity as a rational and modern religion is construed against the image of Chinese religion as outmoded and incoherent. Rodney, a member of Carole and Alan's church, was raised in a Taoist home. He pointed out to me that because most elderly people are uneducated, they are "confused about their religion": "If you ask them in Chinese they will only say they pray to the gods, but if you ask them in English they will say that they are Buddhist, although they are not. They are actually Taoists!" These "confused" answers, however, should be seen in relation to the categories established in official statistics, where Buddhism and Taoism/Chinese Traditional Beliefs represent two separate religious categories (see *Census of Population 2000*). Upon enquiry people thus have to reply that they are either Buddhist or Taoist, regardless of whether they make this distinction in practice.

Rodney's wife, Christina, likewise grew up in a Taoist home. She recalls how her family used to pray to the ancestors on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> day of every lunar month. Growing up under poor conditions, Christina and her siblings were always looking forward to these days because they got to eat good food like roast duck or pork, not because they knew much about the religious content. As a child, she never questioned the religious rituals. "That's how we were brought up, we never questioned," she laughed. "If we were asked to pray, we pray. If we were asked to help, we help. We Chinese are brought up in the way that [we should] respect parents. So we didn't go against parents although we were not happy sometimes. We just followed." Christina was the first among her siblings to become a Christian. Her mother was very upset and threatened Christina every time she went to church. Sometimes she would even walk behind Christina all the way to church, making noise and threats. By hook or by crook, she was unable to stop Christina. "It broke her heart [when I became a Christian]", Christina admitted. "Because when you become a Christian you betray their religion. They feel that you don't respect them as parents and that you don't love them anymore". The comparison to a betrayal has to be understood against the entwinement of religion and filial obligations. In the realm of Chinese religion, a filial child has to perform rituals of ancestor worship, or else the deceased parents will become wandering ghosts. By rejecting the practice of ancestor worship, Christian converts also reject part of their filial obligations to their parents. From that perspective, the conversion to Christianity is not just a matter of private faith; it is also a form of emancipation from the elder generation or, indeed, a rejection of certain aspects of filial piety (i.e. ancestor worship).

Rodney, and many others with him, was a “closet” Christian for several years out of fear that his parents would denounce him. As Rodney became adult and established his own family, his parents became more compliant to his religion. An important factor in this regard is that when parents grow old they usually become dependent on their children for financial and practical support. A similar case is Jane, who joined an evangelical church several years ago. Jane’s mother is a Buddhist, and although she could not stop Jane from converting, she complains that Jane will not pray for her after death. Jane usually retorts by saying: “Isn’t it better that I care for you now, when you are still alive?” Jane’s mother used to keep an altar table in the flat, but when Jane converted to Christianity she removed the altar and now only worships on special occasions. This should be seen against the fact that Jane’s mother is wholly dependent on Jane for economic and practical support. She is long since retired, her savings account is already empty and the “sister-organization” she belonged to has dissolved since most of its members have passed away.<sup>48</sup> It would be misleading to isolate a single factor, but economic dependence is one reason why elderly parents sometimes compromise their own religious conduct. The inversion of the (economic) dependency relation between parent and child undoubtedly affects the balance of power to the advantage of the younger generation, while weakening the authority of the senior generation. Some families experience huge conflicts as a result of religious conversion, sometimes escalating into full-scale fights where children trash their parents’ altars and idols as a demonstration of their repudiation of non-Christian religious practices. Destroying one’s parents’ altar and idols is a drastic action, and none of my close informants, according to what they said, had had such serious conflicts in their families. They did, however, describe other ways in which they manifest their disapproval, such as refusing to eat food that has been prayed over, refusing to carry joss sticks when honoring the deceased during Qing Ming, or refusing to partake in funeral rituals.

Meanwhile, it should not be overlooked that many families manage to keep their religious differences at a distance, at least to the extent of not letting religion interfere with other domains of family life. A good example of this is Carole and her family. Carole converted to Christianity in her teens, as did her second brother. Her oldest brother calls himself a freethinker – which means having no specific religious affiliation – and does not object to performing rituals together with his parents. Carole’s parents were initially very

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48 Without a family as a safety net, unmarried female migrants, such as Jane’s mother, often organized themselves in various sisterhoods, vegetarian halls and mutual-assistance groups (*kongsi*) to support each other in case of sickness or old age, and to arrange the proper funeral rites upon death (Pan 1994: 193ff).

unhappy with her conversion to Christianity. There have been some situations of conflict over the years, such as when Carole's parents threatened not to attend Carole and Alan's wedding ceremony in the church, but despite the lurking tensions they interact frequently as a family and share many daily activities.

## The Decline of the Status of Seniority

Studies of intergenerational relations have described, as well as projected, a declining status of seniority in modern societies (e.g. Eisenstadt 1956; Mead 1970; Cowgill and Holmes 1972; Caldwell 1976), and, no doubt, the generational disintegration and overall declining status of the elderly in Singapore give certain validity to this projection. The increasing emphasis on education and merits, and the urge to adjust to a rapidly changing world, put many elderly at a disadvantage. The inversion of age-hierarchies to the advantage of youth gets even more obvious when seen in contrast to the popular representation of Asian societies as family-oriented and age-hierarchical. My informants frequently commented on this contradiction. Bee Choo, for instance, put it in the following way:

Now old age is seen as a liability to the family. Not like the old society, where the older you are, the more valued you are in the family. The patriarch or the matriarch was always given a lot of status in the family because seniority was valued [in the old society]. But we sure know that now this is a world that favors the young, not the old. Being old is a liability.

Bee Choo, like many others, blames modern society, where the continuous upgrading of technology and the acquisition of "new" knowledge set the rules. The elderly inevitably get left behind as they may lack both education and experience:

I mean Internet and all these things. Even now in government service or leadership positions it's the younger and younger ones who are holding [the positions]. No longer are you rewarded based on seniority or loyalty to the company or to the country. It's all about giving young blood and that kind of thing. So it is a world belonging to the young, and increasingly the old will become a liability because it's less valued in the society.

Seniority, however, is not synonymous with physiological ageing. Seniority is a social status defined and legitimized in terms of old age but in fact made possible due to other factors, such as economic resources or political power.<sup>49</sup> It is most doubtful that old age has ever been the sole determinant of power and influence. Maurice Freedman (1957: 20), for instance, observed that it was not always the case that the eldest man ruled in traditional Chinese society. In theory, the most senior man (i.e. the eldest) would be head of the lineage, but in practice other factors such as wealth and educational status interfered and negotiated the principle of seniority.

While the divergence between physiological ageing and seniority is not new, it becomes extremely obvious in contemporary Singapore, where the notion of seniority is ideologically upheld and reproduced, at the same time as many elderly face discrimination and hardship in their daily lives. Seniority is even institutionalized in the political structure through positions such as “Senior Minister”, i.e. former ministers of state that after retirement receive advisory positions. Lee Kuan Yew was appointed Senior Minister when he stepped down from the prime minister post in favor of Goh Chok Tong in 1990. Lee acted as Senior Minister until 2004, when his son Lee Hsien Loong took over the Prime Minister post. Lee Kuan Yew was then appointed to a new position as “Minister Mentor”, while Goh became Senior Minister. Minister Mentor Lee officially has an advisory role, but he is a member of the Cabinet (so is Senior Minister Goh) and his influence in politics should not be underestimated.

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49 The connection between social seniority (not synonymous with physiological age) and economic power in non-industrial societies has been theorized by French anthropologists in terms of pre-capitalist class relations, whereby powerful elders exploit juniors through controlling the basis for production and reproduction (cf. Terray 1975; Meillassoux 1978). Meillassoux (1978: 139), for instance, argues that in self-sustaining agricultural societies, the seniors’ authority over juniors ultimately “depends on their capacity to control access to nubile women”. Since the seniors’ control over land was not immediate, they sought to perpetuate their control through other methods, such as knowledge in subsistence skills, ritual knowledge (e.g. customs, genealogies, religious rituals), and the access to women (i.e. a precondition of reproduction). This Marxist approach, however, can be criticized for neglecting the reverse situation, that is, non-industrial societies where the elderly are disadvantaged compared to young adults (cf. Foner 1984: xxii). Likewise, even in societies where social seniority is institutionalized, not all elderly achieve equally privileged positions, and even within a category of seniors there would be internal hierarchies and inequalities. Terray (1975) notes this discrepancy between ideology and actual practice in kinship-based societies (or the “lineage mode of production”), where, theoretically, all youths would eventually become elders: “In actual fact, not all youths will become elders; some will die before reaching that goal, others will be preceded by elder brothers throughout their lifetime; but all of them may legitimately think that they will one day cross the barrier” (ibid.: 111).

## Linking the Past and the Present

The above section illustrates how massive social change has a fragmenting effect on intergenerational continuity. It is also obvious that this disruption involves an inversion of traditional age-hierarchies, whereby the elderly are in an increasingly disadvantageous position. Meanwhile, it is important to remember that although intergenerational differences are fraught with problems, there are many ways in which those differences are negotiated and reconciled in everyday life. The negotiating of intergenerational differences is especially conspicuous in the sandwich generation, among those who grew up in the “old” world but have adjusted to the modern. As I mentioned earlier, people from the sandwich generation often see themselves as a link between the generations. The need for a mediating link is perhaps most patent with regard to language, where verbal communication between grandchildren and dialect-speaking grandparents sometimes presupposes an interpreter. Language, however, is not the only instance where people from different generations work out strategies to manage their differences. In my conversations with Bee Choo, she repeatedly talked about the massive transition her generation has experienced: “We are in a generation where we negotiate the differences, the transitions. We are in the generation where at home we were brought up with some of these Chinese traditions, and then in school we were educated another way. So we are in that transition.” To Bee Choo, the navigation between old and new ways of life is more or less an automatic action, depending on the person she interacts with:

If I'm with the older generation in let's say a Chinese dinner, a wedding dinner or something like that, I will still apply traditional rules. In that context you know, automatically we will switch to think like ‘okay, this is your elder, you serve your elder’, and if you see an older auntie or uncle who cannot walk properly you go forward and help out. That kind of Chinese Chinese-ness, *lah*, will still come in, because that was how we have learnt to interact with them, from childhood you see. But if let's say if the elderly are not around and we are alone with my kids, we get another kind of interaction and different rules apply in that context.

In this quote, Bee Choo refers to different conceptions of the proper behavior between elder and younger. As a child, she was expected to address all elder family members in a respectful manner. If they were having a family dinner, she would address the elders and invite them to eat before helping herself. Even today, this is the way she interacts with the older generation. Bee Choo's relation to her own children, by contrast, is much less hierarchical. When they gather around the dinner table, she does not require her children to invite the

adults to eat, nor does she let them wait until the adults have been served food. “No, no,” Bee Choo laughed. “Children eat first nowadays!” Bee Choo continued by explaining that, “it’s no longer like in the past, *lah*. Now people don’t take all this so seriously so if my son refuses to do it [i.e. call his uncle to eat dinner], my brother would just laugh about it or just joke and say ‘save your life, you don’t want to call me!’” Although Bee Choo does not require her children to perform the traditional dinner ritual, she likes them to be aware of the existence of those rituals: “We’re just telling them, as a matter of sharing with them, what we used to do as kids. But not intending that this [practice] must be passed on, *lah*.”

From childhood Bee Choo learnt to address senior relatives according to the proper term. Chinese kinship terminology is very specific and distinguishes matrilineal from patrilineal relationships, sex, generation, and relative age. Proper forms of address include the use of correct titles when speaking with elders, and even between siblings.<sup>50</sup> According to proper etiquette, a junior person has to address his senior according to his/her proper title, whereas a senior person may address his/her junior by name. If there is more than one elder sister/brother, further distinctions are made according to the internal age ranking of siblings, for instance “eldest sister”, “second sister”, “third sister”, and so forth. The practice of addressing is not only a way of manifesting an age hierarchy, it is also conceived of as proper manners.

Most young parents that I met found it important to teach their children to address elder persons according to the proper title. In some cases, the inculcation of kinship terms was in fact revived. Carole’s good friend John, for instance, was never taught to address his elder siblings by title. He simply calls them by name. Nevertheless, John is determined to teach his own children the correct kinship terminology and to address one another accordingly. At the same time as the terms of address confirm a hierarchy based on relative age, John pointed out that it also confirms a “blood-link”. To address one’s brother as “brother”, John said, gives a “closer and more respectful” impression as opposed to calling him by name. Some of my informants even think that proper addressing is more important within the family than with outsiders. Pauline, another teacher at the Chinese Arts & Drama association, recalls that she used to be very confused when reading American novels and books as a child because the characters were always calling each other by name. “I didn’t even know who was the eldest, who was the youngest. How to differentiate?” Like John, Pauline feels that addressing by title confirms that, “yeah, we are a family”.

<sup>50</sup> Elder sister is called *jiejie*, elder brother is *gege*, younger sister is *meimei* and younger brother is *didi* (according to *hanyu pinyin* spelling).

With few exceptions, the terms of address are in Chinese (either in Mandarin or in dialect). Even in families where English is the primary language of communication, the Chinese terms of address are usually kept because the English lacks an equivalent detailed kinship terminology.<sup>51</sup> The English terms “uncle” and “auntie” are mostly used when addressing non-kin, such as a friend’s father or the bus-driver. I was often told that, “anyone can be an uncle or auntie”, and for that reason it is inappropriate to address relatives in English. The Chinese terms of address are thus important markers for distinguishing kin from non-kin. Common for both kin and non-kin, however, is that it would be extremely disrespectful to neglect to greet a senior person by title. Whenever I joined Carole in visiting her brother’s family, her two nieces addressed me as “Auntie Kristina”. If they forgot to do so, they got a scolding from their parents or any other of the adult family members. Likewise, it was expected from me to greet Carole’s parents, or any elder person, as “uncle” and “auntie”. In Sweden it is widely accepted to call senior people by name, and I must admit that it took a while for me to remember to greet and to address senior people properly. As I got used to the habit of addressing and being addressed, I even found myself feeling offended when young children called me by name instead of “auntie” or “jiejie” (“big sister” in Mandarin).

While most of my informants transmit the forms of address to their own children, the shift from dialect to Mandarin or English has an impact on the language of address. Bee Choo grew up in a Hokkien-speaking family and thus learnt the terms of address in Hokkien. If the paternal side and the maternal side are from different dialect groups, the terms of address may also differ accordingly. Children of today, however, are taught the Mandarin terms of address in school. Although the written character is the same for Mandarin and dialect, the pronunciation can be completely different. As a matter of respect to her elders, Bee Choo teaches her own children to address them in dialect. For younger relatives, however, she teaches her children the Mandarin terms, since Mandarin is the curricular mother tongue. As time goes by and elderly relatives pass away, the dialect terms of address are likely to be increasingly less applied. Admittedly, it is not easy to learn and memorize the detailed Chinese kinship terminology, especially when there is no regular interaction with more distant relatives. Big family gatherings are usually limited to the high festivals. Considering the language gap and the infrequent interaction with elder relatives, children of today find it difficult to keep track of the terms

51 One might assume that the practice of addressing according to Chinese kinship terminology would be more prevalent in Chinese-speaking families (families who mostly communicate in Mandarin and/or dialect) than in English-speaking families (families who mostly communicate in English). Interestingly enough, I found that English-speaking families are equally concerned about proper addressing.



of address. Meanwhile, the shrinking family tree means that future generations will have less family members, and hence terms of address, to keep in mind.

## Celebrating Chinese New Year: Family Reunion and “Home Visiting”

The Chinese New Year is the most important occasion when family members, old and young, reunite. The Chinese New Year, also known as the Spring Festival, usually falls in the period January – February (depending on the lunar calendar) and lasts for 15 days. The preparations begin several weeks before, and are especially vibrant in Chinatown, where brightly colored lanterns light up the sky. The streets are crowded with people browsing the overwhelming choice of goodies, food, New Year decorations and flowers. In Singapore it is especially popular to buy *bak kwa*, a barbecued sweet meat sold in thin slices. *Bak kwa* is a must. People queue for hours to get high-quality slices, and in this instance the price is really secondary. With the New Year approaching, everyone hopes for prosperous times. Lion dance troupes are invited to perform at shopping malls and food centers to chase away bad spirits and bring good luck to businesses. When decorating the house for the New Year, people paste auspicious characters on the doors and the walls, wishing for prosperity and good luck. The characters are written on red colored paper, as red symbolizes fortune and happiness.

The hope of a better year to come was especially obvious at the time of fieldwork, as many Singaporeans felt the consequences of the economic recession and increasing unemployment rates. When I attended a New Year gathering at Jennifer’s home, she asked me, on her grandmother’s behalf, to help her draw lucky numbers. Slightly confused, I agreed. Jennifer placed a transparent plastic bowl in front of me, containing small slips of folded paper numbered from 1 to 9. She shook the bowl and asked me to pick a number. I put my hand into the bowl, grabbed a slip of paper and handed it over to Jennifer’s grandmother, who unfolded the slip and took notice of the number written on it. I repeated the procedure until I ended up with a four number sequence 8-1-4-7. The grandmother then took a lottery ticket and filled it with the combination of numbers I had drawn. There are countless ways of creating combinations of numbers for lotteries and other purposes. As I was a first-time visitor I was believed to bring good luck. It is also popular to ask a person

on his or her birthday to draw lucky numbers, or to distinguish numbers from the characteristic lines of *lou han* fishes. Jennifer even told me that when she had her first menstruation, her grandmother threw slips of numbers between her legs and picked out the four numbers that flew the furthest distance.

On New Year's Eve, Chinese families gather together for their annual reunion dinner. On my first fieldtrip I was invited to Carole's family for reunion dinner, and the subsequent year I joined the reunion dinner at Linda Teo's home. Traditionally, the reunion dinner was a large affair. All sons were expected to return to their ancestral home, while married daughters joined the reunion dinner of their husbands' families. Nowadays, by contrast, reunion dinners are usually restricted to closest family or even the nuclear unit, and thanks to the limited geographical distances in Singapore many couples manage to participate in the reunion dinner of both their parents and parents-in-law. Unlike in the past, when all shops and food places were closed over the New Year, more and more families have reunion dinners at restaurants to save the trouble of preparing the dinner at home. Some Singaporeans even go on holiday overseas to escape from the rushing and tearing about. The reunion dinners I attended were relaxed events. Clothes should be in bright, preferably red, colors, but apart from that, the clothing is very casual. Linda, for instance, simply wore a t-shirt and a pair of shorts during the dinner. In comparison, dressing is more formal for the home visits to relatives and friends.

The reunion dinner of Carole's family consisted of her parents, Auntie and Uncle Lee, and their three children (including Carole). Since Alan was temporarily overseas at the time, Carole joined the reunion dinner of her own parents instead of her parents-in-law. Auntie and Uncle Lee had woken up early in the morning to sell chicken and duck meat at the market. After closing their shop, Auntie Lee went back home to prepare the dinner. While Auntie Lee managed the cooking on her own, Carole and I helped out by going to town to buy fish for the *yu sheng*, a raw fish salad. This salad is a unique feature of Chinese culture in Singapore, and is eaten only during the New Year season. It consists of grated carrots, radish, raw fish slices (tuna or salmon), crackers, pomelo and sweetened plum sauce. Auntie Lee made her salad from scratch, as buying a semi-prepared product is unthinkable for her. She placed the salad on the middle of the dinner table, and carefully turned over the ingredients into a colorful mix. When everything was set, we all collected round the table, grabbed a pair of chopsticks each, and began to toss the salad up into the air while saying auspicious words. The tossing of the salad – the higher into the air, the better – is believed to whip up good luck for the coming year. The ingredients themselves, like many other New Year features, carry symbolic meaning. The Chinese character for fish, *yu*, is the homophone of “abun-

dance”, while the traditional New Year cake made of glutinous rice, *nian gao*, has the same sound as “high year”, meaning that the new year will be better than the outgoing year. Another central feature of the New Year’s celebrations in Singapore is the exchanging of mandarin oranges. This is mainly a southern Chinese practice, which was transported to Southeast Asia by Chinese migrants. In the Cantonese dialect, mandarin orange is the homophone of gold. When visiting relatives and friends during New Year, it is therefore customary to offer two mandarin oranges (alternatively four, so long as it is not odd numbers). As a manifestation of reciprocity, the host will also return two mandarin oranges to the guest before leaving.



*Preparing the traditional family reunion dinner at the Lee's. The plate in the middle is the yu sheng, the popular raw fish salad that is eaten only during the Chinese New Year season.*

After finishing the reunion meal, Carole and her sister-in-law, Wendy, went into a separate room to prepare their *hong bao* gifts, red packets containing money. During Chinese New Year, unmarried family members and friends are entitled to receive red packets from married couples. Although red packets are traditionally offered to those who are younger, it is customary for adult children to give red packets to their parents once they have started working. The

young children, of course, are especially eager to collect their *hong bao* gifts. Giving out red packets can be a costly affair, given the number of potential recipients. Whereas close family members may receive substantial amounts of money, sometimes several hundreds of dollars, distant friends usually receive a symbolic sum, like ten dollars. Albeit a crude guide, this can be compared to the average monthly income in Singapore, which in 2000 was estimated to S\$3,114 (*Census of Population 2000*).<sup>52</sup> In fact, I myself received a decent number of red packets, as I attended the many parties throughout the New Year season.

During the New Year period, followers of Chinese religion pay respect to the Gods and to their deceased. Auntie and Uncle Lee were not particularly religious, but they prayed on New Year's Eve. The more devout believers might choose to welcome in the New Year at the temple. Carole, who converted to Christianity many years ago, did not participate in her parents' worship. It is not uncommon that Christians refuse to eat food that has been prayed over, but Carole reasoned that so long as she did not partake in the ritual herself, and conceived of the food as any other food, it did not matter to her.

The Chinese New Year, like Christmas, has become a highly commercialized event, but it is nevertheless the occasion for reaffirming family and friendship bonds. On the first days of the New Year, it is time to honor the elder relatives by visiting them at home, the so-called home visiting. The home visits are usually a hectic business, with several visits on the same day.

In 2003 I attended the New Year festivities in Singapore for the second time. On the first day of the Year of the Goat (2003), I left my home in the morning to pay a visit to Jane and her elderly mother (actually her adoptive mother). Jane's (adoptive) mother had migrated to Singapore in the 1930s. At this point of time, China's economy was badly affected by the world depression and the slump in silk production, and unmarried women were often encouraged by their families to seek employment overseas so that they could send remittances back home, which resulted in a stream of women entering Singapore and other colonies (Pan 1994: 193ff).<sup>53</sup> Jane's mother used to work as a domestic servant, a so-called *amah*, for European and wealthy Chinese households. Although her salary was meager, she regularly remitted money to her family in China. She never got married or had any children of her own.

52 The median income is much lower than the average income. In 2000 the median monthly income was estimated to S\$2,234 (*Census of Population 2000*).

53 Female emigration from China was marginal up to the 1930s, but with the world depression and slump in silk production, large numbers of women began to seek employment in the cities or overseas. This movement coincided with an imposed quota on male immigration by the colonial government in Malaya and Singapore (the Alien Ordinance of 1933). Female immigration remained unrestricted until 1938, when an overall restriction was imposed to stem the escalating unemployment (Pan 1994: 193ff).

To adopt a child, like Jane's mother did, was a common old-age strategy among unmarried domestic servants (Pan 1994: 198). Jane has no recollection of her biological parents and considers her adoptive mother as "her own", and as such she fulfills her responsibilities by providing material as well as personal care.

Jane and her mother live in Bedok, a suburb east of the city center. On New Year's Day, Jane met me at the MRT station and brought me to their home, which by Singaporean standards is a somewhat rundown public housing flat with two bedrooms. On a stool outside the main door Jane's mother had placed a small pot with ashes of burned incense from praying. Inside the house, in the hall (living room), there was a table with food offerings, consisting of a variety of fruits, sweets and tea. In the opposite corner of the hall they had placed a vase of twigs with decorations in red and gold, and on the wall above was a poster of the character *fu* (luck). When I arrived at their home around 10:30am, there were already other visitors there. I presented my two mandarin oranges to Jane's mother, as she is the eldest, and wished everybody a prosperous New Year, or *gong xi fa cai*. The home visit involves much eating, and all households make sure to store up plenty of biscuits, pineapple tarts, dried fruits, nuts and sweets for guests. On top of this, Jane's mother had prepared a delicious meal consisting of fried chicken, spring rolls, noodles and vegetables. When I with a sated stomach said goodbye, Jane's mother returned a pair of mandarin oranges and gave me a *hong bao*.



*A poster of the character fu (luck) and typical New Year decorations at Jane's.*

On the second day of the New Year I visited Andy Lim's family, who on the same day were celebrating the "full month" of Andy's niece. To celebrate the baby's "full month" is an old Chinese custom, which takes place when the baby is one month old. The family usually hosts a gathering for relatives and friends, to whom they distribute red-painted hard-boiled eggs. The egg symbolizes fertility and renewal. Chinese also appreciate the round shape of the egg, which is associated with harmony. To bring extra good luck, the boiled

eggs are dyed red. Sometimes the guests receive other gifts too, such as cakes and glutinous rice. The guests, in turn, are expected to reciprocate these gifts by bringing red packets or presents for the baby.

The Lim's terrace house was crowded with friends and relatives. Andy introduced me to everyone, while I tried hard to keep all the names in mind. That Andy's family is economically well off is obvious from their spacious house, which has three stories and is nicely furnished. At the back of the house they have a tiny garden, where Auntie Lim grows some guava, lime, and spices. In Singapore, where most people live in high-rise buildings, even a few square meters of back yard is a luxury. Auntie Lim, dressed in a red Chinese-style blouse, encouraged me to help myself to the impressive dinner buffet. I filled my plate with pieces of chicken, fish, fried prawns, and marinated mushrooms. There was also beer and wine available for those who wished to drink something stronger than tea or soft drinks. Wine is becoming increasingly popular among middle- and upper-class people, but is rarely consumed by people in general. In fact, the number of times I was served wine during fieldwork can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Since it was a buffet supper, I could easily mingle with the rest of the guests. Most of the people were conversing in English, except for Andy's grandmother who only speaks Hokkien. The very young ran about excitedly, enjoying all the food and goodies, and eager to collect their red packets. Andy's old grandmother, despite being very fragile, also took part in the celebration. Since she can only move around by means of a walking frame, she spent the whole afternoon sitting down by a table. Although the children hardly speak any dialect at all, they show their respect for the elders by offering mandarin oranges and New Year's greetings. Andy was in the care of his grandmother as a child, so he is able to understand some Hokkien, and when addressing elder relatives, he uses the Hokkien terms. In Andy's eyes it would be extremely disrespectful to address them in English (i.e. auntie/uncle). Admittedly though, he has a slight problem remembering the kinship terminology and the relative order of all his uncles and aunts, especially those he seldom meets. Sometimes he even has to ask his mother for the correct term of address before greeting an elder. This actually happened at the New Year party. When an old aunt arrived, Andy leaned towards his mother, discreetly asking for the correct term of address. Andy told me that he wants to memorize the terms of address in the years to come. He should at least know the correct terms of address by the day he gets married, so that he can teach his own children the correct terminology. Despite the fact that he is most comfortable communicating in English, he believes it is crucial to have some knowledge of Chinese language and traditions, or else he will lose his heritage.

## Summary

The challenges facing intergenerational relations in contemporary Singapore are, as we have seen, numerous and complex. Socio-economic development is a major factor in this process, but we also have seen how subjective aspirations of being modern as well as political regimes have had a fragmenting effect on cultural continuity across generations. The strong presence of the Singapore government, and its habit of social engineering has a major impact on intergenerational relations, both in terms of fragmentation and consolidation. One of the most severe interventions is the language policies, whereby dialects have been banned in favor of Mandarin and English. Not only does this lead to the alienation of the younger generation from an ethnic identity central to the elder generation. In some cases it has even destroyed possibilities of verbal communication. The irony, of course, is that whereas the political leadership justified the language shift as a way of consolidating the cultural heritage of the Chinese community, in practice it de-legitimized a pivotal feature of the lived culture.





## CHAPTER 5

## Binding Ties

The Master said, ‘The service which a filial son does to his parents is as follows: – In his general conduct to them, he manifests the utmost reverence; in his nourishing of them, his endeavour is to give them the utmost pleasure; when they are ill, he feels the greatest anxiety; in mourning for them (dead), he exhibits every demonstration of grief; in sacrificing to them, he displays the utmost solemnity. When a son is complete in these five things (he may be pronounced) able to serve his parents (*Hsiao King* [Classic of Filial Piety], translated by James Legge 1988: 480)<sup>54</sup>

In the previous chapter, I discussed how the massive transformation of Singapore has affected cultural continuity across generations. Rapid economic development and upward social mobility, as well as state policies and subjective aspirations of being modern have caused a deep generational divide and an inversion of the relationship between elder and younger generations. However, although the urge to adjust to a rapidly changing world puts many of the elderly at a disadvantage, we need to make a distinction between social seniority and familial obligations.<sup>55</sup> What is striking with regard to Singapore is the discrepancy between the real disintegration of the cultural continuity across generations and notions of Asian family values. How are we to understand the seeming contradiction between intergenerational fragmentation and traditional family values? I have emphasized the importance of recognizing both fragmentation and consolidation: just as much as there are forces threatening the continuity across generations, there are parallel forces binding the generations together. As we shall see, the fragmentation of cultural continuity across generations has not led to the dissolution of intergenerational obligations

<sup>54</sup> *Hsiao King* is one of the most influential historical guides for filial piety. Its origin is not fully known but it seems to have been compiled around 400 B.C. and contains several quotes from Confucius (see, Legge, Introduction).

<sup>55</sup> Leo Simmons (1947: 213–214) noted this distinction long ago in *The Role of the Aged in Primitive Societies*, where he stressed that, “Family responsibility for the care and support of the old is not necessarily related to domestic dominance of the aged, and therefore must be treated separately”.

within the family. Despite the fact that the new generation has to support an increasing number of elderly and that they devote an increasing amount of resources to raising their own children, the family has remained the primary unit of support in Singapore. As such I shift my focus from disintegration to the ways in which relations between elder and younger generations are maintained and reaffirmed.

In the onset of this study, I introduced the concept intergenerational contract for those expectations and obligations that bind the generations together. The concept of a contract is relevant in several respects. Although my informants do not use the term “contract” with regard to intergenerational obligations, the implicit understanding of those obligations does in effect resemble a contract that is governed by sentiments of indebtedness and repayment. The concept of a contract is thus an adequate tool in theorizing how people interpret and practice their intergenerational obligations. At another level, the contract between parent and child is also actively reproduced by the modern Singaporean state. We shall see that the state, in fact, plays a significant role in maintaining and reinforcing the intergenerational contract by providing limited public welfare and pursuing a pro-family politics. The most explicit attempt to cement children’s responsibilities to elderly parents is the Maintenance of Parents Act, which gives elderly parents the right to sue their children in case they neglect to support them. In this respect, the intergenerational contract is neither a remnant from the past nor is it *sui generis*. It is, in fact, a contract in the literal sense of the word, as opposed to a metaphor for implicit obligations and expectations. This chapter attempts to grasp how the intergenerational contract operates from above and from below; as a state strategy and as a cultural logic.

## The Asian Family, the State, and the Global Economy

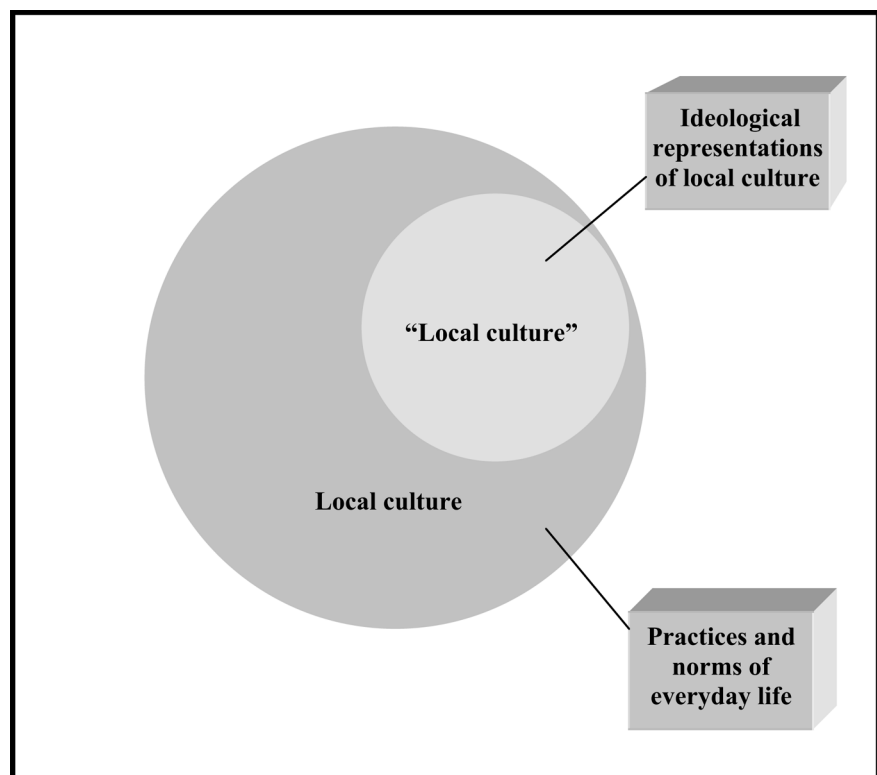
In his traditional Chinese New Year’s message in 2004, former Prime Minister Goh Chock Tong expressed deep concern about the fragmentation of families in Singapore: “Strong and stable families make for a strong and cohesive society. Many of the ills in Western societies are linked to the weakening of family ties” (*Straits Times* 21 Jan 2004). According to Goh, globalization and the greater use of English among Singaporeans make traditional family values especially vulnerable to external influences. In the same speech, Goh stressed that fundamental Singaporean values such as “hard work, thrift, respect for

elders and placing the community before self” must not be abandoned in the process of development (ibid.).

Clearly, the familial domain cannot be understood in isolation from the societal domain, including the political economy and the strategies of the state. This is extremely evident in Singapore, whose government pursues social engineering down to the last detail. Needless to say, the family has been a pivotal image of Asian culture in general and Chinese culture in particular for centuries. In the 1980s, an increasing number of analysts suggested that traditional Asian Values, of which the family is outstanding, worked as a counterforce to the social disintegration evoked by modernization. Indeed, it was argued that Asian Values were the very motor behind the successful modernization of Asian societies (e.g. Kahn 1979; Tham 1981; Tu 1984, 1997; Rozman 1993). This hypothesis was readily adopted and reaffirmed in Singapore under the leadership of Lee Kuan Yew. The credibility of Asian Values, however, was seriously damaged by the financial crisis that hit Asia in 1997. In the aftermath of the crisis, an Economic Review Committee and a Remaking Singapore Committee were set up to outline strategies of how to equip Singapore economically and culturally for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The committees’ reports, which were submitted to the government in 2003, established that diligence and discipline are not longer sufficient. The 21<sup>st</sup> century Singaporeans have to become innovative and creative; rather than learning how to take directives, they have to learn to become entrepreneurs.

With this ideological turn, the PAP government, once again, demonstrates real consistency in letting the economic dictate the social and cultural (cf. Wee 2001, 2002). Singapore is, as pointed out by Wee (2002: 130), an obvious illustration of how “states are capable of managing culture as an instrument to maintain national competitiveness within global capitalism”. Aihwa Ong makes a similar observation in *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (1999), in examining how certain cultural representations of “Chineseness” are strategically reproduced within different contexts of legitimacy, or what the author, inspired by Foucault, conceptualizes as regimes of truth and power. These regimes, which effectively normalize and disguise power relations, are identified as the nation-state, the market-place, and Chinese family organization (ibid.). Ong’s contribution, as I see it, is her emphasis on the interconnectedness of these regimes of truth and power. Contrary to most postcolonial theories, where globalization implies the decline of nation-states and locality (in favor of a hybridized globality), Ong shows how states continue to operate within, and benefit from, the global economy. The continuous role of the state, and its interconnectedness with the global economy, is especially conspicuous in Singapore. It is, therefore, important to under-

stand that the government's emphasis on self-sustaining families is part of a broader strategy of attracting multinational corporations through an investment friendly climate with low taxes. Meanwhile, the political leadership justifies its anti-welfare strategy on the grounds that Asian societies are naturally family-oriented; that the family is a cornerstone of the local culture. Local culture is usually conceptualized as a polar opposite of globalization, but here I suggest that images of local culture, such as Asian family values, are actually strategically and selectively deployed by the Singaporean state with the ambition of framing a society that is adequately adapted to the global economy.



**Figure 4** *A graphic illustration of the analytical distinction between “local culture” and local culture as proposed in the text.*

In this context, we should make an analytical distinction between “local culture” and local culture, that is, ideological representations of “local culture”, in this case employed by the state, and local culture as a dynamic system of practices and ideas articulated in everyday life. The distinction between “local culture” and local culture does not imply that they represent two separate entities, nor does it mean that the former is purely instrumental and spurious

while the latter is non-instrumental and genuine. By the same token, this analytical distinction cannot be translated into a simplistic top-down versus bottom-up relationship, whereby influential actors, such as political leadership, academe and the media, unilaterally construct a representation of culture that is enforced upon people on the ground. As we shall see, notions of local culture are also reified and strategically used by ordinary people in their everyday lives. “Local culture”, therefore, should be seen as an ideal type that is strategically deployed – as well as denied and challenged – by various actors in various situations.

## The Central Provident Fund

The Singapore government exerts a major consolidating influence on the preservation of familial obligations through a range of regulations and policies. The clear message is that the care of the elderly is not the responsibility of the state. Instead of a tax-financed pension system, a compulsory saving scheme – the Central Provident Fund (CPF) – provides the formal old age security in Singapore. This saving scheme is compulsory for all employees except the self-employed.<sup>56</sup> Prior to 1999, employer and employee each contributed 20 percent, making the total contribution rate 40 percent. In the aftermath of the financial crisis in 1997, the employer’s rate was cut to 10 percent on the premise that it would be restored as soon as the economy recovered. The rate was later raised to 16 percent but a full restoration was ended by Singapore’s economic downturn in 2003. Prime Minister Goh argued that Singapore’s dependency on multinational corporations makes it necessary to cut costs for employers and sustain an investment-friendly climate, as Singapore faces competition from low cost countries (Speech by PM Goh, *Straits Times* 28 Aug 2003). The government again decided to gradually reduce the employer’s contribution rate, but this time on a more permanent basis. At the moment, the employee’s rate for those up to the age of 55 years remains 20 percent, while the employer’s rate has been cut to 13 percent. For those aged 55–65,

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56 The Central Provident Fund consists of three accounts: the Ordinary Account (aimed at housing and insurance), the Special Account (aimed at retirement), and the Medisave Account (aimed at medical expenses). While the self-employed can contribute to the Ordinary and Special Accounts on a voluntary basis, it is compulsory for all self-employed with a yearly net trade income of more than S\$6000 to contribute between 6 and 8 percent to the Medisave Account. At the end of 2004, the total CPF membership was 3,018,014 (Central Provident Fund Board, <http://www.cpf.gov.sg> [accessed 5 Aug 2005]).

the employee's rate is 12.5 percent and the employer's rate 6 percent; for those aged 65 and over the employee's rate is 5 percent and the employer rate 3.5 percent.<sup>57</sup> The economic restructurings are designed to stay in tune with the global capitalist system, and reflect the continuity of the ideological pragmatism that has been a trademark of the PAP government ever since independence.

The Central Provident Fund was established in 1955. Nevertheless, many elderly people still lack sufficient savings. Members get full access to their CPF savings at the age of 55, but as they are allowed to withdraw money from the fund for purchasing public housing flats, education and medical costs, the retirement pool is usually scarce. Studies have shown that a large proportion of today's elderly either entirely lack or have insufficient savings for retirement. In 1995, only one-third of those aged 60 and over had CPF accounts, and among those, only a fraction expected their CPF savings to cover their whole retirement (*National Survey of Senior Citizens in Singapore 1995*; Chan 1997: 40). In such cases, the formal old-age-support must be supplemented by informal support, i.e. the family. None of my informants feel confident that their CPF savings will cover their whole retirement. Even those from the younger age-cohorts, who generally have better chances of saving up money than their parents had, seriously doubt that their future resources will be sufficient. It is increasingly common to set up private saving accounts and buy insurance to supplement the CPF, but Singaporeans are painfully aware that they might be forced to rely on their children in old age.

## The Maintenance of Parents Act

Since 1995, children's responsibility to support aged parents is stipulated by law under the Maintenance of Parents Act. Parents over 60 years of age who lack financial means to support themselves may thereby sue their children if they refuse to provide for them. The Tribunal for Maintenance of Parents was subsequently opened in 1996, with a total of 152 people filing suits before the end of the year. After the initial three years, approximately four in five plaintiffs received orders compelling their children to support them (*Sunday Times* 4 April 1999). Since 1996 the tribunal has received about 100 applications per year. The tribunal sets the amount of contribution based on each child's

<sup>57</sup> Current information is available at the website of the Central Provident Fund Board, <http://www.cpf.gov.sg>.

average income and the needs of the parent. Even so, the tribunal does not judge indiscriminately in favor of elderly parents. If it can be proved that the parents did not take responsibility for their children when young, the tribunal may decide not to compel the children to provide support. Several of my informants, regardless of their overall appreciation of the Maintenance of Parents law, likewise subscribed to the reservation that children who were mistreated by their parents should not be forced to provide support. In that sense the obligations between parent and child are seen as a contractual relationship.

In any event, the implementation of the Maintenance of Parents Act indicates that children may not automatically fulfill their filial obligations towards elderly parents. The timing of the act was certainly not coincidental. By the mid-90s, the problem of an ageing population in Singapore had become increasingly obvious. By making the family the locus of responsibility, the act prevents an ageing population from becoming a future burden on the state. From that perspective, the entire notion of filial piety becomes equivocal. While filial piety is often taken as an absolute subservience to parents in all aspects of life (and even beyond life in the shape of ancestor worship), this does not apply to contemporary Singapore. Filial piety as practiced today is primarily – but not exclusively – manifested through financial and material support. Filial piety does not automatically involve excessive devotion to parents and acknowledgement of seniority. This is probably not even a “modernized” version of filial piety. As early as the 1950s, Maurice Freedman (1957: 58) observed that filial piety among Chinese Singaporeans was more a matter of material or economic obligations than of excessive deference to parents. Even Confucius himself, according to the *Analects*, complained about the watered down state of filial piety among his contemporaries: “The filial piety of the present day merely means to feed one’s parents; but even one’s dogs and horses receive food; without reverence wherein lies the difference?” (Confucius, *The Analects*, book II, chapter VII).

Singapore is by no means unique in its pro-family approach. Legal documents regarding children’s responsibilities to elderly parents exist in other countries, and the role of state policy in reinforcing as well as undermining the practice of filial piety has been observed in other studies (e.g. Sung 1990, 1995; Davies and Harrell 1993; Ikels 2004). For example, Charlotte Ikels’s (2004) edited volume *Filial Piety: Practice and Discourse in Contemporary East Asia* illuminates the role of state policy with examples from Japan, China, Korea and Taiwan. Davies and Harrell (1993) examine how families in China have been affected by policy shifts in the post-Mao period. Despite the attempts to undermine the (supposedly repressive) traditional family structure during the early communist regime in China, children’s support of elderly



parents is currently re-emphasized and enforced by law. It should also be kept in mind that legislated filial piety is not a new phenomenon. China, for instance, has a long history of family law, and the lack of filial piety was considered a heinous crime in the Imperial Codes. Examples of unfilial acts were if children cursed or accused their parents, or if sons failed to support parents or set up separate households while the parents were still alive (Jamieson 1970: 13ff; Young 1998: 143). In addition to negative sanctions, Chinese subjects were educated in Confucian family ethics through recurrent lectures read by local officials or approved laymen (Baker 1979: 119). The existence of the family division contract, which I mentioned in the Introduction, is another example of how intergenerational obligations were formalized and reinforced. From that perspective, the assumption that children cared more for their elders in the past than they do today appears rather deceptive.

## Welfare Agencies and Public Education

One might wonder what happens to deprived people who lack savings or, for one reason or another, are without family support? Here we have to remember that in spite of the Singapore government's pronounced anti-welfare ideology, it does in practice fund a social welfare system. Various types of programs are available for low-income households, such as subsidies for housing and medical costs, and the government also gives grants to voluntary welfare agencies. No doubt, a certain degree of state provision is important from the viewpoint of securing the continuous support of the lower-income electorate. The government has increased its welfare funds over the past decade, something Chua and Tan (1999) link to the 1991 general election, when the People's Action Party lost a substantial number of votes from the lower-income electorate. However, the government does not want this support to be recognized as state welfare since that might develop a dependency mentality among the people. State funded relief is therefore channeled to welfare agencies via community groups instead of being given directly to recipients (*ibid.*: 152f).

Services for the elderly are primarily run by voluntary welfare organizations (VWO), which are partly funded by the government.<sup>58</sup> The voluntary welfare organizations provide daycare activities, domestic help, housing, and health care for the frail elderly when family support is insufficient or absent. The eligibility for public assistance is closely monitored to make sure that the family takes responsibility for the elderly as far as possible. Nursing homes for elderly

who need daily assistance, for instance, are an expensive option unless the patient qualifies for government subsidy. Monthly bed charges for VWO-run nursing homes range from S\$500 to S\$1,800, while commercial nursing homes are even more expensive as there are no subsidies.<sup>59</sup>

During my fieldwork I visited different types of welfare agencies. I was in touch with so-called Family Service Centers, neighborhood-based agencies offering counseling and programs aimed at strengthening family life, as well as an agency exclusively concerned with the situation of the elderly – the Singapore Action Group of Elders (SAGE). SAGE is a voluntary welfare organization, and except for the counseling center, which is co-funded by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, and the National Council of Social Service, all other branches are dependent upon donations and fundraising. SAGE offers counseling and support for elderly parents who wish to negotiate matters such as maintenance with their children. In addition to face-to-face counseling with trained counselors, SAGE has a help-line, managed by volunteers, that caters to the elderly and their caregivers. The staff I interviewed at SAGE stressed that it is a big step for the elderly to actually seek counseling. “It’s culture. It’s this”, said the director, pointing at his face. The fear of losing face is one reason why relatively few elderly seek counseling. They feel embarrassed about the fact that their own children do not fulfill their responsibility for providing material and practical support. Another important reason why so few elderly seek counseling, as pointed out by the staff, is that they are usually dependent on their children for financial support. To give voice to their resentment may, in worst case, provoke a disruption of that support. It would be like biting the hand that feeds one.

The majority of the phone calls to the Singapore Action Group of Elders concern various types of family frictions. Living together under the same roof can be a strain on intergenerational relationships. The staff at SAGE quoted conflicts between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law as a recurrent problem, including disagreement over the bringing up of children, where the elder and younger generation may have different views on what methods to apply. These

58 The government provides financial assistance to voluntary welfare organizations through the National Council of Social Service (NCSS), which coordinates the social service sector in Singapore. Currently the NCSS has 367 member organizations (however, it is not compulsory for welfare organizations to register as members of the NCSS) (current information available at the website of the National Council of Social Services, <http://www.ncss.org.sg>). Welfare organizations also make their own fund-raising and are often set up in collaboration with religious societies (although their services are offered to all regardless of religion).

59 The subsidy is calculated on the basis of the gross income of the patient and his/her immediate family members. For example, if the per capita income of the family is less than S\$300, the elderly will qualify for 75 per cent subsidy. If the per capita income exceeds S\$1,000, the elderly will not qualify for any subsidy (see the website of the Ministry of Health, <http://www.moh.gov.sg/corp/elderlycare/subsidies/intro.do> [accessed 19 Feb 2006]).

kinds of intergenerational frictions, said the director, are ultimately the result of changing values across generations. The maintenance of elderly parents is another issue. SAGE has had cases where the child/children refuse to support their parents, often with the argument that they were badly treated by their parents when young. Many Singaporeans say that children of today are more selfish and less filial than in the past. The director of SAGE, on the other hand, suggested that it is rather a question of economic pressure on families than an erosion of filial piety: "I think that it is not because they are *less* filial. I think it's because of the economic pressures, that they have to take care of their own families as well, if they have one. It's a competitive world out there." He added that future generations will hopefully be less dependent on their children in old age, which, in turn, may lay the foundation for a more equal relationship between parents and children.

In addition to economic pressures, the rapidly ageing population is predicted to cause major strains on intergenerational relations in future. The only way to manage this problem, according to most politicians and social workers, is through public education. When I visited SAGE and other welfare agencies I was astonished by the amount of pamphlets and other public educational material available. Browsing through the shelves, there are brochures on "Understanding the Elderly", "Better Inter-generational Relationships", "Essential Parenting Tips", "Grandparenting Tips", "Relating to In-laws", "Effective Communication with the Elderly", and a lot more (most of the public education material is produced by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports). According to the director of SAGE, public education is absolutely crucial in forging stronger intergenerational ties in the ever-changing society of today: "The young must understand the elderly, right, and also the elderly must understand that the world is changing very fast. What they were used to before may not necessarily be applicable now, when dealing with the young." This is precisely what Margaret Mead argued in *Culture and Commitment* (1970), that the elder generation has to accept that the world they grew up in is not the same world young people grow up in today. Only then can a post-figurative culture arise, where elders learn from the young, rather than the other way around.

## Filial Piety in This Life and Beyond

Filial piety has been around for centuries and centuries back in ancient China. Because back in those days, we were taught that one of the virtues is filial piety. Why is that so? Because when you have filial piety, ultimately when you have your own children, your children will likewise do that to you as well. Because in China, where my grandparents came from, they firmly believe that it's important that you have to look after your parents. Your descendants will look after you, so that this can carry on in generations to come. And the children will not be dispersed. They will not just leave the place and go to another place. Even if they do so, due to work commitment or due to marriage, they will still come back, right, to visit them or even send them some gifts or money as a token of appreciation for having taken care of them for the last twenty, thirty years when they were younger.

This is how Daniel explains why he takes care of his elderly parents: filial piety, a Chinese virtue passed down from ancient times, repeated across the generations. Daniel's rationale here is basically that what goes around comes around. You take care of your parents because, in due time, you will have to rely on your own children. Ideological constructions of Asian family values, i.e. "local culture", certainly conceal the complexity of practices and beliefs in everyday life, but, as I said earlier, the analytical distinction between "local culture" and local culture does not mean that these two dimensions of culture are disconnected from each other. While notions of Asian family values plays an instrumental role in Singapore politics, the same notions also come out strongly in everyday discourse; they bear meaning for the ways in which people interpret familial obligations in their everyday life. The idea of filial piety, whereby children are obliged to reciprocate and respect their parents, is indeed a pertinent feature of how my informants understand and describe intergenerational obligations and expectations. I do not doubt that even Lee Kuan Yew, once the most devout advocate of Asian Values, perceives filial piety in terms of a true (as opposed to invented) moral imperative.

It has to be stressed that filial piety is not a coherent notion; the interpretation of filial piety is influenced by various factors such as religious affiliation, age, and socio-economic status. For instance, whereas the idea of reciprocating with one's parents cuts across generations and social class, the manifestation of filial piety through material support may be a matter of survival for poorer elderly (unlike for wealthy elderly). Another interesting observation is that elderly people, in contrast to younger people, often include obedience to parents as a measure of filial piety. One of the most obvious reinterpretations of filial piety in contemporary Singapore concerns the expectations on sons and daughters. In traditional Chinese society it was the sons who carried the

responsibility for elderly (and deceased) parents, but as daughters now earn their own income, they are increasingly expected to contribute to their natal family.

Religious affiliation has no significance for the flow of intergenerational support in daily life but it does influence the interpretation and application of filial piety. In the realm of Chinese religion, filial piety stretches beyond this life in the form of ancestor worship.<sup>60</sup> The rituals of ancestor worship “help consolidate the collective identity of the family and the clan by symbolically bridging the gap between the human realm of living descendants and the non-human realm of departed ancestors” (*The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas* 2000: 81).<sup>61</sup> Special offerings to ancestors are made on the first and fifteenth day of every lunar month, and also in connection to major annual festivals, such as Chinese New Year (Chun Jie), Festival of the Hungry Ghosts, Mid-Autumn Festival (Zhong Qiu Jie) and Double Ninth Festival (Chong Yang Jie). The most important occasion for the honoring of the dead is Qing Ming (equivalent to All Souls’ Day), which usually falls in early spring. During Qing Ming, Chinese visit the graveyard to offer food and prayers and sweep the tombs of their ancestors. Because ancestors are believed to have the capacity to help as well as punish their descendants, it is vital to perform the proper rituals. If children neglect to pray and make the proper sacrifices to their deceased forebears, their forebears may become miserable wandering ghosts.

Thus, whereas followers of Chinese religion perceive filial piety according to a larger religious cosmology, Christians restrict – at least in theory – the idea of filial piety to life on earth; to be filial is to respect, provide, and care for your parents while they are alive. I described in the previous chapter how increasing numbers of Chinese are converting from Chinese religion to Christianity. The fear that children will fail to perform the proper ancestral rituals sometimes influences old parents to convert to Christianity. Auntie Wee, who works as a cleaning lady, had this rather pragmatic approach to religion. Whereas she and her husband are Buddhists, their two daughters are Christians. In due time, however, Auntie Wee and her husband will join their daughters in the Christian faith. “Buddha, Christ, all are the same to me,” she said in a sober tone,

60 In Chinese society, the responsibility of reproducing the patrilineage and upholding the ancestral worship lies with the sons. However, notwithstanding the emphasis on sons in the ideology and structure of ancestor worship, women are usually the ones who see to the domestic worship and the daily offerings of joss sticks (Freedman 1970a: 174).

61 The significance of ancestor worship for filial piety has been observed in several studies on pre-communist China and overseas Chinese societies (e.g. Kulp 1925; Hsu 1948; Freedman 1957, 1979; Wolf 1968; Baker 1979).

“but my daughters will not pray to me when I’m dead anyway, so I might as well become a Christian before I die.”

However, the idea of a dyadic parent-child relation, where children are expected to provide support to their parents, is not reducible to a particular religion. The expectation of supporting and caring for elderly parents recurs regardless of religious affiliation and age. As Auntie Lim, Andy’s mother, put it: “Children must have the responsibility of taking care of parents because they [were the ones’ who] educated them.” Behind Auntie Lim’s statement lies a strong awareness of indebtedness and of the importance of “paying back” one’s parents, literally and figuratively speaking. Providing financial and material support to aged parents stands out as one of the most crucial manifestations of filial piety, but there are also other aspects, such as taking parents for holidays or outings, bringing them out for dinner, paying attention to their needs, buying presents and treating them with respect. Cohabiting with elderly parents is another important responsibility, although there is a trend towards substituting co-residence and personal care by simply hiring a maid or a nurse to take care of the elderly parent in their own homes. Through Alan and Carole’s church I got to know Peter and Barbara. Peter works as a police officer, while Barbara is studying to become a child-care worker. They live with their two sons and Barbara’s old mother in a public housing flat in the western part of Singapore. To Barbara, the duty of supporting elderly parents is inherent in Chinese culture: “As a Chinese there are things [you are supposed to do], like you [should] have parents living with you. It is expected of you. You know, it’s your duty to take care of your mother and father if they are old.” In the past, this duty usually fell on the sons but nowadays – as in Barbara’s case – it is increasingly common for parents to reside with daughters too (see Chapter 6). Barbara is the youngest of six siblings. Her elderly mother used to live with one of Barbara’s brothers, but the frictions between her and her daughter-in-law escalated to the point where she decided to live with Barbara and Peter instead. Since Peter’s parents live in Malaysia with the rest of his siblings, he does not feel any pressure to also invite them to reside with him and Barbara. According to Barbara, her mother is the “focal point of the family”. Whenever the family has reunion dinners, they all gather at Barbara’s house. “You must visit your parents frequently to be filial because for them it’s a very important thing,” Barbara explained, “and it’s also considered a sin to send one’s parents to an old folks’ home. It’s not acceptable although it’s fading away.”

## “A Chip inside You”

On a sunny afternoon in October 2002, I was invited to join Linda Teo and her family on a visit to Haw Par Villa, a theme park displaying Chinese mythical characters and legends. Haw Par Villa was built in 1937 by Aw Boon Haw, the founder of the famous Tiger Balm business, and is a popular place to visit for both locals and tourists. As we had space for one more person in the car I asked Angela to come along. Angela, whom I got to know through Carole and Alan, is an unmarried woman in her late thirties. She is formally classified as “Chinese Singaporean”, but culturally she is of a Straits Chinese background (also called *Baba* or *Peranakan*). Angela is the second youngest of six siblings. Her childhood was tarnished by the constant quarrels between her parents, and her father’s inclination to exercise “disciplinary actions” towards his wife and children. Despite Angela usually speaking her mind, it took quite some time before she revealed to me that her parents had actually divorced a few years ago. Shortly after the divorce, Angela broke off contact with her father and stopped giving him pocket-money. Her father has threatened to take her to the Maintenance of Parents tribunal, but she has refused to provide him with any financial support.<sup>62</sup> She is not overtly worried that he will actually realize his threat. In any case, she said, her father had treated her so badly that the tribunal would probably not judge her guilty. In Angela’s view, her father does not genuinely care for his children: “He didn’t care for the kids, he only cared for what his kids could give him, how they could benefit him.”

Angela’s sore relationship with her father goes back to her childhood, when she felt that her father gave her second brother and younger sister preferential treatment. It was with bitterness Angela told me how her father denied her the opportunity to pursue tertiary studies, while her second brother was sent to study in England. Why did her father favor the second brother and the youngest sister? According to Angela, it all began with a fortune-teller’s prediction: “My father used to visit a fortune-teller to seek advice as to which of his children are filial. It turned out that the fortune-teller predicted that my second brother and my younger sister are the ones who would turn filial and obedient children.” Despite her anger with her father, whom she referred to as “the old man”, she is concerned that no one should find out about her parents divorce or about the fact that she does not give him any support. When I asked her why she was bothered about what other people might think she just said, “I don’t want people to look down on me.”

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62 Angela’s father gets financial support from his other children, although they were also subjected to his abuse.

After our visit to Haw-Par Villa, we stopped by a hawkers' center for some dessert. While munching on *ice-kachang* – crushed ice sprinkled with sweet syrup and jelly – we chatted about cultural differences between Sweden and Singapore. When we got into the upbringing of children and family arrangements, Angela suddenly burst out: "What is really terrible is this law [i.e. the Parental Maintenance Act] we have in Singapore, where children have to be responsible for their parents. Parents can even sue their children for not maintaining them. That is really crazy!" Angela's attack on filial piety caused a tense silence around the table. At first sight, Angela looks rather timid; short and slim in stature, with a petite face and long black hair. But she is capable of expressing a real ferocity. The others seemed very uncomfortable with Angela's outspokenness. They were almost speechless. Auntie Teo's personal view on children's responsibilities was clearly indicated in the Introduction, where I described her strong reaction to the fact that Swedish children do not give their parents any financial support. I was well aware that Angela's negative attitude is tied up with her personal experience of growing up in a dysfunctional family. Nevertheless I was surprised to hear Angela so bluntly rejecting the moral rationale of taking care of aged parents in front of Auntie Teo and her daughters. It is certainly true that a lot of people complain that traditional family values are eroding and that children are less filial nowadays, but to publicly declare that parental support is "really crazy", like Angela did, is taboo.

In the above situation, filial piety is not an ideological construct estranged from everyday life. On the contrary, it shows how filial piety is crucial for how people perceive and practice intergenerational expectations and obligations, and therefore represents what I would call a lived tradition. There is no doubt that traditions are selectively deployed or even invented (cf. Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), but a serious problem with the invention-of-tradition argument lies in the distinction between genuine and invented traditions, and the assumption that the latter is typical of industrial or rapidly changing societies. Cultural change should not be equated with cultural invention (Sahlins 1999). Traditions of *all* societies are in a process of constant redefinition. By the same token, notions of traditions can be instrumental at all levels, in politics as well as everyday life. It is not only the state that highlights the notion of filial piety for strategic purposes, so do people in their everyday life. The idea of children's indebtedness to parents is employed by parents to assert their authority, which was the case with Angela's father. Either way, the reason why such a strategy can be effective at all is that this idea of indebtedness is, even when instrumentally employed, to some degree perceived as real by the subjects themselves. Angela, who herself objected to supporting her father, de-



scribed this expectation as “a chip inside you” that you have to do your duty to repay your parents, since they brought you up.

The fulfillment of the intergenerational contract, I suggest, is not primarily triggered by the law, i.e. the Maintenance of Parents Act, but bound up with a social pressure, which, in turn, is grounded in a specific cultural notion of the parent-child relation. Angela is a good example of this phenomenon. She did not fear the tribunal as much as what other people would think of her if they knew that she refused to give her father financial aid. Thus, the ideological reification of filial piety also takes place on the level of identity formation in the sense that people feel that they are expected to live up to the ideal image of Chinese family life. To support aged parents is conceived of as the correct thing to do. Like Darren, a good friend of mine, said, “no matter what you may think of the government and their politics, you would never criticize the *value* of the family and filial piety.”

## Family versus State

It is ironic that the Singapore government is avowedly anti-welfare, yet highly interventionist. How do people feel about the close monitoring of the intimate sphere of the family? And in particular, how do they feel about the Maintenance of Parents Act, whereby they are even legally responsible for aged parents? Not surprisingly, Singaporeans are highly ambivalent towards the Maintenance of Parents Act and the way the state intervenes in private family matters. At the same time as people express sadness and embarrassment over the fact that “filial piety” has to be stipulated by law, they often acknowledge that the law may be necessary because children are less reliable today. Hui Min, an unmarried woman in her mid-twenties, described her own ambivalence in this regard:

Initially I felt it was a bit ridiculous that we needed it [the law], because I felt it should be an intrusion into a very personal domain. I mean, that was the first reaction, but of course at the same time I realized there were actually a lot of old people suffering because their children were doing silly things to them, using up their CPF money and all that. Like convince [their elderly parents] to contribute with their CPF money to buy a new house and then in the end they might not let the old person stay with them. Or they treat their parents like a maid, you know. I used to know this girl whose grandmother was treated like a maid, she would just scold her, really derogate her like a maid, and the poor old lady had to wash the car under the hot sun. So I mean, after I thought

about it I thought, 'yeah, maybe there is a necessity for this law', but nevertheless it's rather sad that the government has to take this step.

Hui Min is not the only one who perceives the implementation of the Maintenance of Parents Act as the outcome of a weakened sense of responsibility for the elderly. Bee Choo, who is also the deputy director of a family service center, has a very pragmatic attitude towards the Maintenance of Parents Act. She reasons that in a society where values are intrinsic, you would not need such a law, but Singaporeans are so used to the government's "carrot and stick approach" that they have learnt to behave only when there is an incentive or a punishment. Bee Choo is not particularly sentimental over this fact. "Maybe it's not an ideal world, it's not a perfect world," she said, "but Singapore needs the Maintenance of Parents Act because there are people who just wouldn't take care of the older people." Despite her sober outlook, Bee Choo still hopes that the majority of Singaporeans will take responsibility for their elderly parents without being brought to court: "Let's hope it's a last resort, *lah*, for people who can't use any other approach expect this one."

Some people are more negative than others towards the Maintenance of Parents Act. Elder Uncle Wong, a retiree in his 60s, stated in an interview that filial piety should be natural, not enforced by law:

*Ah, the parents maintenance law? This is a force. By law you force a person to do something, there's no love in it. There's no gratitude. What we impress upon the children is their gratitude. You love your parents, so out of gratitude to your parents you pay. There's a value of love in it. But in the law, you do the action with no love, whether there is love or not. If love, you don't have the law, you did not have to have law to come in. When there's no love, [when] the person has no love, you force the person by the law. It's the government's enforcement. They force the person to love. After payment, one, two month, they stop, so you enforce the law again. You have somebody go and chase him and get the money. So it's different.*

Other people see the Maintenance of Parents Act as yet another intrusion by the state into the lives of citizens. Andrew, a colleague and friend of John, in his mid-thirties, is strongly against the law on the grounds that each individual should be free to decide whether they want to take care of their parents or not. In Andrew's opinion it is not self-evident that children should be responsible for elderly parents, and with the increasing costs of living and an ageing population even more children will have difficulties in meeting expectations. Andrew's objections against the enforcement of intergenerational responsibilities, however, did not reflect his relationship to his own mother, to whom he gives regular support. His mother, who is a housewife and has no savings of her own, is wholly dependent on her children, and for that reason Andrew

considers that it is his duty to support her: "Let's say if I would not save her, what can she do?" he said. But for his own part, Andrew emphasized the importance of carefully planning one's retirement. Although it seldom turns out to be the actual case, the majority of Singaporeans I spoke to would prefer to be self-reliant in old age. There is a strong reluctance to being dependent on one's children. Andrew, for instance, said that he would prefer death to being a burden on his children. When I later examine the complexity of this dependency relation, we shall see that at the same time as there is resistance against being dependent on one's children, intergenerational transactions, including monetary/material support, actually play a crucial role in the reaffirmation of intergenerational roles and relationships.

We should bear in mind that the expectation to support elderly parents is not exclusive to the Chinese community. Ting Ting, a friend of Hui Min, is married to Alif, who is Malay. On one occasion when I interviewed all three of them (Hui Min, Ting Ting and Alif), it was he who most forcefully stressed the duty of taking care of one's parents. With regard to the Maintenance of Parents Act he said: "It's a good law! Very good. Because your parents were the ones taking care of you, so why should you not take care of them? Then when they are old you take care of them, something like a reward. If you don't take care, then it's a sin." Taking care of elderly parents is supposed to be natural, Alif explained, but since some children are simply *boh chup* (nonchalant) the law has to step in.

Both Alif and Ting Ting are Muslims. Ting Ting grew up in a typical Chinese family but converted to Islam when she got married to Alif. Although cross-ethnic marriages do occur, it is still uncommon for Chinese to marry outside their own group. Ting Ting's parents, and in particular her mother, were very upset with her decision to marry Alif, not only because he is a non-Chinese, but also because Ting Ting had to convert to Islam in order to marry him. Ting Ting, however, is very genuine about her conversion. She goes to the mosque, reads the Quran, eats Halal food, and wears the traditional *tudung* (headscarf worn by Malay Muslim women). She only takes off the *tudung* when she visits her mother, who never has accepted Ting Ting's decision to marry a Malay man. Ting Ting says that unlike her own parents, who would have preferred that she married a Chinese, her parents-in-law do not care what "race" she is, as long as she is a Muslim. Despite Alif and Ting Ting being husband and wife they still have their preconceived opinions about Chinese and Malay culture. A common opinion among Singaporeans is that Malays have a very strong communal ethos and are less individualistic than the Chinese. Ting Ting, who has experiences from living in both a Chinese and a Malay family, thinks that Malays are "warmer" than the Chinese. Malays take

every opportunity to get together, whether it is for a wedding party or a casual picnic by the beach. Ting Ting's Chinese relatives, by contrast, usually gather only when there is a festive occasion, such as the Chinese New Year. Another difference between Malays and Chinese, Ting Ting said, is the physical contact between friends and relatives. Whereas Malays greet each other with hugs and kisses, hugging in public is alien to most Chinese. Even within the family hugging is a rare thing, with the exception of very young children.

My informants often pointed out that Chinese are obsessed with the accumulation of wealth, while Malays lead a simple life and value human relations. Alif, himself being Malay, subscribed to this stereotype in claiming that Malays, unlike Chinese, would never send their parents to an old folks' home. Ting Ting immediately objected, emphasizing that Chinese people also consider it anti-familial to send parents to old folks' homes (this was also stated by my other Chinese informants). I do not have sufficient ethnographic data to make any adequate comparisons between Malay and Chinese practices regarding old-age support, but if indeed it is less common among Malay families to send elderly parents to nursing homes, it is not necessarily a matter of filial piety. The nursing home is a relatively expensive option, which not all families can afford. Considering that the average Malay family is less well off than the average Chinese family, the decision to take care of the elderly at home may be an economic issue. Moreover, Malay families are in general larger, which means more human resources to take care of the aged or the sick. Alif and Ting Ting live with Alif's parents, who have seven children, including Alif. Since Alif's siblings have all married and moved out, he and Ting Ting assume the responsibility of living with his parents as they age. Ting Ting also has responsibilities to her own parents. She visits them once a week, usually during weekends, and gives them a monthly allowance. Both Ting Ting and Alif think that children should give money to their parents once they earn an income, because "giving money is a way of showing that you care". However, while children are expected to take care of elderly dependants in both Chinese and Malay families, there are differences in how those obligations are conceptualized and realized (cf. Djamour 1965; Li 1989).

## To Give and To Return

An important argument of this study is that whereas the political economy may set the stage for strategies in everyday life, these strategies take on specific

meanings in specific contexts. The limits of public welfare in Singapore may force elderly people to rely on their children, but it does not *determine* the form or the amount of intergenerational transactions. In Singapore (i.e. within a single social system), there are cultural differences with regard to intergenerational expectations and obligations. Several studies have noted that the expectation of financial support from children is more articulate among Chinese compared to Malays or Indians (Chen et al. 1982; Li 1989; Mehta 1999).<sup>63</sup> This is an interesting point considering that the Chinese as a category are economically better off than the Malays, and, presumably, in less need of support. Were there any direct correlation between economic needs and expectations on support, the situation should have been the reverse. Whereas Chinese children are expected to reciprocate directly to their parents, ethnographic accounts of Malay kinship show a different notion of the parent-child relation. The Malay parent's role as a provider involves little expectations on future financial return. Instead, the Malay child reciprocates indirectly by providing for the next generation, i.e. to his own children (Djamour 1965: 144; Li 1989: 155). In this respect, the Malay family appears closer to the concept of the so-called Western family. Tania Li remarks in her study of Malay kinship that "the stark terms in which the expectations of direct material return from children is expressed in the Chinese family is in marked contrast to the way in which this relationship is perceived in Malay society" (1989: 155). The vague expectations on material support from children does not mean that intergenerational support is absent in Malay families, but that it operates according to a different cultural order. The difference can be illustrated in terms of Lévi-Strauss's (1969) models of "restricted exchange" and "generalized exchange". The Chinese idea of intergenerational reciprocity is defined as a matter between two parties, namely the parent and child. A Chinese child cannot reciprocate indirectly to his parents. On the contrary, the restricted transactions serve to define and confirm the roles in the dyadic parent-child relation in Chinese families. It is important, of course, to note that although this dyadic parent-child relation appears exclusive it not a closed system, as the resources flow both to elderly parents and to the next generation (i.e. young children).

The Chinese intergenerational contract centers on the awareness of what your parents have given you, in terms of material welfare and emotional concern, and the expected obligation to reciprocate those efforts later in life.<sup>64</sup> I

63 Mehta's (1999) study on intergenerational support in Singapore found that compared to Malay and Indian informants, Chinese informants had clearer financial expectations on their children compared to Malay and Indian informants.

64 As pointed out by Bourdieu (1977), gift exchange is defined by the interval between gift and counter-gift. What separates gift exchange from, for instance, swapping, is the lapse of time separating gift from counter-gift.

have suggested earlier that this notion of indebtedness and repayment permeates Chinese social relationships in general, in a way that bears much resemblance to Mauss' (2000) theory of the gift and the implicit expectation to reciprocate. The dyadic parent-child relation, and the presence of clearly defined obligations, is a prominent feature in studies of Chinese society, past as well as present (e.g. Freedman 1957, 1970; Wolf 1968; Cohen 1976, 2005; Baker 1979; Miller 2004).<sup>65</sup> The so-called family division contracts found in China, of course, is one of the most obvious examples of how intergenerational obligations were explicitly established even in historical times (Cohen 1976, 2005). Also in contemporary Singapore, the contractual understanding of the parent-child relation is visible in the way people interpret intergenerational obligations.

The idea of children being indebted to their parents appears throughout my ethnographic record, in verbal accounts as well as in action. As soon as the adult child gets his or her first paycheck, he/she is expected to give his/her parents pocket-money. These monetary contributions are not a pure retirement support, as they do not coincide with the retirement of the parents. In fact, the contributions usually begin while the parents are still in working. Nor are the contributions exclusively meant to cover for common household expenses since the practice applies to all working children, regardless of whether they reside with their parents or not. (The amount of the contribution, however, is usually higher if the child resides with parents.) Ting Ting, whom I quoted earlier, said precisely this, that it is every child's responsibility to give their parents allowances, whether the parents need the money or not:

You can say that you have to give them [the parents], *lah*. It's kind of a responsibility there. I mean, I think in Singapore most people, after they start working will give their parents an allowance. Whether they live with their parents or not is a different issue. It's a responsibility there, *lah*, in the sense that you should give to them. And whether or not they actually need the money, that's also a different issue altogether.

The sense of indebtedness, as in how much one owes, can be quite specific. Andy is a good example here. Andy has a fairly good idea of the amount of money his parents spent on his university studies, which he estimated to approximately S\$15,000. When he began to work, he gave his parents a lump

65 In Chinese, the ancient notion of *renqing* ("human feelings") embraces the proper behavior and bond of reciprocity existing between family members, kin, and friends. *Renqing* refers to obligations arising from natural feelings of attachment (unlike the notion of *guanxi*, which is associated with a high degree of instrumentality) (Yang 1995: 67f). *Renqing* is not in the typical vocabulary of young English-speaking Singaporeans, although most of them have an idea of its meaning. However, even if they do not use the word *renqing*, I would say that their understanding and practice of intergenerational obligations operate according to a similar logic.

sum of S\$10,000 from his savings account, meant as an initial repayment. He explained this act to me with the words, “It’s always nice to clear one’s debts, don’t you think?” In addition, Andy gives S\$1,000 every month to his mother, for common household expenses and money to spend (he earns about S\$3,000 a month). Children usually give the money to their mother, since she is responsible for the daily marketing. Alternatively, they give separate allowances to their mother and father, but the mother will always receive the largest portion. On the whole, Andy’s parents are well off; in terms of economic standards and life-style they would fall into the category of upper middle-class. Andy’s mother, Auntie Lim, had just retired from her job in the civil service. His father, Uncle Lim, used to work for a computer company, but nowadays runs his own “bar-code” firm. Andy’s parents do not need his money just now, although the situation may well change as they are ageing. It would have been easy to assume that the amount of money that is transferred depends on the receivers’ (i.e. the parents’) economic needs, but this is not the case. This study, as well as other studies (e.g. Li 1989), indicates that there is no absolute correlation between the economic need of the parents and the amount of the allowance.<sup>66</sup> There is an expected obligation to repay a debt; whether the receiver needs the repayment or not.

Similar to Andy, Hui Min points out that her parents do not need her contributions, at least not for the time being. Her mother works as a teacher, while her father is retired. Through hard work and modest living, they have accumulated enough capital to buy a landed property, where they plan to spend their old age. In fact, the money that Hui Min gives to her parents goes straight into a saving account her parents have opened in her name. Every month, Hui Min transfers in total S\$600 to her parents. So far, her mother has put all allowances into that account. I asked why she keeps giving her parents money if they do not need them anyway. Her simple reply is that, whether it is money or gifts, it “sends a message”:

I think it’s a gesture because I know they are happy, they are pleased when I do things like this. It may not be money. For example, if I pass the shop that I know sell excellent cakes and buy a box home, my parents are happy. They will scold me for spending the money but I know they are happy. They enjoy it. Or if I buy chocolates for my dad, I get scolded, but he finishes it within a week so I know he’s pleased. So I feel good about it, and in a sense again, I think it’s also important to maintain the balance in the family because at this stage they don’t need anything from me, quite clearly, and there’s not much I can do to make things better for them because they are like way ahead of me. But although [my contribution] is very small it sends a message across.

<sup>66</sup> Based on ethnographic data on Chinese Singaporeans, Tania Li (1989: 156) notes that monetary transfers from children to parents occurred also in wealthy families.

Hui Min's parents may not need her money, at least not at this point of time, but her contributions remain an important marker; a token of appreciation for the efforts made by her parents in bringing her up. Of course, the fact that Hui Min's parents allegedly save the money on her behalf is a way of asserting parental authority. By signaling that they do not *need* the money, the parents indicate that they are not dependent on their children. In addition, of course, there is always the possibility that their parents may withdraw the money in the event of dispute. The moment the economic dependency becomes inverted, parents lose a major base of authority, as they have to rely on their children for material and practical survival.

Some parents state exactly how much their working children should give to them, while others do not state any explicit demands concerning the amount or frequency of contributions. The absence of verbally expressed expectations, however, is not synonymous with the absence of expectations as such. In fact, expectations of intergenerational support can be extremely subtle (see chapter 6). An interesting point, to which I shall return, is that although my informants themselves feel obligated to support their elderly parents, they claim to not really *expect* their own children to provide support. My suggestion is that this ambiguity reflects the weakening position of the elderly as well as the increasing costs of living in a modern consumer society. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that they would get extremely disappointed if it turns out that their own children indeed will not give them anything. This, I argue, is because the meaning of the transactions is not primarily a question of material survival; the transactions manifest and regenerate the bond of reciprocity that ties parents and children to one another.

I shall take an example from an interview with the Wong brothers. The elder brother, "Elder Uncle Wong", is a retiree, the younger brother, "Younger Uncle Wong", is still working. When I asked Younger Uncle Wong about the expectations he has with respect to his adult children, he said that he and his wife do not really expect his children to provide for their living expenses. They will try as far as possible to maintain themselves but if things do not work out, then, of course, they hope their children take care of them. "But why don't you expect your children to take care of you anymore?" I asked. Younger Uncle Wong explained that because the society is changing so fast, these sorts of expectations are no longer strong, and that probably not even Lee Kuan Yew would expect Lee Hsien Loong (Lee Kuan Yew's eldest son) to take care of him when he is old. I pointed out to Younger Uncle Wong that it is perhaps because Lee Kuan Yew, in contrast to the majority of Singapore's elderly, is very rich. And although Singaporeans nowadays have CPF savings, the latter are seldom sufficient for retirement. One could have assumed that Younger Uncle



Wong is not getting any allowances from his own children, but he actually does. Both his son and daughter are “paying back” according to their capabilities. Elder Uncle Wong, who has three adult children, was more explicit than his brother when describing his children’s responsibilities:

Even when my children were young I inculcated upon them that this is the *value* that we preserve [i.e. that children should take care of their parents]. This is the value that we look at high. Therefore, my children, I told them that it is their *duty* to look after [their parents]. So even when we are still able [to maintain ourselves], how much they contribute back to us is immaterial. It is the *value* we must hold. Even if they give us ten dollars per month, it’s still acceptable, because it’s the *value*. That there is such a value that they treasure, that they *think* it is their duty to do so. That is how I look at it for all my three children

Elder Uncle Wong emphasizes that it is a *duty* to take care of your parents. But at the same time, the duty should arise from a natural wish to reciprocate to your parents; a wish to repay. It should not arise from an external force, such as the Maintenance of Parents Act. (Recall how Elder Uncle Wong dismissed the Maintenance of Parents Act because it is an external force, “By law you force a person to do something, there’s no love in it”.) In my ethnographic record, it is evident that intergenerational transactions are about both duty/obligation and “natural” feelings; they are two sides of the same coin. To support elderly parents is not an act of pure altruism. It is an act of repayment. This is quite unlike my personal idea of obligation and natural feelings. In my interpretation, obligation and natural feelings are polar opposites, even mutually exclusive, which I suppose, makes me a stereotype of what Jonathan Parry (1986) calls the ideology of the “pure gift”, that is, the notion of gifts as free and without obligations. Parry (*ibid.*) suggests that the ideology of the pure gift, which is built on the dichotomization between gifts and commodities, is likely to emerge in capitalist societies, where the material significance of gift exchange is replaced by commercial exchange. Under such circumstances, “gifts can assume a much more voluntaristic character” (*ibid.*: 467). In Singapore, however, the ideology of the pure gift seems surprisingly unpronounced. People are very conscious of the binding effects of gift-giving. They understand that gifts cement a social relationship, and they also know that neglecting to give, as well as neglecting to accept, is equivalent to rejection of interpersonal relationship

Admittedly, it took quite some time for me to understand that my informants do not see obligation and natural feelings (or affection) as mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, the entwinement of obligation and affection entails a potential ambiguity regarding the “actual” motive behind a gift or a favor, even when it takes place between family members. John, a good friend of Ca-

role, described parental support as a “gray area”, where you are never certain of whether the support arises from pure obligation or genuine care:

You can say that sometimes it’s a confusion, because the thing is so subtle, so difficult to differentiate, whether is it out of love or is it out of filial [piety]. Probably you can say it’s a confusion. It’s a very gray area. For you, you may think this is love, but to me I may think this is what you’re supposed to do.

John once said that children are more selfish today than in the past, and sometimes they give money to their parents only because of the social pressure, not out of genuine gratitude. That children of today are more selfish is a common perception in Singapore, whether this is the actual case or not. I would say that the perception that children – or rather, people in general – have become more selfish is an implicit critique against modernity. I described Chapter 4 the nostalgia for the past, for the *kampung* days. John, by now in his early thirties, was actually born in a *kampung*. He lived there until the age of eight, when the village was torn down to make way for urban housing projects. John’s father, who worked as a bus conductor, died at a very young age. His death was a hard blow to the family. John’s mother was a housewife with no income, who had to find a solution for herself and her five children. Luckily, though, the family was taken under the wing of John’s paternal grandfather, who ran a small poultry farm in the same village. When the authorities decided to appropriate the village area for urban development, John’s family was relocated to a modern housing estate. As the years went by, the children grew up, began to work, got married and established their own households. The only exception is John’s sister, who is unmarried and has remained in the parental home. Notwithstanding the hardships following the death of his father, John is very nostalgic about his childhood. Those were the days when people genuinely cared for each other, before modern consumerism had poisoned society. Certainly, there is a great deal of ambivalence attached to experience of modernity; while people may be critical to a corrupt consumer society, they define their aspirations and dreams within the framework of that very same society. You may miss the *gemeinschaft* of the past, yet you would not want to miss your air-conditioned flat with running water. What is even more interesting is that capitalist symbols, such as money and consumer goods, actually play a crucial role in reaffirming social relationships.



*An old hawker center in Toa Payoh. When I made a return visit to Singapore in 2004 it was all gone, replaced by a multistory food center.*

## The Intimate Economy of Filial Piety

The fulfillment of filial piety is certainly not limited to financial and material contributions, but I argue that monetary transfers do play a key role in the re-affirmation of the Chinese intergenerational contract. From the discussion above it is clear that monetary transactions between generations not only work as a binding agent in terms of economic-practical support, but also as an important marker of reciprocity and affection. In that sense, the modern capitalist economy has both a fragmenting and an integrating impact on intergenerational relations. On one hand, rapid socio-economic change has brought about a generational divide and an inversion of traditional age-hierarchies. The individual thrift and consumerism associated with capitalist modernity also represent a potential threat to collective solidarity and intergener-

ational responsibilities. On the other hand, the resource flows, which manifest and regenerate the intergenerational contract, are interpreted in relation to the very same capitalist economy that threatens to erode intergenerational relations.

The ways in which Chinese intergenerational transactions intersect with the capitalist economy should also be seen in relation to the specific position of money in Chinese social life. While not seeking to reify the stereotype of the economic-minded Chinese, it is important to note the historical and social context of Chinese overseas and their relation to local society. In her study of exchange in a Malay fishing community, Janet Carsten (1991) points out that the Chinese obsession with money stands in contrast to the seeming lack of interest in money among the Malays. This notion dates back to the colonial society and the different roles of the Malay and the Chinese. The Chinese newcomers arrived with the intention of making a better living. The fact that the Chinese had no given place in the local political framework meant that they had to establish their own social system. Being at the margins of local Malay society, “they built up a social system in which leadership went to rich men and status depended directly on economic power” (Freedman 1960: 163). The relative economic success of the Chinese can be partly explained in terms of an immigrant ethos, but the Chinese were not only energetic and hardworking, they also seemed to have had a sophisticated understanding of the use of money. Maurice Freedman (1959) has suggested that the financial skills of overseas Chinese rested on three characteristics of their society of origin, namely, “the respectability of the pursuit of riches, the relative immunity of surplus wealth from confiscation by political superiors, and the legitimacy of careful and interested financial dealings between neighbours and even close kinsmen” (ibid.: 65). Not only businessmen, but also the poorest among peasants seemed to invest their money rather than putting the “savings in a stocking under the bed” (ibid.: 64).

The cultural meanings of money, however, extend beyond the accumulation of wealth; among my Chinese informants, money, and even symbols of money, are used as an important marker of reciprocity. Parry and Bloch stress in the introduction to *Money and the Morality of Exchange* (1991: 1) “that in order to understand the way in which money is viewed it is vitally important to understand the cultural matrix into which it is incorporated”. In doing so, Parry and Bloch question the universality of the so-called Western discourse about money, in which “money is associated with, and promotes, the growth of individualism and the destruction of solidary communities” (ibid.: 4). While the Western discourse about money draws a clear line between cash and gift (Douglas and Isherwood 1978: 58), this line is remarkably absent in Chi-

nese social life. Money has an important symbolic significance. Not only is money transferred within the immediate family, it is also transferred as gifts at weddings, Chinese New Year, birthdays, funerals, and other occasions. On happy occasions, money is typically given in red packets, as red symbolizes happiness, while on funeral wakes, visitors pay their last respects by giving money to the family of the deceased, either unwrapped or in a white envelope (but never in a red envelope). Money also plays a major role in Chinese religious life, as the offerings to gods and ancestors include the burning of fake money. Money, thus, works as a manifestation of intergenerational obligations even beyond death. The monetary transactions among Chinese Singaporeans do not destroy social relationships. On the contrary, they serve to *reaffirm* social relationships. Inversely, the failure to fulfill the expectations related to such transactions damages the social relationship between the two parties.

At Chinese wedding banquets, for instance, guests are expected to give red packets to the bride and the bridegroom. The banquets are usually held at a restaurant or a hotel, big enough for hundred or even two hundred guests. The guests are relatives and friends of both the bridal couple and the latter's parents. I was told that if necessary, one would not hesitate to invite distant friends just to cover for the expenses of the banquet. When attending a wedding dinner, you first have to estimate the costs of the event; if it is a posh restaurant, you should also put more money inside the red packet. On an average, you never give less than S\$50 per person. People usually write their names inside the envelope, so there is no way you can be cheap with your honor intact. In fact, bridal couples usually profit on the dinner, especially since many guests give slightly more than they need to. Some couples even take note of how much they receive from each guest, in order to know how much they should give in return for future occasions. The same goes for gifts at other occasions. For example, Hui Min's mother notes what kind of gifts Hui Min gets from her uncles and aunts, so that, when the times come, she will give something equivalent to their children. Not many people would ask the giver directly how much they paid for a gift, but on one occasion I was even asked by someone to quote how much I had paid for the pineapple tarts I gave him, but I refused to tell him. A couple of months later, when I was about to leave Singapore, he gave me a box of chocolates as a farewell present. He had obviously not stopped thinking about how much I had paid for the pineapple tarts, because as he handed over his present, he asked me one last time, "Hey, Kris, how much did you actually pay for those pineapple cookies? Expensive or not, *huh?*"

The amount of money is not less important with regard to transactions between family members. Although some people claim that the amount of mon-

ey is immaterial, like Elder Uncle Wong did, that statement does not correspond to actual practice. It is not simply a question of giving or not giving. It is, indeed, a question of *how much* to give. The intention behind the gift, and the message it conveys, is estimated against the sum given, whereby the monetary value gets translated into emotional value. John, for instance, pointed out this intimate meaning of money:

If you want to give [money to your parents], you have to be slightly more generous. It's like there's a measure, there's a measure of how much you give that reflect whether I was a filial [son]. [If] you [are] making that out of appreciation and just give fifty dollars every month. Fifty dollars? What is fifty dollars in present conditions? You might as well not give anything, because that fifty dollars will not make a difference. If you want to give properly you can say why don't you give two hundred? There's a bigger value there, at least you can see the value of two hundred dollars.

There is even an informal “market-rate” for the appropriate amount of money to give to parents, although this is not always translated into actual practice. According to this informal market-rate, ten dollars certainly is not a sufficient sum. (The notion of a market-rate, though, I never heard from elderly parents, i.e. the receivers of the money.) The appropriate sum to give depends on your total salary and on whether you reside with your parents or reside independently. Jennifer, a colleague to Bee Choo, is unmarried and lives with her parents. Jennifer estimated that based on a gross income of S\$2,000 a month, S\$400 is an acceptable sum to give if you live with you parents. If you do not live with your parents, 200 dollars a month would be an acceptable sum. Hui Min also talked about this market-rate. “You can't just give a few dollars if you earn 5,000 dollars,” she emphasized. “It sends the wrong message to them, like ‘you give me 50 dollars out of 5,000? That is what!?’ So you have to find out what's a respectable amount to give.” The fact that there is an informal market-rate is in itself a clear indication of the significance of monetary transactions. Friends and colleagues do discuss and compare how much they contribute to their parents. Likewise, parents compare – not to say compete – with each other on how much money, presents, and treats they receive from their own children. If your child gives you money, or takes you for a holiday, or buys presents, it is not only a proof that you have a filial child; it is also an acknowledgement of yourself as a parent. As much as a child's contributions reflect their gratitude to their parents, the absence of such contributions reflects a dysfunctional relation.

## Summary

This chapter has examined the ways in which intergenerational relations are maintained and reaffirmed. A key concept in discussing the forces that bind the generations together is the idea of an intergenerational contract. It operates at many different levels. On one hand, the contractual relationship between parent and child is reinforced by the state, as part and parcel of its anti-welfare policy. As such, the case of Singapore demonstrates that economic development does not necessarily involve a relocation of welfare from the family to the public sector. While the lack of sufficient public welfare bind family members together in an economic-practical sense, intergenerational support and transactions are performed as meaningful acts. The agency behind intergenerational support can only be grasped insofar as we uncover the intentionality and representations surrounding this phenomenon; that is, understand the intergenerational contract from the inside. The ethnography reveals a cultural notion of intergenerational obligations that is deeply entwined with sentiments of indebtedness and repayment, which makes the notion of a contract doubly adequate. In this context, transactions of money, goods, and services have a regenerating effect on the intergenerational contract that goes beyond pure material survival.

## CHAPTER 6

# Renegotiating the Intergenerational Contract

The previous chapter discussed the ways in which the Chinese intergenerational contract is regenerated in contemporary Singapore. However, the terms and realizations of the intergenerational contract are far from uncontested. I have already touched upon the different challenges facing intergenerational relations in Singapore, such as massive upward social mobility, widening generation gaps, and an emerging ageism. Additional threats to the intergenerational contract are the erosion of extended family units and a dramatic decline in fertility. These problems are not unique to Singapore. Studies of other Asian societies likewise reveal how the intergenerational contract is being challenged and renegotiated in the context of modernization (Ikels 1993; Croll 2000; Traphagan 2000; Chow 2001). One of the most evident problems is the pressure of fulfilling responsibilities to both elder and younger dependants, which to a substantial degree is due to the increasing costs of raising children in combination with the ageing population. In this competition, it is the elderly, rather than the young, who are projected to suffer. The pressure to balance intergenerational obligations to elderly parents and young children is quite conspicuous in Singapore. Young parents invest a tremendous amount of time and energy in the upbringing of their children. At the same time, they are expected to take care of elderly family members. Thus, instead of a complete reversal of intra-family resource flows in favor of children, as projected by John Caldwell (1976), there is an intensive resource flow in both directions. During fieldwork, I collected several accounts of how young parents cope with, and negotiate, their responsibilities to elder and younger dependents. I shall let these ethnographic accounts illustrate the kinds of problems



people face in everyday life, and the strategies they deploy in trying to manage intergenerational obligations.

## The Shrinking Family

Singapore has one of the fastest-ageing populations worldwide, due to higher life expectancy and a dwindling birth rate. In 2003, the total fertility rate hit an all-time low of 1.25, far below the replacement rate of 2.1.<sup>67</sup> The consequences of an ageing population on intergenerational relations have attracted much attention among social scientists in recent years (e.g. Philips 1992; Thang 2001; Traphagan and Knight 2003). The fact that there will be fewer children to take care of more elderly parents is also a major concern for the Singapore government. The government has made several attempts to boost the birthrate, such as the formation of a committee to promote marriage and childbirth, the introduction of an annual Romancing Singapore Campaign, government-sponsored matchmaking agencies, and a baby bonus program that gives cash rewards to couples when having second and third children. So far, however, these incentives have not had the anticipated effect, which indicates that economic factors are not the sole explanation for falling birth rates.

A quick look at the typical family tree gives a good idea of just how dramatic the demographic transition could be. Carole's father, Uncle Lee, grew up in a family with eight siblings. Her mother, Auntie Lee, grew up in an even larger family with a total of eleven siblings.<sup>68</sup> Not only was the birth rate high in those days, so was the mortality rate. Carole's parents are both in good health, but several of my other informants grew up with only one parent due to premature death, which, in turn, was the result of poor living conditions. This was the case for Bee Choo, whose father died from heart failure at a young age. Bee Choo's husband's parents also passed away at a young age. John, Carole's friend, lost his father when he was only a baby, as did Christina, a female informant in her late thirties.

While Auntie and Uncle Lee are from large families, they themselves have only three children, i.e. Carole and her two elder brothers. At the time when Carole was born, in the early 1970s, the increasing participation of women in the labor force in combination with governmental measures to stem the birth

<sup>67</sup> The total fertility rate is estimated per female aged 15–44 (Department of Statistics, <http://www.singstat.gov.sg> [accessed 24 August 2004]).

<sup>68</sup> Two of Auntie Lee's siblings were given away at a young age, which was a fairly common practice due to poverty.

rate had begun to yield results (see also Salaff 1988). Today, the “small-family-ideal” is even more pronounced. Carole delivered her second child, a son, during my final stage of fieldwork, and as far as she and Alan are concerned, two is the right number of children to have. Carole’s eldest brother Edwin and his wife Wendy have two sons (twins) and likewise do not wish to have more children. Apart from the whole project of raising more children, Wendy had bad experiences from her previous pregnancy, when she had to be hospitalized for several weeks prior to the delivery due to complications. Not only was it mentally exhausting, the hospital fees quickly multiplied and caused a financial strain on the family. Middle-class parents spend substantial amounts of resources and energy on the upbringing of their children, which is one of the main reasons for limiting the number of children. Another important reason, which was also noted in Janet Salaff’s (1988) study of the impact of Singapore’s industrialization on family life, is that having more children prevents wives from working and consequently makes it problematic to maintain the desired material living standard and pursue the “five C’s”, i.e. cash, credit card, car, condominium, and country club membership.

### “The Best of the Best”

When my informants claim to be unable to afford more than two children, it is not so much an issue of providing basic needs, as it is an issue of providing the ultimate platform for the child to have a successful life in terms of education and future career. Carole asserted this by saying that, “Chinese want to have the best of the best for their children, but if you’re fine with providing just the minimum, then of course you can have more children”. The phrase “the best of the best” was something that I came to hear repeatedly during fieldwork. In a way, the Singapore government’s ideological emphasis on pragmatism, meritocracy, and upgrading has trickled down to such an extent that the importance of achieving and excelling have become culturally ingrained. Singaporeans often describe themselves as being *kiasu*. *Kiasu* is a Hokkien term meaning fear of loss or fear of failure. *Kiasu* is not only the fear of losing something that one already possesses or have achieved, it also means getting the most out of one’s money, to maximize one’s profits and to excel no matter what the costs. The notion of *kiasu* applies to a variety of behaviors, but generally revolves around the infatuation with upgrading one’s status and standard of living. You may be called *kiasu* if you stuff yourself with food at a dinner

buffet only to get the best value for your money, or if you queue up for hours whenever there is a free offer at a shopping center, or if you push your child through various extra-curricular classes to ensure that he or she gains an advantage in school.

No doubt, if you want to provide “the best of the best” for your child, you cannot afford to have too many of them. My informants frequently referred, and thus subscribed, to the stereotype of the Chinese as industrious, materialistic and status-driven. John, for instance, claimed that, “it probably is in genes of the Chinese, that they want to excel in whatever they are doing.” The Chinese obsession with success was often mentioned as the main reason for restricting the number of children. “Of course,” my informants would say, “look at the Malay families. They are less well off than the Chinese, but yet they manage to have so many children.” The underlying bias here is that, unlike the Chinese, the Malays do not bother about their children’s success. Statistically, the Chinese community is economically better off and has higher educational qualifications than the Malay community. In 2000, for instance, the median monthly income for the Chinese was S\$2,335, compared to S\$1,790 for the Malays (S\$2,167 for the Indians). In terms of educational level, the proportion with university qualifications was 12.6 percent for the Chinese, compared to 2.0 percent for the Malays (*Census of Population 2000*). Chinese Singaporeans may express a certain admiration for the Malays strong community spirit, but at the same time they conceive of this community spirit as inseparable from an irresponsible and lazy attitude. Or as Bee Choo reasoned, “Malays still believe in, you know, ‘live or die, we live and die together. If we can’t provide, never mind, we all starve together’, unlike Chinese who would be more pragmatic and say ‘for what do we starve, why should everyone die? Why doesn’t one of you die?’” Bee Choo laughed, but then turned serious again. “Sometimes I feel that this cohesiveness among the Malays may not necessarily work to their advantage.” Speaking from her experience as a social worker, Bee Choo thinks that Malay parents are far too permissive and do not discipline their children properly. Nor do they bother much about their children’s education.

To Chinese middle-class parents, by contrast, the competitive education system and the emphasis on academic performance puts quality before quantity when it comes to the number of children. The importance of children’s achievement is commonly linked to the Confucian idea of the meaning of children. While Chinese “parents do everything they can to promote their children’s moral and material welfare”, children are expected to “reciprocate by displaying the cardinal Confucian virtue of filial piety” (Zhao and Murdock 1996: 205). Thus, a child’s achievement is not only a matter of personal

success, but brings honor to the family (ibid.). That Chinese parents today spend increasing resources on their children should then perhaps be seen against the fact that, unlike earlier generations, they have the means to do so. It is true that the Confucian tradition views education as the primary vehicle for success, but then again, that particular tradition was not wholly present among the earlier Chinese of Singapore, as the majority of the Chinese immigrants derived from the poor peasantry or the urban proletariat. The idea of a Chinese-Confucian heritage, nonetheless, is undeniably significant in the way my informants represent, and interpret, their views on children and education. The stereotype of the diligent Chinese is, of course, also reaffirmed in various representations of Chinese-ness in the media and popular culture as well as in academic writings and in state ideology (such as notions of Asian family values).

## Children as Investments: Population Planning and Educational Streaming

The idea of children as investments, whether for support in old age or as an extension of the Self, must also be understood in relation to the Singaporean state. Vivienne Wee (1995) shows how the state influences the lives of children as well as ideas concerning the value of children through population planning and educational streaming. Population planning is not merely a demographic matter, but allows the state to “intervene in the relevant domains of its citizens’ lives – sexual, reproductive, familial, and educational” (ibid.: 189). This is especially pertinent in Singapore, where the ideological emphasis on human capital values citizens – including children – according to the “needs” of society. The government’s population planning has not only aimed at controlling the number of children, but also what *kind* of children are being born (e.g. in terms of ethnicity and social class). In the 1960s and 1970s, the Singapore government successfully managed to restrain the high birthrate through promoting the two-child family. But the slow-down was asymmetrical, insofar as the birthrate decreased significantly among educated Chinese women, while it remained high among other groups. This development evoked concerns that Singapore’s future gene pool would deteriorate. In his 1983 National Day speech, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew foresaw a national disaster if well-educated women continued to have fewer children than poorly educated women: “If we continue to reproduce ourselves in this lop-sided

way, we will be unable to maintain our present standards. Levels of competence will decline. Our economy will falter; administration will suffer; and society will decline” (Lee Kuan Yew, quoted in Barr 2000: 123).

Lee’s National Day speech was the prelude to a number of measures aimed at counteracting what he perceived to be an erosion of Singapore’s gene pool. A graduates’ matchmaking agency, the Social Development Unit, was set up to facilitate dating among graduate men and women. The government also initiated the Graduate Mothers’ Priority Scheme to speed up reproduction among educated women. Under this scheme, graduate women were offered tax breaks and insurance privileges to have more children. Working class women, on the other hand, were urged to stop at two children through cash awards and sterilization campaigns. Two women’s organizations, undoubtedly influenced by the government, even suggested that graduate women should marry and procreate as a form of National Service, comparable to the 2.5 years of military service compulsory for all men. However, the Graduate Mothers’ campaign was politically sensitive as the polarization between more and less “intelligent” women had ethnic connotations; Chinese women were comparatively higher educated but simultaneously displayed the lowest fertility rate. Since the program aimed to encourage reproduction among educated *Chinese* women, it implicitly proposed the superiority of Chinese *genes*.

The public dissatisfaction evoked by this eugenic, elitist population planning subsequently led to a demise of the program. By then, however, the continuous fall in births combined with an ageing population had become so problematic that a new policy was set up to promote an overall reproduction of the citizenry (Heng and Devan 1995: 196ff). This kind of intervention into the intimate sphere of sexuality and reproduction is rationalized on the grounds that Singaporeans have to put society before self, or else the whole country will sink. As far as the government is concerned, however, the national duty of procreation is only legitimate within the institution of marriage. The idea of the “normal” family as consisting of husband, wife and two or three children is strongly enforced in state ideology and politics. Alternative family forms, including single-parent families or homosexual relationships, are palpably marginalized as they “are viewed as antithetical to the national ideology of the family as the foundation of nationhood” (Wong et al. 2004: 45–46). The marginalizing of alternative family forms is not merely ideological. Divorcees and unwed parents, for instance, face practical obstacles with regard to public housing policies, which require a family nucleus in order to buy a flat (see below).

Ever since independence, the PAP government has been persistent in their ideological emphasis on meritocracy and upgrading of human capital, i.e. im-

proving the skills and educational capacity of the citizenry. The education system is extremely competitive and can be compared to a gigantic sorting machine.<sup>69</sup> At the time of fieldwork, Primary Four students were streamed according to their performance in English, Mother Tongue and Mathematics into EM1, EM2 or EM3 (“EM” is an acronym for “English and Mother Tongue”).<sup>70</sup> In Primary Six, students sit for the Primary School Leaving Examination. Based on their results in English, Mathematics, Science and Mother Tongue they are admitted to a secondary school course that suits their learning abilities: the Normal course, Express course or Special course. The Special and Express courses prepare students for the GCE ‘O’ level examination (Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of Education), after which they can apply for pre-university education (junior colleges) or post-secondary education (polytechnics and institutes of technical education). The Normal course in secondary school prepares students for the GCE ‘N’ level examination. Students who get very good results at the ‘N’ level examinations may get the opportunity to extend their studies for another year to sit for the ‘O’ level examination and thus make it to a junior college, polytechnic or technical institute.<sup>71</sup> However, there is a strong – and not unfounded – sentiment among people that once a child is placed in the slower streams, it is nearly impossible to later advance to tertiary education. The streaming system allegedly enables every child to develop at his or her own pace, but in practice the classification of students according to their academic record has reinforced prejudices against students in the slower streams.

Many parents with whom I spoke complained about the “rat-race”, and their inability to change the situation. They were very anxious to make sure their children did not end up in the slower streams. It is even common for parents to take a holiday from work just to help prepare their children for major examinations. While Singaporean children are pushed to the extreme, the increased focus on children is certainly not unique. In Sweden, to draw a parallel, the popular term “curling parents” refers to parents who do everything they can to pave the way for their children, to erase any obstacles and make sure their children get a happy and full life. Critics argue that curling parents do both themselves and their children a disservice by being overprotective and failing to set limits. Perhaps there is a difference in the sense that curling par-

69 Despite Singapore’s strong emphasis on education, compulsory school attendance was not introduced until 2003.

70 In 2004 the Ministry of Education discarded the distinction between EM1 and EM2 to allow each school to organize their classes according to their own preferences, while EM3 remains a separate course.

71 Further information and current education policies can be obtained from the website of the Ministry of Education, <http://www.moe.gov.sg>.

ents supposedly expect little or nothing in return for their sacrifices. Singaporean parents, by contrast, do expect something in return, at least that their children become successful in school and at work. It is not only teachers and parents who influence children to take school seriously, peer pressure is also an important factor. One girl I met was about to choose whether she would opt for Humanities and the Arts or Mathematics and Sciences in Junior College. Despite being more interested in the arts, and despite her parents encouraging her to follow her gut feeling, she decided to opt for Mathematics and Sciences. Why? Because in her peers' eyes, and indeed her own eyes, the arts is only for those who are not smart enough to take up mathematics and sciences.

## The Anxiety of Preparing Children for the Future

The question of schooling is an interesting topic. Many parents I spoke to were ambivalent regarding the degree to which they should push their children to perform academically. Children of today are so busy doing homework and attending "enrichment" classes that they get deprived of their childhood. Instead of enjoying a carefree existence, children are burdened with the expectation of getting good grades. Bee Choo was one of those parents who worried about her children's well being under such tremendous pressure. Her five-year-old daughter almost developed a school-phobia already in kindergarten. Bee Choo and her husband had chosen what they believed to be a suitable kindergarten, located near their home and with a Christian profile. Eventually they felt that this kindergarten pushed the children too hard. The teacher used to threaten the kids that if they did not get the spelling right, they would have to stay and could not go home. Bee Choo's daughter took it very hard. On Sunday nights, she would be cranky, begging her parents to let her stay home from school the next day. She also started having nightmares, and although she did not sleep well, she woke up way ahead of time. At first, Bee Choo hoped her daughter would learn to cope, but these symptoms were too extreme to ignore. They decided to move her to another kindergarten, which advocates an experimental to approach learning, more based on real life than on books and reading. Although this program is rather new and not yet evaluated, Bee Choo believes it is more stimulating and, most important, less intimidating for her daughter. Even so, she is slightly worried about there being a setback once her daughter enters primary school, where there is little room for

failure. For example, they foresee that she will struggle in the Mandarin classes, as they seldom speak Mandarin at home. While Bee Choo is careful not to put pressure on her children, she admits that one cannot avoid the importance of education: “I want my children to do well academically because that’s an important way of feeling some sense of confidence.” Parents who dislike the harsh education system nevertheless see no other option but to make sure their children get through school with good results. Everything else would make them appear to be bad parents.

Bee Choo and her husband are not alone in experiencing this dilemma. Barbara and Peter have been married for fifteen years and their two sons are six and three years old respectively. Barbara and Peter mainly converse with each other and with their children in English. To Barbara’s old mother they will speak in dialect, while their two sons, who do not understand dialect, use Mandarin. Although Barbara and her siblings always communicate in dialect when they get together, none of her siblings’ children, with only one exception, know the dialect. Barbara and Peter would like their children to speak dialect too, but being working parents they do not have time to actually teach their children. Like many other parents, Barbara also reasoned that her children already have a tough time coping with both English and Mandarin. To introduce dialect would just place an extra burden on them.

Schoolchildren in Singapore are expected to have a basic knowledge of English and mother tongue already before entering Primary One. The drilling begins in nursery and kindergarten, and since both English and Mandarin are parts of the streaming system it is crucial not to lag behind in either of these subjects. By the same token, children from Chinese-speaking homes are at a disadvantage in the English education system, while children from English-speaking homes have difficulties coping with Mandarin in school. In Barbara and Peter’s case, their two sons were most comfortable in English. Their eldest son has even developed a strong resistance to speaking Mandarin. A number of times when Barbara has tried to speak with him in Mandarin, he has voiced his dissatisfaction: “Why do you speak to me in Mandarin? I don’t like it.” Recently, Barbara and Peter pulled him out of a Mandarin class because he was simply too stressed about it. For the time being, they do not want to push him more than necessary, but the fact that he has shown weak results in the Mandarin tests in kindergarten is worrying. When he begins Primary One next year, Barbara and Peter will have him enrolled in Nan Hua, a school known for its prominence in Chinese. To maintain a good rank in the official school ranking system, top-grade schools such as Nan Hua are concerned that their students perform well. Considering her son’s difficulties with Mandarin, Barbara was initially unwilling to send him to Nan Hua. She realizes that he may



suffer under the pressure, academically as well as emotionally. In the end, however, the close proximity to their home outweighed their apprehensions. Now they do not have to arrange transport or wake up early in the morning to send him to school. In addition, the close proximity means that he is prioritized in the enrolment queue.

One side of the coin is that parents wish to give their children the ultimate platform for a successful life. At the same time, the success of the child is also a reflection of the parents' efforts. Peter, who himself complained about the obsession to "excel" at every cost, pointed out that children are an investment and a prolongation of oneself: "What parents cannot achieve for themselves, they want to achieve through their kids." In that sense, children are not exempt from the hunt for social advancement. The offering of "enrichment" classes and pedagogic methods for maximizing children's learning ability is massive, so are the various brands of milk powder and supplements claiming to boost children's intelligence. Many of the milk powder tins available at the supermarkets display pictures of smiling children, wearing the typical mortarboard, with a graduation certificate in their hands. In the fall of 2003 there was a media debate over the Abbott Laboratories' popular baby formula "Gain IQ", which claims to improve the child's brain development. Abbott Laboratories, a big American health-care firm, said to their defense that the 'IQ' in Gain IQ stands for "intestinal quality", rather than "intelligence quotient". Not many people, however, associate the acronym IQ with "intestinal quality", and the design of the tin hardly makes it easier to grasp the intended meaning. Whereas "IQ" is spelled out in bold letters, the subsequent clarification "intestinal quality" is written very thinly.<sup>72</sup> Abbott Laboratories has been criticized for misleading consumers, but the brand, as well as other brands claiming to improve children's learning abilities, is very popular among Singaporean parents.

Milk powder and nutritional supplements are but one of a multitude of ways in which parents seek to make sure their children are getting the best possible tools for succeeding in life. For instance, the majority of the children who attended Mandarin speech-and-drama classes at the Chinese Arts & Drama association did so because their parents hoped it would improve their academic performance in Mandarin. As I mentioned in the outline of fieldwork section (chapter 3), these children are primarily from middle-class, English-speaking homes. It was not uncommon for these children to attend several different activities after school and during weekends. Whether it is classes in

<sup>72</sup> The debate has been commented upon in a number of forums. See for example, 'Gain IQ ads being scrutinised after "misleading" claim', [http://www.brandrepublic.com/login/index.cfm?fuseaction=Login&resource=BR\\_News&articleType=news&article=201210](http://www.brandrepublic.com/login/index.cfm?fuseaction=Login&resource=BR_News&articleType=news&article=201210) (accessed 6 March 2006).

mathematics, language, piano, swimming, drama or calligraphy, parents hope that it will better equip the child for the future. I recall especially one little boy, around ten years old, who informed me that he attends as many as twelve extra-curricular activities a week. His only free day is Saturday. On all other days he has scheduled activities. Neither extra-curricular activities nor the allegedly intelligence-boosting baby formulas are cheap, and parents often spend several hundred dollars every month on “enrichment” classes, private tuition, learning material, and so forth. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that young parents experience an immense pressure to balance their obligations to both their children and parents.

## Competing Obligations

While there is a marked expansion of the resources flowing from parents to children, this has not led to the anticipated disruption of children’s responsibilities to elderly parents. Rodney and Christina, a married couple, described their experiences of managing competing family responsibilities. They are living in a public housing flat north of the city center together with their three children and a Filipino maid. Rodney is a police officer, while Christina works part-time giving private tuition to primary and secondary school students. It is not cheap to raise three children and employ a domestic worker, although they reduce their costs by not having a car. In addition, they have to provide financial support to their parents. Rodney’s widowed mother lives with Rodney’s brother, while Christina’s mother, also a widow, lives on her own. She used to live with Christina’s brother’s family, but due to escalating frictions with her daughter-in-law, they decided to live apart. Since both Rodney and Christina have siblings, the responsibility of supporting their parents is divided amongst several children. Christina used to give her mother regular financial support, but in recent years she has felt compelled to cut down on the allowances:.

When I started working I gave her [money], but when our children started coming, she [my mother] knows that financially you are quite tight. Because when you have families to run, and you have a maid to support, she realizes that it’s quite difficult on your side. And she has saved enough for her old age, so she told us ‘you can keep’ [the money]. So normally I give her something for her birthday, special occasions, when she’s going for a holiday, or Chinese New Year. So these are the few occasions [when] I normally give her [money].

According to Christina, her mother can sustain herself on her own savings and the allowances she gets from the rest of the children, at least for the time being. However, should her mother's health worsen as she is ageing, Christina will have to shoulder a heavier responsibility. Not only is money a problem when having your own family, so is time. Christina and Rodney complain that they do not have enough spare time for visiting their parents. Unlike Rodney's mother, who lives with one of her children, Christina's mother only gets to meet her children when they come to visit her or take her out for a meal. Christina tries to visit her mother on regular basis, but it is difficult to allocate the time. Initially, they used to visit Rodney's mother on Saturdays and Christina's mother on Sundays. "Even when our first kid came, we go here, we go there," Christina sighed. "Then you realize that you don't have time on your own. And you're so tired, especially when both of us are working. So because of that we visit our parents alternate weeks."

It is evident how Rodney and Christina struggle to fulfill the obligations to their parents at the same time as they need to focus on the upbringing of their own children. The pressing situation often leads to a curtailing of the amount and form of support given to elderly family members. Although the intergenerational contract is not disrupted, it is certainly renegotiated. We shall see below how the fulfillment of filial piety seems increasingly concerned with meeting the material needs of elderly parents, rather than obeying parents or even providing practical and emotional care.<sup>73</sup> This change goes hand in hand with the emergence of an affluent middle-class, that has the means of delegating practical and emotional care to paid domestic workers or nursing homes, even if the latter option remains less socially acceptable.

## The Erosion of the Extended Family

The stereotype of the Chinese extended family may be much exaggerated, but most elderly people in Singapore do reside with their children.<sup>74</sup> Likewise, unmarried children seldom move out to live independently. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, this pattern is partly a result of public housing regulations. Considering that over 85 percent of the population live in public housing, this is an area where the government effectively can implement their family poli-

<sup>73</sup> The same tendency, whereby filial piety is increasingly realized in terms of financial support, is visible in Hong Kong (see Chow 2001).

<sup>74</sup> In the mid-90s, over 85 percent of the Singaporean elderly over 60 years of age co-resided with at least one child (Chan 1997: 42).

cies.<sup>75</sup> There are numerous incentives and criteria for purchasing public housing flats that serve to encourage marriage and the desired family norm. Unmarried persons below the age of 35 are not entitled to apply for contracts. Only those older than 35 years may purchase a flat on the basis of the assumption that they are unlikely to ever start a family of their own. To promote family life in its nuclear form, a Third Child Priority Housing Scheme makes it easier for families with three children to upgrade their flat to a larger one (an implicit motive here is to combat the low fertility rate). Since the 1970s, several schemes have also encouraged extended family relations: the Multi-Tier Family Housing Priority Scheme facilitates two- or three-generation families who want to live in the same flat. A Joint Selection Scheme gives priority to parents and married children to select separate flats within the same estate (*Singapore – a pro-family society* 1995: 4f).<sup>76</sup>

Singapore's public housing authority, the Housing and Development Board, nowadays builds larger flats to accommodate extended families, but it is worth noting that the small units built in the 1960s to house low-income families were not adapted to extended family arrangements. The demolishing of *kampungs* and the splitting up of extended families into nuclear households was a direct result of the government's modernization project. For example, in a case study of the demolishing of Soon Hock Village, it was reported that out of 33 multi-family households, 32 split up into smaller units due to resettlement (Wong and Yeh 1985: 356). Interestingly enough, in those days the political leadership had a far more negative attitude towards "Asian" family structures than they do today. Former Minister of Finance Goh Keng Swee, for instance, expressed in the early 1970s his suspicion that the strong kinship solidarity prevalent in Asian societies would inhibit individual motivation for accumulating wealth, which is necessary for the emergence of a successful capitalist system (Hill and Lian 1995: 148).

Meanwhile, the slow response to the current incentives for extended household formation reflects the emerging preference for nuclear family units. It is telling that the average household size decreased from 4.2 persons in 1990 to 3.7 persons in 2000, while the proportion of multi-family units declined from 6.7 percent in 1990 to 5.6 percent in 2000 (*Census of Population 2000*). The

75 The Housing and Development Board was established in 1960 to tackle the urgent need of housing a rapidly growing population. Not only was the ambitious HDB project a measure to solve the poor state of housing, it simultaneously counteracted the high rate of unemployment. To encourage people to buy rather than rent their flats, the government launched the Home Ownership Scheme in 1968, allowing buyers to withdraw money from their Central Provident Fund for this purpose (Low and Aw 1997: 39f). This arrangement, it must be emphasized, is only valid for public housing and not for the private market, which means that the latter is a much more costly option.

76 For current information see the website of the Housing and Development Board, <http://www.hdb.gov.sg>.

realization of preferred living arrangements – to reside with parents or to set up an independent household – is, of course, related to socio-economic factors. In poorer families, you might not have much choice but to have your parents living with you because it would not be affordable to financially maintain two households, i.e. both your own household and your parents' household. In any event, the increasing preference for nuclear family units is obvious in my ethnographic record, and as we shall see below, many young couples who today reside with parents or parents-in-law are very ambivalent towards the thought of being dependent on their own children in the future.

A common projection in theories based on modernization is that the economic-practical functions of the family inevitably fade away in modern societies (e.g. Parsons 1955; Cowgill and Holmes 1972; Caldwell 1976).<sup>77</sup> Supposedly, one of the most important reasons for this development is the erosion of extended families in favor of nuclear units. John Caldwell (1976), in his analysis of intergenerational resource flows, argued that the redirection of the latter to the advantage of children in modern societies is triggered off by an emotional nucleation of the family. The emotional nucleation of the family, with its emphasis on conjugal bonds and children, ultimately leads to its economic nucleation (*ibid.*: 352ff). This account, however, is inadequate with regard to Singapore. Although the ethnographic accounts show an increasing preference among young couples to set up separate residence, a great deal of support and cooperation cuts across these nuclear units. What we see is thus a renegotiation of the form, rather than the dissolution, of intergenerational obligations. An obvious trend is that cohabiting is no longer a prerequisite for fulfilling one's filial piety, as it is increasingly replaced by financial support. John, for instance, described how attitudes to filial piety differ between the elder and younger generations in the following way:

My parents would hope to be with any of their kids [in old age]. To those generations, filial [piety] means staying together, looking after. To the younger generation, the filial aspect of the relation is probably more towards like 'you don't necessarily have to stay with me. I can just show [my filial piety] by visiting you more [often]. You stay somewhere else but I visit you more often'.

Christina shared John's view on how filial piety is being reinterpreted with regard to cohabitation. Unlike the old generation, who sees cohabiting as tantamount to filial piety, the new generation wants to be independent:

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<sup>77</sup> In a study of the American nuclear family in the 1950s, Talcott Parsons (1955) argued that while the family was losing many of its economic and political functions, it develops new emotional and psychological functions adapted to the modern society (especially in the socialization of children).

No matter how, they [the older generation] will think 'I will stay with my son, by hook or by crook, however I don't care'. But our generation now, we are more open. Most of us actually think that even [for] sons, instead of marrying-in we want you [to] go and get your own house. You set up your own family. Once you settle down you can invite us over, then we will consider whether we want to sell our house and join them or whether we want to stay on [in our own house]. Our generation, we feel that we are more independent and we don't want to be a burden [on our children].

Christina's husband Rodney added that young people realize the strains arising from cohabiting, and therefore prefer to live on their own:

The more family members that stay together, the more conflict, the more disputes. Instead of fighting with others to make money, to do something, you actually fight amongst brothers, sisters, cousins. So it's actually very complicated. So for us Singaporeans, our generation, we understand that. We want to be independent. It's not like last time, when you must be in the family. This type of practice I think has stopped since our generation, because normally the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law is always a problem.

Rodney and Christina illustrate the preference among younger Singaporeans to live independently from their parents, and, in due time, independently from their own children. The nucleation of families is also connected to upward social mobility, as the acquisition of a home – just like the acquisition of a car or any of the five C's – is a way of manifesting a certain life-style and standard of living.

## Family Networking across Households

Despite the increasing trend of living independently from parents and other relatives, the small size of Singapore and the convenience of communications make it possible to retain and utilize an "urban kinship network" without cohabiting (Wong and Kuo 1979). Sun and Liu's (1994) study on intergenerational relations in Taiwan makes a similar observation, where separate residence is compensated for by new forms of interaction such as visiting and talking on the telephone. Several of my informants made use of this type of urban kinship network. We saw how Bee Choo decided to stay near her mother to make it easier to socialize as well as to cooperate on a daily basis. Carole and Alan purchased a flat in the same neighborhood as Carole's parents for the same reasons. In addition, current public housing policies have given Carole and Alan priority in buying a flat near Carole's parents.

Unlike Bee Choo, Carole has never lived in a *kampung*. By the time she was born, her family had already shifted to a public housing flat. At the time of fieldwork, the Housing and Development Board had relocated Carole's parents, Auntie and Uncle Lee, to Tiong Bahru due to the demolishing of their old housing estate. Their second son, who is still unmarried, lives in the same flat while their oldest son has moved in with his wife and two children in the unit next door, an arrangement that is also encouraged by public housing incentives. In the evenings the family members gather in Auntie and Uncle Lee's flat, where Auntie Lee cooks the dinner. Only occasionally do they go over to Edwin and Wendy's home or to Carole and Alan's home. Auntie and Uncle Lee's unit is newly renovated and has a polished interior. When entering the front door, one immediately steps into a spacious hall-cum-living room. Along the left wall are four wooden chairs carved in an ornate style, each one attached to the other so that it resembles a bench. On the opposite side there is a TV and a small table with a wireless telephone set, a vase with artificial flowers and a gift-wrapped bottle of wine, which is for display only since none of the family members drink wine. The flooring is made of bright marble-like clinkers, and the absence of carpets gives a clean, somewhat bare, touch to the room. Since the kitchen is too narrow to accommodate a dinner table, a section of the big hall has been turned into a dining area. The three bedrooms are located in a row to the left of the dining area. One bathroom is attached to second brother's bedroom, while there is another bathroom next to the kitchen. The Lees were fortunate enough to get a unit on the 27<sup>th</sup> floor, which gets more breeze than the lower floors. Nowadays it is standard to have air-conditioned flats, but elderly people often find it difficult to appreciate the dry coolness from the air-conditioners.

Although Auntie and Uncle Lee are Taoists, they keep no altar or joss stick holders in their home. I was told that Auntie Lee had moved all the idols to a temple when they moved out of their old flat a few years ago. I never found out the exact reason for the removal of the idols. It was not a question of giving up their religion, since both Auntie and Uncle Lee still visit the temple and make offerings on special occasions. It could have been a similar reason as for Auntie Teo, who, despite being religious, keeps no idols at home, simply because she worries that she will incur the gods' anger if she fails to attend to them, i.e. make regular offerings and prayers. Instead she considers it safer to show her piety by frequenting the temple.

Auntie and Uncle Lee run a stall at a hawker center, where they sell chicken and duck meat. Since they plan to retire in the near future, their new flat has been fully paid for by their second son, who is still unmarried. Their eldest son, who lives next door, is the manager of a petrol station and his wife works

at the turf club. They have two sons, twins, who have just begun primary school. Since Auntie and Uncle Lee are still working and cannot be expected to look after the twins in the afternoons, their oldest son has employed an Indonesian maid. Maids are supposed to work only for their employer, but nonetheless it is common that they conduct work in more than one household. In this case, the maid who was employed to work in the oldest son's household also helps out with housework in Auntie and Uncle Lee's flat. On the other hand, because most of the daily interaction takes place in Auntie and Uncle Lee's unit, it is difficult to draw a clear line between the two households. When Auntie and Uncle Lee finish their work in the early afternoon, Auntie Lee usually goes home to take a rest before preparing dinner for the rest of the family. Her eldest son and his family drop by for dinner on a daily basis, while Carole and Alan join them at least a few evenings every week. As in many other families, it is Auntie Lee who cooks the dinner. The maid is only entrusted with simpler tasks, such as chopping ingredients and clearing the table. Auntie Lee, herself an excellent cook, once declared to me that the younger generation – including her daughter and daughter-in-law – “cannot cook”.

A typical Chinese dinner consists of several plates of vegetables and meat served with rice. In the middle of the table there is usually a bowl of soup, which is either ladled into smaller bowls or simply eaten directly from the big bowl. Meals are all about sharing. The food is never served as individual portions but in various pots and larger plates from which the guests use their own chopsticks to pick the pieces they want. Auntie Lee, who never sat down until she was certain that family members and guests were satisfied, usually circled around the table, encouraging me to “eat, eat”. According to traditional custom, younger family members are supposed to invite older family members to begin eating, “Dad, eat” or “Grandmother, eat”, but the dinners at the Lee's were never that formal. Since their dinner table only has room for five or six people, those who arrive first usually eat first. Afterwards, some time is spent playing with the kids or watching TV, usually any of the Chinese drama serials from Singapore, Hong Kong or Taiwan. Dinner is always rounded off with a variety of cut fruits: apple, pineapple, melon, litchi, or whatever has been purchased at the market. Compared to myself, I found Singaporeans not only enthusiastic about food, but also very knowledgeable about its supposed medical effects. When having a meal with Singaporean friends I would learn that this or that is good for your blood pressure or for your complexion or for your eyesight. Of course, the medical aspect of food is central in Chinese medicine, which is also shown by the plentiful choice of teas, herbs and dried food found at Chinese pharmacies.



I mentioned earlier that Alan and Carole interact more frequently with Carole's parents than with Alan's parents, who live in another area of Singapore. Alan's trying work schedule is the main reason why they visit his parents less often, every second week on average. During my stay with Carole and Alan, Alan worked from early morning till evening, and on top of that he had to complete assignments at night. Many nights he got only three or four hours' sleep, and was evidently exhausted. Since Carole stayed at home to look after the children fulltime, Alan alone was responsible for maintaining their living standard and reproducing the "middle-class way of life" (Purushotam 1998: 127). Apart from the costs of buying and furnishing their new flat, they had also purchased a brand new car upon moving back to Singapore. Their current life-style includes overseas trips and restaurant visits, playing golf and purchasing modern consumer goods. In addition to securing a materially comfortable life, there are family relations that need to be maintained. Alan seemed increasingly affected by these pressurized circumstances. Subsequently he became more laconic and short tempered. At times, it was nearly impossible for me to have any extended conversations with him at all. Communication evidently suffered between Alan and Carole too. In interacting with his son Timothy, Alan was generally very patient, but sometimes his exhaustion made him more prone to losing his temper. If Timothy was fretful and refused to be pacified, Alan or Carole would slap him over his hands or underarms. Scolding as well as spanking children, however, is considered normal and even necessary to my informants. Canes can be purchased from the provision shop, but, in Carole's words, a ruler might be as effective. Spanking children is taboo in Sweden, although, I am certain, it does occur. Alan jokingly told me that the Singaporean families who had been living in Sweden together with them always made sure that doors and windows were closed before spanking their children, or else the neighbors might hear what was going on.

## Dimensions of Family Ties

Just as the formation of nuclear households does not determine the amount of economic and practical support among family members, shrinking family size and urban housing is no guarantee for closer interaction among family members within the same household (i.e. the assumption that the increasing social alienation in modern societies leads to a consolidation of the nuclear unit).<sup>78</sup> There are many different dimensions of family solidarity, such as

structural (co-residence), associational (the contact between family members), affectional (emotional closeness), consensual (sharing of opinions), functional (helping each other with daily tasks), and normative (feelings of responsibility between older and younger generations) (Lawton et al. 1994: 20). These dimensions do not necessarily presuppose one another. A relationship can be strong in terms of practical cooperation without being strong in terms of emotional closeness, and vice versa. Keyue, a young woman and one of my closest friends, lives in a flat together with her parents and her older sister. Her sister goes to work early in the morning when Keyue is still asleep, whereas Keyue usually returns home late at night when her sister has already gone to bed. At one point Keyue told me that she had not spoken a word to her sister for a couple of months, despite the two of them sharing a room. This had not struck her until she bumped into a friend of her sister, who commented on her sister's new hairstyle. Keyue realized she did not have the slightest idea about her sister's hairstyle. In fact she had not seen her sister in daylight for over two months.

Keyue's experience is not exceptional. Many informants were surprisingly unaware of their parents' or siblings' daily affairs. Residing together does not automatically mean that you know a lot about each other. Another young woman, who was not only living with her parents but also met them for dinner most evenings, said that although she communicates with her parents she does not share much of her personal life: "After coming home from work, or anywhere outside, you are so exhausted by constantly being part of a competition. The moment you step out from your house, nothing is private. People will compete with each other on every single aspect, so when I get home I just feel like retreating and closing the door to my room."

## Contested Territories

Living together as an extended family can be very trying. Changing notions of family life, intergenerational obligations, and gender are a source of conflict, and an important reason why young couples prefer to set up their own households. Without question, the worst trouble spot is the relation between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. The tensions between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law are very much tied to the changing position of women in

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78 For an account of industrialization, state policies, and nucleation of Chinese Singaporean families during the 1970s and 80s, see Salaff (1988).

contemporary Singapore, and the ways in which young women deviate from the traditional role of a daughter-in-law. In traditional Chinese society the daughter-in-law was expected to submit to her mother-in-law. The practice of patrilocality meant that the daughter-in-law was physically estranged from her natal family. As an outsider she could expect little or no sympathy from her new family. Women today shun every prospect of ending up in such a situation, and even if they might not accept any bullying by their mother-in-law, they have a strong desire to be the woman in charge of the house. Not surprisingly, the preference for independent housing is more pronounced among women than men in the ethnographic record. Husbands, in turn, often complain about being squeezed between their wife and their mother, and being forced to negotiate when there is a disagreement.

John knew a lot about the potential frictions between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. The first time I met John, he and his wife Karen were expecting their first child. John works as an insurance agent, while his wife works at the Singapore Broadcast Authority. A few months ago, they bought a flat of their own, but due to a delay in the renovation work they were temporarily staying with John's mother, where John had lived until he got married. John personally wants them to live permanently with his mother, but to avoid future conflicts between Karen and his mother he submitted to Karen's wish to buy a new flat, away from both parents and parents-in-law. In Karen's view, "it's best to stay away [from parents and parents-in-law] rather than to stay together to build up a volcano. Because when the volcano erupts, that spells a lot of trouble". The problems surrounding the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law are clearly a recurrent topic of conversation among friends and colleagues. In fact, on numerous occasions my informants talked about the conflicts taking place in their friends' families, rather than the conflicts in their own family. The reason why the conflicts between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law stand out is related to changing notions of gender across generations. One of the most striking changes is that women increasingly enter the formal wage economy and, in some cases, even abandon (voluntarily or not) their "traditional" duties of marriage and motherhood by remaining single and/or childless.

John, who was quite open about his personal experiences, described how the tensions between his mother and wife were manifested during the period when the couple temporarily resided with his mother. One seed of dissension had to do with different habits of hanging out laundry to dry. Whereas John's mother always hangs out the wet clothes turned inside out, Karen simply hangs out the laundry in whatever condition she finds it, be it inside out or not. At one point, John's mother told Karen "no, you should do like that in-

stead [i.e. hang the clothes inside out]”. When Karen again made the same mistake, her mother-in-law repeated the advice. Soon Karen began to feel irritated. At that point, John had to step in and do what he calls “a middleman’s job”, that is, to calm down his wife and try to explain the issue to his mother without hurting her feelings. As far as John is concerned, the tense situation is a result of his wife’s lack of tolerance. He feels that most people of his generation do not realize that “what goes around comes around”.

Probably they can’t think that far, or probably they wouldn’t eye so far away. [They would think] ‘no worry, next time I won’t bother to stay with [my children], I stay on my own’. But that’s easy for you to say now. Because right now, the things that are most present to you is [that] you want your livelihood, you want your own privacy, but twenty, thirty years down the road, who knows? You may need to depend on the child, and if your child were to do the same way as you do it, then you start to think back, ‘twenty, thirty years ago I did the same thing’.

It is not uncommon that elderly parents shift from one child to another due to intra-family frictions. This was the case with Barbara’s mother, who shifted from her son’s home to Barbara’s because she could not get along with her son’s wife. Andrew, a friend of John, had a similar experience. Andrew’s mother, who is a widow, used to live with another son. For the same reasons as Barbara’s mother, she eventually shifted to Andrew’s home instead. Although Andrew’s wife also gets annoyed with having her mother-in-law living with them, the arrangement is manageable. Andrew feels that he often has to mediate between his wife and mother to keep both of them contented. The keyword is compromise. For example, he has convinced his wife to let his mother be the boss of the kitchen, since she likes to cook. He also encourages his wife to praise his mother’s cooking, even when she does not find it so tasty. Just like John, Andrew thinks it is easier to ask his wife to be patient, rather than to ask his mother to be patient. “We have to respect her, *lah*”, Andrew said. “She’s senior, so why not just give in sometimes”. But Andrew’s mother has to do her fair share of compromising too. Andrew is the only Christian among his siblings, and as long as his mother lives with him, she is not allowed to engage in any ancestor worship at home. In true evangelical spirit, Andrew thinks that his mother should convert to Christianity. He has tried to convince her to come to church, but so far she has refused to do so. I should mention that Andrew is not the most rigid of Christians, and he actually brings his mother to the temple during Qing Ming and other special occasions. In addition to religious practices, Andrew’s mother has to compromise her language. Her grandchildren do not understand any Cantonese at all, so she has to communicate with them in Mandarin, which she is much less comfortable with. Sim-

ilar to many other grandparents, she has even begun to pick up English words and phrases in interacting with her grandchildren.

There are, of course, families where the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is unproblematic, but to the majority of my female informants the ideal is to stay away from in-laws upon marriage (although in the end this might not be the actual arrangement). From the perspective of a daughter-in-law, the mother-in-law tends to be possessive of her sons and to meddle too much in household affairs is run and how the children are raised. Nicole, a young female, expressed this standpoint. She and her long-term boyfriend intend to get married in the near future, and Nicole is insistent on setting up a separate home. Nicole is working as an air-stewardess and, like most young women, does not care much for housework, which, in any case, is taken care of by the maid her family employs. Being well aware of her poor training in domestic skills, Nicole is worried that she will not meet her future mother-in-law's expectations of a "good wife". To the old generation, Nicole said, a good wife should run the household, including cooking, cleaning and taking care of the children. Such expectations are not easy to meet for those women who work full-time outside the home.

The negative image of the mother-in-law persona arises from bad experiences, either personal or via hearsay. Bad experiences are easily remembered. As John said: "If you have ten friends, out of ten friends five of them live on their own, and five live together with the in-laws. It's five who live with the in-laws, [and] out of the five, four of them complain. But out of the five there's one who manages to live peacefully." Yet, this single case where things work out smoothly is seldom remembered. Instead people bear in mind the unhappy stories, and come to the conclusion that, "it's so difficult to stay with in-laws. Better don't". Nicole, for instance, grew up observing the many arguments going on between her mother and paternal grandmother, and she did not want to go through that herself. This was also the case for John's wife Karen, whose own mother had not been treated well by her mother-in-law.

At the same time as young women often prioritize career over housework, I observed that for many elderly women their domestic skills serve as a strategy to remain useful to the family. With the overwhelming choice of cheap hawked food around, young people see no real incitement to cook themselves. At the same time as older women complain of their daughters' and daughter-in-laws' poor domestic skills, they take great pride in being the matron of the kitchen. As long as elderly parents are appreciated and able to offer their cooking skills, they can make a contribution, rather than only being a dependant. Another female informant, who lives with her mother-in-law, told me that she never interferes with the cooking: "It's a territory; it's a place where my moth-

er-in-law rules so if you want to interfere that means you will try to take over. So it's better not." Whereas elderly parents might feel inferior to their educated children, the domestic domain is a place where they remain superior. As Nicole's argument indicates, young career-minded women feel inadequate in cooking and domestic skills, and happily leave it to their mothers or mothers-in-law (or the maid, for that matter). Cooking skills and food are matters of significance for Singaporeans, and old aunties do not hesitate to judge the food served to them unless it is prepared to perfection. It is not good enough to be a mediocre cook, and in that sense, the unwillingness of younger women to demonstrate their cooking seems quite understandable.

## Filial Sons and Filial Daughters

In addition to the negotiation of cohabiting, the intergenerational contract has been reinterpreted with regard to sons and daughters' filial responsibilities. The responsibility of taking care of elderly parents in Chinese families traditionally fell on the sons (albeit not exclusively).<sup>79</sup> The eldest son attained a certain ritual supremacy by being responsible for ancestral worship, and sometimes received an extra share of the family property, but apart from that the inheritance was divided equally among all sons (Jamieson 1970: 16; Freedman 1970a: 174). In traditional Chinese society sons were responsible for upholding the ancestral worship as well as securing the continuity of the patrilineage. Sons thus symbolize the link between the past (ancestors) and the future (descendants). Daughters, by contrast, were transferred to their husbands upon marriage. They were not entitled to any property, and from the day they married their filial piety was supposed to be whole-heartedly directed to their parents-in-law.<sup>80</sup> A daughter's primary duty was to give birth to a son, thereby securing the continuity of her husband's patrilineage (cf. Hsu 1948: 107). Compared to mainland China, however, the estrangement between daughters and their natal family became less fragrant in Singapore where geographical distances were smaller and allowed for continuous interaction.

79 Famous historical guides for filial piety, such as the *Book of Rites*, the *Classic of Filial Piety* and the works of Confucius and Mencius, stress the relationship between parent and son. *Li Chi (Book of Rites)* was written around 200 B.C. and is a guide for religious, social and moral activities, including the proper filial behavior between children and parents.

80 According to Jamieson's translation of classic Chinese family law, unmarried daughters had the right to maintenance but a daughter could not inherit property unless there were no male successors alive (see Jamieson 1970: 5, 17).

The intergenerational contract is still an affair between sons and their parents in many parts of Asia (Croll 2000: 113ff), but in Singapore this norm is eroding as working daughters increasingly provide financial support for their parents (cf. Graham et al. 2002; Teo et al. 2003). Sons are still preferred for carrying the family name, but the idea of a daughter marrying-out no longer implies that her filial piety shifts from her natal family to her husband's family. All of my female informants were expected to contribute to their parents, in terms of money as well as other services. Considering that daughters have become an important source of support, the impact of declining fertility may be less catastrophic than anticipated, as the responsibility of taking care of elderly parents is increasingly divided among both male and female children.<sup>81</sup> Not only are working daughters an important source of financial support, sometimes elderly parents – voluntarily or not – reside with their daughters instead of their sons. Barbara, who is the youngest daughter, houses her elderly mother, because there was friction when she was living with her son and daughter-in-law. To live with a daughter is no guarantee for a harmonious arrangement, but at least it eliminates some of the tensions that usually arise between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Many of my informants, young as well as old, actually said they prefer daughters because daughters are more “caring” than sons. Janet Salaff (1995) has observed a similar development in Hong Kong, where greater expectations are placed on working daughters to make financial contributions to their natal families. This trend reflects a reinterpretation of the intergenerational contract whereby both male and female children are expected to take responsibility for elderly parents. Carole contributes to her parents, although she was exempt from giving money during the period she was unemployed. Her two brothers also contribute financially, but Carole claims that as a daughter she shows more consideration for her parents, for example by buying small gifts or helping out with practical things, such as translating and composing letters in English. It is reasonable to suggest that daughters, who compared to sons were often perceived as a waste of time and money, have always had to work harder to prove themselves. Even today, sons have an ascribed advantage by being those who bear the family line and secure future descendants, while daughters have to *acquire* the role of a filial child through actual deeds.

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81 In addition, the higher mortality rate in the past did not strike exclusively against the elderly. In many families only one or a few children would reach maturity and be able to fulfill their filial obligations to their parents (see Cohen 1976: 67).

## Mei Ling – An Unmarried Daughter

Mei Ling, a church friend of Carole and Alan, is a lively woman in her early forties. The first time I met Mei Ling was through Yan, who rented out a room to me for a couple of months. With her curious eyes and cheerful temperament, Mei Ling gives a very friendly impression. Like Yan, she is unmarried. Mei Ling told me that she would really like to have a family of her own, but now it is too late for her. No one, especially not Singaporean men, would want to marry a woman who is already over forty years old, Mei Ling explained. It is interesting how conscious Singaporean women are about age, and perhaps rightly so judging from Mei Ling and other single females that I spoke to. Women who have passed the age of thirty without being married perceive themselves as outdated. Although there are exceptions, the conventional pattern is that men marry women who are younger than themselves. The reverse case is rather uncommon, not to say taboo. A man I know told me in confidence that his wife, who is actually four years older than himself, lies about her age simply because she finds it embarrassing to be older than her husband.

At the time of fieldwork, Mei Ling was pursuing a quite successful career in one of Singapore's largest banks. Without much education, she had slowly worked her way up, something which is becoming less common in Singapore where a university degree is seen as the best guarantee for a good job. Mei Ling is the eldest child among four siblings. She grew up in what she calls a typical Taoist family, with ancestor worship and temple visits. When Mei Ling was in her teens, she converted to Christianity. Her conversion caused tensions in her relation to her parents for years, especially when she refused to carry the joss sticks at funerals or refused to eat food that had been prepared for worship. Recently, though, Mei Ling's parents have also considered joining church services. According to Mei Ling, it happened after a period when she had been very ill and had to undergo surgery. When Mei Ling returned home, her mother had moved all idols to the temple without saying a word. During her convalescence, her parents even accompanied her to the church services. Mei Ling thinks that she has finally proved to her parents that she can be a filial daughter without praying to their gods or ancestors. For example, when Mei Ling's grandfather was hospitalized, she was the one person who visited him when no one else had the time or will to do so. Also, since Mei Ling is the only unmarried child and has no family of her own, she ends up carrying the main responsibility for her own parents, at least with regard to practical assistance. When it comes to financial support, all four siblings contribute. Unlike in the past when only sons were expected to take care of elderly parents, Mei Ling



and her sister are also expected to do their fair share. Mei Ling explained to me that her mother has taught both sons and daughters to show their filial piety by giving pocket-money:

My mum made it a rule that when each one of us go out [to work] we have to give her allowance. She knew our pay, and she would tell you how much you need to give. But gradually, when my brothers and sister got married, my mother was a very reasonable woman, she told them to reduce the allowances. She told them each to reduce their allowances. Give to her whatever is comfortable to them, but *must* give. You know, they *must* give whatever they can afford or what is comfortable to them. [...] We are trained to give. I know my brothers give, my sister gives, I give. All of them give, although it's a matter of the amount you give.

The emerging norm that all children, regardless of gender, are expected to financially support elderly parents increases the total input of support. At the same time, the expectation to split equally among the siblings is a potential source of dispute. Cases brought to the Tribunal for the Maintenance of Parents often spring from this kind of situation where one or a few siblings fail (or refuse) to contribute to the maintenance of their parents. Already prior to its opening in 1996, the tribunal recognized the need to help care-giving children by forcing reluctant siblings to contribute to their parents' maintenance (*Straits Times* 31 May 1996). Staff members that I interviewed at the Singapore Action Group of Elders pointed out that, indeed, several of the cases brought to the tribunal stem from conflicts between contributing versus non-contributing siblings. The formal complaint to the tribunal has to be filed by the parent(s), but the actual initiative may very well come from the child/children who are unhappy with their siblings' lacking contribution.<sup>82</sup> Of course only a fraction of such disputes are brought to the tribunal, and to most families the tribunal would be a very last resort. Surely, conflicts among siblings over the maintenance of parents are not new. In Chinese society, inheritance was traditionally divided equally among the brothers. By the same token, all brothers carried the responsibility for providing for their aged parents, although the parents might choose to reside with one of the sons. Myron Cohen (1976: 73f, 213) noted in his study on Chinese families in Taiwan that if the property was divided while the parents were alive, the sons' shared duty to support their parents was usually stated in the family division contract. If the brothers decided to split up into separate conjugal units, the old parents either rotated among their sons or stayed permanently with one son who, in turn, received compensation from his brothers. The agreement to jointly support

82 Parents who due to circumstances are unable to apply may have a family member file an application on their behalf.

elderly parents also implied a pressure on each and every son to fulfill his commitments. Anyone who failed or refused to take responsibility would elicit the anger of those brothers who offered their share.

An interesting aspect in the care of elderly parents is the role of unmarried children, and especially unmarried daughters. Whereas there is a growing acceptance of nuclear units in Singapore, unmarried children are still expected to live with their parents. In terms of financial freedom, being unmarried and residing with parents is a quite appealing option. Without the costs of running a separate household and raising children, a larger portion of the income can be spent on consumer goods and pleasure. It is also convenient not to have to bother about cooking food or doing laundry, whether this is taken care of by their mother or a maid. In addition to practical obstacles, such as public housing regulations and the costs of living, it is considered unjustified to move out from one's parents before marriage. Most parents would object if an unmarried child insists on moving out, regardless of the age of the child. Mei Ling recounted her situation. Whereas her siblings had all married and moved out, Mei Ling remained with her parents until a couple of years ago, when she decided to buy her own flat. But her motive for doing so was not to escape from her parents.

For me, the reason why I wanted to go and get a flat outside [i.e. away from her parents] is that finally the flat, which belongs to my parents, if they pass away, it will be divided among the four of us, okay. So maybe you can foresee that next time there might be arguments over money so I prefer to have my own [flat]. But I had a very difficult time persuading my parents that I'm not dropping them and moving out on my own. So it took quite some time to convince them. Of course I explained the reason why I'm doing it. I should get used to be alone because in future, let's say I'm not married [then] I'll be alone when they are not around. So it's better to adjust now than to adjust later when they are not around, so finally they agreed that I can go and buy my own flat.

In Mei Ling's particular case, her decision to move out was triggered by a combination of factors. She realizes that there may be future conflicts over the inheritance, and in order to evade such a situation she bought a separate flat. Although Mei Ling does not intend to desert or break away from her parents, they have difficulties accepting her decision.

It's very traumatic for them if the last daughter who is not married just moves out and comes to see them only during weekends. Because after all, we have lived together for so many years. So I decided to stay half the week at my place, to get my own privacy and space, and half the week with them. In the beginning that was the perfect picture but then after a while it's not so fun, kind of lonely, so nowadays I move back to my parents' place more often.

Mei Ling is very attached to her parents and siblings. Without having any children of her own, she enjoys their company preferring it to spending time alone in her own flat. Unmarried children, who, like Mei Ling, remain in the parental home and have no family of their own, typically end up being the main caregiver to elderly parents. However, there is a difference between sons and daughters with regard to the form of support. Both daughters and sons are now expected to provide financial support, but compared to sons, the expectations on daughters are also tied up with emotional care and practical assistance in the household (e.g. cooking, cleaning, washing).<sup>83</sup> Jane, another unmarried female, once pointed out that, “it’s always the single child who ends up taking care of the parents”. Jane herself has no other siblings and alone supports her elderly mother.

The rising number of unmarried persons, just like the declining birth rate, is a serious concern for the government. A survey on family life conducted in 2001 singled out educated unmarried females in their thirties for holding the most negative attitudes to marriage and parenthood (compared to unmarried men in the same age cohort) (*Attitudes on Family: Survey on Social Attitudes of Singaporeans 2001*). But at the same time as these women are criticized for not performing their national duty of marriage and childbearing, they play a crucial role in the preservation of filial piety by caring for elderly parents. It should be remembered that the emphasis on marriage is not only a matter of population policies and national ideology. There is also a strong social pressure involved, and unmarried people often feel stigmatized for not conforming to the norm. This is especially evident during Chinese New Year celebrations, when unmarried family members and friends are entitled to receive red packets with money from those who are married. Angela, who is still unmarried at the age of 38, did not enjoy celebrating the Chinese New Year for this very reason. “I always get the question ‘isn’t it about time you get married?’” she said to me. Although the Chinese New Year first and foremost celebrates the family reunion, Angela prefers to travel overseas during the festive season.<sup>84</sup>

83 The gendered perception of daughters as more caring than sons is not unique to Singapore. A study on intergenerational expectations in rural northern China shows that while daughters increasingly provide financial support to their parents, they are also expected to provide practical assistance in the household (Miller 2004: 34ff).

84 Her strained relationship with her father, portrayed in the previous chapter, is of course a further incentive to escape the New Year celebrations.

## Delegating Care in the Global City

Intergenerational obligations are not only about providing money; they also include practical care, whether we talk about the care of elderly family members or young children. For families where both spouses work, it is far easier to provide the financial support than practical care. Ever since Singapore embarked on its ambitious industrialization program in the 1960s, there has been a growing demand for women to enter the formal wage economy. The participation of women in the formal wage economy presupposes that they can be freed from much of their work within the household. To encourage more women to join the labor force, the government launched the Foreign Maids scheme in 1978, by which Singaporeans can employ foreign domestic maids. Today, Singapore has one of the highest proportions of Foreign Domestic Workers (FDW) worldwide, with no fewer than one in seven households hiring a Foreign Domestic Worker (*Straits Times* 2 Feb 2003).<sup>85</sup>

To employ a foreign domestic worker is relatively cheap, and considered to be normal for any middle-class family. A domestic worker earns an average of \$S250-300 per month depending on their country of origin. This should be seen in comparison with the average monthly income in Singapore, which in 2000 was estimated to be S\$3,114 (based on the resident population aged 15 years and over) (*Census of Population 2000*). Indonesian maids are at the lower end of the scale (approximately \$S250), while Filipino maids are more expensive due to regulations imposed by the Philippine government (approximately \$S350). Singaporean employers rationalize this wage difference with the argument that Filipino maids generally have a higher level of education and speak fluent English compared to, for instance, Indonesian maids. The employer is required to pay an additional Foreign Domestic Worker levy to the government of approximately \$S300 per month, and provide the maid with board and lodging, but the total sum is a bargain considering that the maid's tasks usually exceed childcare.<sup>86</sup> Apart from the fact that a maid can look after two or even three children for the same salary, most employers expect her to clean, wash, cook, and perhaps look after elderly members of the household. The fact that the domestic workers are from less developed countries, like Indone-

85 In 2004, there were more than 140,000 Foreign Domestic Workers in Singapore (current information is available at the website of the Ministry of Manpower, <http://www.mom.gov.sg>).

86 The levy is adjusted from time to time as a means of stemming the inflow of foreign maids. In an attempt to further facilitate childcare and eldercare at home, the levy has been slightly reduced for families with children below the age of 12, or with elderly persons aged 65 years and above (Ministry of Manpower, <http://www.mom.gov.sg/ProceduresAndGuidelines/WorkPermit/ForEmployersofForeignDomesticWorkers/GeneralGuideonEmploymentofForeignDomesticWorkers.htm> [accessed 29 September 2005]).

sia, Philippines and Sri Lanka, legitimizes their low wage, both in the eyes of the Singapore government and in the eyes of the Singaporean employers. Maids are not seen as being exploited because even though their wage is very low in relation to Singapore standards, it is a lot of money converted to the standards of their home country.

The foreign domestic worker stands in sharp contrast to the far more privileged category of foreign workers called “foreign talent”, such as professionals, executives and managers. If the purpose of attracting “foreign talent” is to boost Singapore’s position as a global hub, the purpose of foreign domestic workers is to free the local skilled workforce from domestic work. As Saskia Sassen (1994: 5) shows in her work on global cities, unskilled low-wage jobs are necessary to facilitate the expansion of the financial industry and specialized services, and this, in turn, generates “new economic inequalities within cities”. These economic inequalities are intertwined with ethnicity and origin. Being a small city-state, the unskilled jobs in Singapore are filled by migrant workers from poorer countries in the region. The fact that some women (i.e. middle-class) can be freed from housework and pursue a career by delegating the housework to a maid (or an elderly mother or mother-in-law) does not really change the gendered perception of housework as a female responsibility. As noted by Nirmala Purushotam (1997: 555), “the costs of being working mothers and working women are effectively curtailed only by shifting the burden to another group of women [e.g. FDW]. Nothing basic has or seemingly has to be changed. For women still do the housework and mind the children”.

The relation between maid and host family is often marked with ambivalence. At the same time as the maid actually lives in, and thus is a part of, the household she works in, her very presence is a potential threat against family harmony. A recurrent problem voiced by employers is that their children get too attached to the maid, who is the one providing the daily emotional and practical care. Angela, for instance, was convinced that her sister’s Indonesian maid purposely tried to turn the kids against their parents. She even suspected that the maid was practicing black magic. Angela claimed to have found hairs, letters and other personal belongings of the family members in the maid’s bags. On one occasion, Angela showed me a small plastic jar containing the hairs, which she had found among the maid’s belongings. She believed that the maid used these in black magic rituals aimed at taking control over the host family. Auntie Teo, Linda’s mother, expressed a similar fear that their Filipino maid is capable of harming the family through occult practices, in case she sees a reason to do so.<sup>87</sup>

87 The fear of black magic has nothing to do with the person’s religious beliefs; whereas Angela and her sister are Christians, Auntie Teo is a Buddhist.

In a certain sense, the fear of black magic – imagined or not – is the maid's only weapon in relation to her employer. Although Angela did not live with her sister's family she spent a lot of time there and did not hesitate to scold the maid. No doubt the dislike was mutual. It escalated on the day that Angela without further ado searched through the maid's belongings for traces of black magic. Angela was well aware of the anger her actions provoked. She even hypothesized that the maid would take revenge by poisoning the food, and for a period of time she did not dare to eat meals prepared by the maid unless she had supervised the cooking. The discontentment with the Indonesian maid escalated to the point where Angela's sister fired her and hired a new maid.

Incidents of maids being abused by their employers are frequently reported in the media, as are incidents of maids committing suicide, sometimes by jumping out of windows in high-rise estates. Just as often though, one reads of incidents of maids mistreating or abusing the children in their care. Carole's eldest brother, Edwin, and his wife, Wendy, subsequently decided to fire their Indonesian maid to save costs. This decision was preceded by a heightened disapproval of the maid's behavior. Some of the complaints concerned the maid's interest in using make up, and wearing trinkets and new clothes. "She likes to dress up nowadays", Carole explained to me in a disapproving tone. Carole's sister-in-law, Wendy, also suspected, but had no proof, that the maid was beating the children. Another source of irritation was that the maid had begun to socialize with other Indonesian maids in the neighborhood. For a number of reasons, employers are reluctant to let their maids out of their sight. For example, when maids meet outside, they get a chance to exchange tips on how to best manipulate their host families. They get more streetwise, hence less submissive. Another concern is that the maid may enter into sexual relationships with male foreign workers and become pregnant, or worse, that the maid will top up her salary by selling sexual services. The suspicion of prostitution is especially strong with regard to Filipino maids who, unlike Indonesian maids, claim one free day per week. The suspicion that the maid will acquire sly ideas or, even worse, become sexually involved if she goes outside is seen by some employers as a justification for locking the maid in. Angela's sister, who nearly had a nervous breakdown due to her paranoia, locked the door from the outside when she went out to prevent the maid from leaving the house. Other employers install video cameras in their flats to make sure the maid does not misbehave when they are absent. Such excessive attempts to restrict the maid's freedom should be seen against the fact that the employer is responsible in case the maid violates the terms of her work permit, including getting pregnant or committing crime. To minimize the risk of losing the mandatory security deposit of S\$5,000, employers, by various means, seek to

restrict the maid's access to the public sphere, where they are exposed to "moral and social pollution" (Yeoh and Huang 2000: 590).

## Negotiating Intergenerational Exchanges

The notion of filial piety, no doubt, emphasizes children's obligations to parents. In reality, however, intergenerational obligations and expectations partly move in both directions. Elderly parents in Singapore are not only receivers of support; they are also providers of support in the form of baby-sitting, cooking, or other housework (cf. Chan 1997; Mehta, 1999; Teo et al., 2003). I described in the prologue how Bee Choo and her mother live in the same housing estate, only a few floors apart (her mother lives with Bee Choo's eldest brother). Despite their past conflicts, Bee Choo appreciates having her mother nearby since it facilitates family cooperation. It is easier for Bee Choo to attend to anything her mother needs if she is nearer, and she knows that her mother likes to meet her children on a daily basis. Although the maintenance of elderly parents can be financially heavy, the intergenerational support is not one-sided, as Bee Choo's mother helps taking care of the grandchildren. In this respect, the gains of living nearby are mutual:

My mum is still at a stage in her life where she is quite contributing. She [has] stopped working, but she is looking after my kids. So she cooks, she comes in the day to my flat and she looks after my children, she supervises my maid, she cooks the meals and we are eating together with my brother. So she's actually doing a lot for the family, she's an important source of support. Although she's been sickly quite often now, looking after her when she is sick, the burden is not squarely on anyone of us, because there are three of us. So yeah, it's okay, and she is still contributing to the family, so it's hasn't come to a point where we...where the strain of taking care of her is felt. Yeah. But I do buy insurance policies for her, for her medical [costs], and all this is not on her request. All this is not on her request you know, but yeah, [I'm] thinking that she will need this, in the long run.

No doubt, grandparents are an appreciated and important alternative to childcare centers or domestic workers. John and Karen received a great deal of assistance from Karen's parents after the birth of their first child. Karen had no intention of resigning from her employment, and decided to go back to work after the standard maternity leave of two months. For John and Karen, it was ultimately a choice between having one income or two incomes. They would survive on one income, but in order to keep their present standard of

living they need two incomes. Karen and John had made an agreement with Karen's mother to take care of the baby round the clock on all weekdays. The decision to have, as John put it, a "weekend-baby" is a common arrangement in Singapore, especially if a couple has the possibility of leaving the baby in the trusting arms of their own parents. As John and Karen feel confident in leaving their baby in the care of Karen's mother, they are able to focus on their careers and get a proper night's sleep. John and Karen visit the baby every day after work, but they only bring her home for the weekends.

Besides assistance from grandparents, it is also common to hire a full-time maid or to send the children to a child-care center. The increasing demand among working couples for flexible and extensive child-care services has spurred some childcare centers to offer 24-hour service. Child-care centers, however, can be a costly affair. The monthly fee (in 2005) for full-day child-care services for a three-year-old is approximately S\$450–550 at childcare centers around Singapore, while 24-hour care can cost as much as S\$1,400 a month. Child-care centers are thus an expensive option compared to getting grandparents to assist or to employing a maid. Those of my informants who had young children preferred to engage their own parents (or parents-in-law) before using childcare centers or employing a foreign domestic worker. Grandparents are perceived as the ultimate people to transmit proper values to the new generation. Whereas the foreign maid stands for cultural pollution and is seen as incapable of transmitting proper values to children, grandparents stand for cultural purity and cultural continuity. Furthermore, grandparental assistance is a cheap option. The fact that assistance from grandparents enables young parents to continue wage labor makes them higher valued. Seen from that angle, elderly family members are not just a burden on the younger generations. On the contrary, they are also a resource. Despite the important role played by grandparents in this regard, their services are not really conceived of as labor because it takes place within the family. A grandparent does not get a formal salary, although they usually get some extra pocket-money for the effort. The "grandparents-option", of course, is also strongly encouraged by the government as an aspect of its family ideology.

We should not dismiss the fact that many grandparents happily do housework and take care of grandchildren, indeed even insisting on it. But it is not always a matter of pure choice. When children surpass their parents in education and income, it brings about an increased ambiguity concerning what factors have precedence in defining authority within the family, i.e. whether the authority is based on old age or educational/occupational status. Social seniority should not be conflated with parental authority, although they are likely to reinforce one another. Maurice Freedman (1970: 5) observed this connec-



tion in his work on Chinese family and kinship: “one may speculate that a father’s authority will be exercised more forcefully and for a longer time when the family enjoys wealth and high social standing, i.e. when his authority is buttressed by economic power and influence derived from the extra-domestic sphere”. It should not be assumed that economic or political status is a prerequisite for the fulfillment of filial obligations, but it is probably correct to say that wealthy parents are able to exercise a higher degree of authority within the family. For one thing, it makes them economically independent of their children in old age. Furthermore, a parent with substantial economic resources would be in a better position to exert influence on his/her child in controlling the inheritance of those resources. However, in the average Singaporean family, elderly parents are unable to manifest their authority by economic means. As Bee Choo once said, the best way to survive in old age today is to be as much an asset to the family and the society as possible:

My mum is still an asset. She looks after my kids and all that kind of things. She’s an asset. So if I can do something like that, if I can be a value. That is the only way. An asset can also be because you have a lot of money, so you don’t need to depend on your children. The children may come to you because you have the money. Yeah, this is why I said the only way is to continue being a value, *lah*, to the society. Not becoming redundant and a liability, but that’s the big challenge. As much as I try I’m gonna soon become obsolete.

While many of the traditional incitements to filial piety, such as the fear of social and supernatural sanctions, have been weakened in modern society, it is ever so important for the elderly to ensure care in old age. One way for elderly parents to cement the intergenerational contract is through providing support to their own children, with the hope of getting repaid later in life (cf. Ikels 1993). As I have already pointed out, the reproduction of this contractual relationship does not mean that it is an agreement made between equals. What is even more interesting, the original principle of filial piety – whereby children are subordinated to parents – sometimes appears totally inverted. Elderly parents who are financially dependent on their children may be *obliged* to offer their services as a form of service in return. This was the case for Angela’s mother, Auntie Chan. Auntie Chan, who is now in her seventies, has never taken up any paid employment before. Auntie Chan’s husband was the sole breadwinner, while she stayed at home to raise their six children. I mentioned earlier that their marriage was very unhappy and eventually ended in a divorce. Angela’s father, who has had permanent employment and has Central Provident Fund savings, manages to live in a flat on his own. Auntie Chan, on the other hand, has no savings and is totally dependant upon her children for

accommodation and monetary support. She is currently living with her eldest son, his wife and their little son. Her remaining children contribute by giving her pocket-money, paying for medical bills, taking her out for dinner, and so forth. In exchange for living at her son's home, Auntie Chan's is expected to prepare dinner on weekdays and to take care of the grandson after school. "She has to do it, it's her job," Angela said. "If she doesn't do it, they kick her out." The fact that none of the other children has enough space to accommodate Auntie Chan makes her vulnerable when negotiating the terms of the arrangement. From that perspective, her services are an insurance of continuous support rather than voluntary assistance.

## Transmitting the Contract across Generations

An important question is if and how the intergenerational contract, as described in this study, is transmitted to the next generation. Most of the young parents I worked with said that they do not *expect* their own children to support them in the future. The increasing preference (as in verbally expressed preference) among parents to rely on own savings has also been observed in other studies in Singapore and across Asia (Chung et al. 1981; Chen et al. 1982; Sun and Liu 1994; Mehta 1999). However, the situation is more complex than meets the eye. It is methodologically crucial to distinguish between verbally expressed expectations and implicit expectations. A lesson I learnt during my fieldwork was precisely that expectations on financial and material support can be extremely subtle. Some informants pointed that out themselves. Daniel, for example, dismissed the idea that parents no longer expect their children to be filial: "Although most of them, verbally they say they don't [expect anything from their children], I know that deep down inside, they *wish*, they *want to*. Because being Chinese is sometimes a very reserved [behavior]. We don't say [it] but deep down inside we want. We want." Daniel stressed the importance of teaching children to reciprocate with monetary as well as practical support to their parents. Even so, he acknowledged that children are an insecure investment. Here Daniel's own doubts regarding children's responsibilities surfaced. Despite having maintained that parents do expect their children to reciprocate, he is not certain that these expectations will materialize into actual deed. His uncertainty in this regard was clearly visible in the way he reminded me that, "things have changed over the years, so we don't expect it, but of course if it *does* happen, then it's a bonus. If it doesn't,

then we have to take care of ourselves [in old-age].” Daniel blames the erosion of children’s sense of familial responsibilities on “Western” influence:

Singapore has become too Westernized, too Westernized culture. And you realize that – I don’t know about your country – but most Westerners are very nomadic in nature because due to the home, the place they came from, big as US, so they travel from country, from state to state to seek greener pastures, and then they marry to somebody in another state, you know. So because of all this Western influence they don’t really look after us. There’s no guarantee that they will now become [filial], and that’s the reason why [we have] five [children], so at least my chances are higher.

Guaranteed or not, Daniel doubts that he will have sufficient savings by the time he retires, and perhaps will be forced to rely partly on his children. Bee Choo likewise remarked on the increasingly ambivalent attitude toward expectations on children’s responsibilities among young parents. On one hand they try to adopt a realistic attitude, and keep reminding each other not to count on their children in old age. On the other hand, they would certainly be disappointed if their children actually turned out not to care for them. “You say [that you don’t expect anything] to remind yourself, but at the same time you hope that they will [give you support],” Bee Choo said. In a similar way, Carole claimed that she and Alan prefer to be financially independent in old age and that they will not force their children to support them. But the expectation to “pay back” is deeply rooted, and on other occasions Carole indicated precisely that. For example, she once pointed out that it was much better to have two children instead of only one, as it would be a heavy burden for the single child to be responsible for the old parents. No sooner said she was shortly thereafter pregnant with their second child.

This precautionous attitude reflects an uncertainty regarding their children’s future capability, as well as willingness, to support elderly parents. As Bee Choo pointed out, “inculcating [filial piety] is no guarantee that your child would eventually do it. Because I mean, my pragmatism is this, I don’t know what kind of world, what kind of challenges there will be when they [my children] become adult, when I become old, when I become a liability.” The rapidly changing society makes Bee Choo uncertain that her own children will express their concern and respect in the form of financial support.

If they [my children] grow up in a context where you don’t show respect by giving your parents money, then so be it. But they can...they still need to show respect in other ways, and concern for the parents in other ways. So because I think, we all grow up in different time of the world, and that means in that context we have different ways of doing things. The underlying value will be the same, but the way of expressing it is different, and there’s no one prescribed way, *lah*, to me. So, I wouldn’t insist that since I’m brought up with the value to show filial piety to my mum I must give her money,

that when I'm old I expect you to give me money. But I will expect you to show consideration for me, if I need money, if I need care, things like that, yeah. But I would, in that light, also say that 'okay, I will save for myself, plan for myself so that I don't have the expectation that you must care for me when I'm old'. That was not possible during my parents' time. During my parents time it was not possible to save for the future. So you had to rely on your kids to look after you when you're old, but in my context it's different. So in that sense it's okay for her [Bee Choo's daughter] to show her feelings by other ways.

Young parents repeatedly point out that the increasing costs of living will make it harder – if not impossible – for the next generation, i.e. their own children, to look after elderly parents. The intergenerational contract is indeed under pressure, but certain ideas and practices regarding the dyadic parent-child relation are reproduced across generations. Despite the fact that young parents claim to have little hope in receiving future support, they certainly try to transmit the idea that children are expected to reciprocate to their parents. Whereas some parents explicitly state their expectations about receiving future support, other parents choose a more subtle approach, such as giving examples. A common strategy is to give money to their own parents in front of their children. This was the strategy Daniel used in teaching his children to reciprocate to parents.

When we give gifts to our parents, our children will ask 'why are you giving gifts to grandparents?' Ah, then this is how we will tell them. Because they have eyes and ears to see and hear, and we will bring our parents out for lunches and dinners on birthday celebrations and certain special occasions. So when they see [how we treat our parents], this picture will be superimposed in their mind, and when they are older and start to understand things, then they will realize what we've been doing. So eventually when our turn comes they will do that to us.

Other parents even let their children hand over money to the grandparents on their behalf. One problem with the erosion of multi-tier families in favor of nuclear families is that there are fewer opportunities for young children to observe the interaction between their own parents and grandparents, which also means fewer opportunities for parents to give examples of "filial piety". Another way of reminding children of the expectation to repay one's parents is to pose rhetorical questions. Peter, for example, makes it a point to regularly ask his children: "So when I'm old will you take care of me? Will you give me some money?" Although he poses the question in a joking fashion, he hopes that the message gets across. In a similar way, Andy recalled how his maternal auntie used to remind him when he was a child that, "one day when you grow up and make money you must give your mother spending-money".

These kinds of expectations are not only passed down from parent to child, but also cemented through the media. At the time of fieldwork, Singapore television broadcasted the popular Hong Kong serial *A Kindred Spirit*. This drama series gives a portrait of familial relationships in modern Hong Kong, but bears many similarities to Chinese customs and family life in Singapore. My Singaporeans friends in fact encouraged me to watch *A Kindred Spirit* to get an idea of Chinese culture. The episodes illustrate various features of social life, from Chinese New Year celebrations and wedding dinners to familial obligations and conflicts. Parents often use these kinds of serials to illustrate “filial behavior” to their children, by condemning or praising the actions of the characters. In the past, before TV, filial piety was a common theme in Chinese opera plays and bedtime stories.

Elder Uncle Wong, who is in his sixties, emphasized the importance of actively teaching children to be filial, in the past as well as nowadays: “It’s inculcation. It’s how you teach your children.” When Elder Uncle Wong was young he was taught to respect and repay his parents, both from home and in school. In school they had a textbook that cited examples of filial piety. He recalled a story about the crow. When the young crow grew up, it returned to feed its parents, who were old and could no longer fly. The tale about the filial crow is well known, and was often quoted by my older informants. There are plenty of similar tales, for example, the tale of the son who slept naked on his bed only to entice the mosquitoes from his old parents, or the tale of the son who disguised himself as a deer to get the milk that would cure his parents’ eye disease. Even if children today laugh at such stories, which admittedly appear old-fashioned, the value of filial piety (in the sense of supporting and respecting parents) is still taught in school as part of civic and moral education. If children are indeed less reliable today, it is hardly to be blamed on the school curriculum alone. As this chapter shows, the goal of maintaining a high living standard and the increasing costs of raising children makes it difficult for young parents to simultaneously meet the needs of elderly and younger dependents, but whether this has in fact caused a change in children’s *willingness* to fulfill such filial obligations or not, is a different issue.

## Summary

This chapter has addressed the challenges facing the continuity of intergenerational contract among Chinese Singaporeans. To begin with, the rapid social

mobility across generations has weakened the position of elderly parents vis-à-vis their children in terms of economic capacity and social status. The weakened position of the elderly is accompanied by the increase of resource flows from parents to young children. The focus on children is further heightened by the dramatic fertility decline, and the emerging preference for nuclear family arrangements. Meanwhile, these challenges have not, as predicted in various modernization theories, led to the dissolution of resource flows from adult children to elderly parents. Instead, the intergenerational contract has been re-worked in a number of ways. While many young couples prefer to live in nuclear units, intergenerational support cuts across these units. The ethnography illustrates how cohabitation is a negotiated aspect of the intergenerational contract, and how separate living arrangements are compensated by financial support. The expectations on children's filial obligations have also been re-interpreted with regard to gender. Whereas elderly parents traditionally relied on sons for financial support, daughters too have become important providers of such support as they enter the labor force. Finally, this chapter highlighted the fact that the intergenerational contract contains mutual support. While the sandwich-generation is squeezed between elder and younger dependents, they are themselves dependent on the informal assistance provided by elderly family members, due to the limited possibilities of both public care for the elderly and childcare.



## CHAPTER 7

# Conclusion: Living in Transition

When I began my fieldwork in Singapore I was intrigued by the seeming contradiction between traditional family values and the huge generational divide caused by the dramatic transformation of the society. The Singaporean experience of modernity is peculiar in several respects, but what is most striking are the parallel processes of conspicuous intergenerational integration and disintegration. While the family remains a pivotal feature of society and the primary unit of support, Singapore represents one of the most rapidly changing societies worldwide. As such, this study has attempted to expose this modernity from below; to capture the ethnographic reality of the “maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish” (Berman 1983: 15).

During fieldwork, I focused in particular on the category of people belonging to the so-called sandwich generation. The sandwich generation, as any generation in the anthropological interpretation, is not a biological fact; it is, as Mannheim (1952: 291) would have it, a matter of “social location”, directly linked to rapid upward mobility. The sandwich generation is intriguing in the sense that it more or less embodies the transition to modern society; of the world they grew up in, only fragments remain. Many of the ethnographic stories I have depicted here contain experiences of this transition; they unfold the ideas and strategies people employ in coping with a deep and complex generation gap.



## The Generation Gap

The complexity of the generational divide in Singapore makes modernization theory an insufficient frame of analysis. In this study I have suggested an approach that takes into account processes of both fragmentation and consolidation, and the levels at which these processes occur. As such, the fragmentation of intergenerational continuity has to be discussed in relation to different dimensions of modernity, in which economic development is but one – albeit influential – aspect.

In Chapter 4, I tried to shed light on how subjective aspirations of being modern as well as the political regimes implementing a modernist project are driving forces in the emergence of intergenerational differences. The Singapore government is one of a kind, with powerful tools to exercise meticulous social engineering in its ambition to further modernize the country. One of the most severe consequences of the state-propelled modernity project is the decline of dialects in favor of Mandarin and English. Through language policies and the ban on dialects, the government has effectively discouraged young children from learning the language of their predecessors. The language policies were, as I have already pointed out, part of an attempt to (re-)define the cultural heritage of the Chinese community as well as molding a modern and civilized society, wherein dialects are supposedly inadequate. This intervention is by no means a trivial matter. Apart from obstructing verbal communication between people of different age, the language policies have led to a heightening discrimination of dialect-speaking elderly in the public sphere and unequal access to information. No doubt, the actual disadvantage of elderly in everyday life stands in sharp contrast to the notion of seniority upheld by the state. As Bee Choo said: “This is a world that favors the young, not the old. Being old is a liability.”

What now manifests itself as a multiplex generational divide is not, of course, a simple result of external forces. Having grown up under poor circumstances in the village or in a shabby urban area without modern conveniences, the sandwich generation benefited not merely from a modernity project run from “above”; they themselves were the “motor” behind the development in their aspirations to make a better life for themselves and their children. Living in this transition is, as we have seen, a potentially conflict-ridden existence characterized by changing ideas of family life and filial piety. Whereas the extended family is a popular representation of Chinese family life, young couples increasingly establish their own households. As both men and women pursue careers outside the home, they are often forced to substitute

practical and emotional care for elderly family members with financial and material support. An even more problematic reinterpretation of filial piety appears among young people who convert to Christianity and reject the practice of ancestor worship. By rejecting ancestor worship, they not only dissociate themselves from Chinese religion, they also dissociate themselves from fulfilling their filial obligations to deceased parents and ancestors. In this regard, religion is an explosive issue that causes tensions and conflicts within the family. To refuse fulfilling obligations to ancestors is comparable to refuse fulfilling obligations to one's parents while they are alive, as ancestors who are neglected will suffer in the netherworld. Christian children, on their part, are convinced that their parents will suffer for a completely different reason, namely that those who are not Christian are doomed to end up in hell.

Living in transition is not only about conflicts. It is also about negotiating the differences. The sandwich generation finds itself in-between old ways of life and new ways of life, and, by result, its members often have to act as a mediating link between the generations preceding and following their own. Their mediating role applies in many situations where elder and younger generations are gathered, although it is most pronounced when they have to act as interpreters due to the shifting usage of language. The sandwich generation is caught in the middle in yet another, and very crucial, respect. In struggling to maintain their life-style in a competitive society, they have to devote an increasing amount of resources on the upbringing of their own children. The constant reminder from the government that the people are wholly dependent on their capacity to "up-grade" their skills and their status only serves to further intensify their quest for continuous upward mobility. In the midst of this quest, they are also responsible for the maintenance of their elderly parents, who often lack the means to support themselves.

## The Intergenerational Contract from Above and from Below

At the same time as the massive transformation of Singapore has had a disastrous effect on cultural continuity across generations, there are specific ways in which elder and younger generations are tied together. As a way of analyzing and interpreting the integrative mechanisms, I have elaborated on the concept of an intergenerational contract. As such, I have attempted to show that the notion of a contract is relevant in understanding both the strategies

people employ in relation to the political economy and the lack of public welfare, and the cultural logic of intergenerational roles and responsibilities.

In Singapore, the idea of a contractual relationship between parents and children is cemented by the government's family politics, which explicitly locates the responsibility of welfare within the family. Through the implementation of the Maintenance of Parents Act – whereby children are legally responsible for elderly parents – the notion of an intergenerational contract is reproduced literally within the framework of the modern state. This act is part the project of establishing an anti-welfare society, where families, rather than the state, are responsible for the well-being of its members. In a White Paper on Shared Values, issued by the Singapore government in 1991, the message was as clear as ever.<sup>88</sup>

In recent decades many developed societies have witnessed a trend towards heavier reliance on the state to take care of the aged, and more permissive social mores, such as increasing acceptance of “alternative lifestyles”, casual sexual relationships and single parenthood. The result has been to weaken the family unit. Singapore should not follow these untested fashions uncritically (*Shared Values* 1991: 3–4).

The Singapore government rationalizes its family politics in terms of Asian culture (i.e. the idea that Asian families are inherently strong and self-sufficient), but it should be remembered that the anti-welfare policy is part of the ambition of molding a society that is flexibly tuned to the global economy. This is also the reason why the emphasis on the family remains, in spite of the decline of the Asian Values ideology in recent years. To keep a competitive edge, the government is aimed at creating favorable conditions for multinational enterprises, and cannot be burdened with providing social welfare indiscriminately.

However, in this study I have suggested that the binding agent must also be found in the culture of intergenerational obligations and expectations. That is, the intergenerational contract has to be understood not only in relation to the political economy and the state, but also in relation to a specific cultural logic whereby it is represented and interpreted. The ethnographic material of this study attempts to lay bare an intergenerational contract governed by sentiments of indebtedness and repayment. Chinese social relationships are characterized by clearly defined roles and responsibilities, and so are familial relationships. It is the duty of every child to take care of his or her parents in old age, since they were the ones' who gave you life and brought you up. It is the repayment of a debt inherent in the role as a child. Intergenerational transac-

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<sup>88</sup> The formulation of the *Shared Values* in 1991 was an attempt to strengthen national consciousness and define a set of core values shared by all Singaporeans.

tions in Chinese families are, as we have seen, very specific and, as such, serve to reaffirm a dyadic parent-child relation. You cannot repay your debt indirectly; it is a matter between two parties. (This can be contrasted to, for instance, Malay families, where transactions appear to be less specific and more indirect.) The cultural understanding of the intergenerational contract also has implications for the ways in which the intimate realm of it intersects with a modern capitalist economy. Money has historically been a pivotal feature of social life in Chinese society, and I have attempted to show how monetary transactions, perhaps increasingly so, serve to regenerate the intergenerational contract among Chinese Singaporeans as a means of defining and maintaining a specific social order.

While the dyadic parent-child relation is reproduced, it is not a constant; for reasons discussed in this study, it seems to have become less hierarchical and more reciprocal. The challenges facing intergenerational relations in contemporary Singapore are, as we have seen, many and complex. The dramatic leap in education and income put many elderly at a disadvantage vis-à-vis their children, which is also visible in a declining status of seniority. The increase of resources devoted to young children, as well as the longevity which prolongs the responsibility for aged parents, force families to carefully negotiate obligations. In the absence of sufficient public welfare, intergenerational support – in both directions – is crucial in managing daily life. Just as elderly family members are dependent on their children for financial and practical aid, so are many adult children dependent on elderly family members for assistance with housework and childcare while they take on paid employment outside the home. As pointed out by other scholars, this kind of mutual dependency serves to reproduce the contractual relationship between parents and children (e.g. Ikels 1993; Lillard and Willis 1997; Croll 2000).

## Further Research

This study should be seen as a contribution to the anthropology of intergenerational relations in modern societies. Not only is there a lack of ethnographically grounded studies of intergenerational relations in modern societies, there is also, I suggest, a lack of adequate analytical concepts in dealing with this phenomenon. The concept of an intergenerational contract has been an attempt to develop a tool in understanding the mechanisms binding generations to one another. Suggestions for further research would comprise the

elaboration of the notion of an intergenerational contract, and in particular elaborate the variables or dimensions of how the contract can be differently designed in different cultural contexts.

This study has also argued for the importance of analyzing familial or generational relations within the context of states and larger political economy. Even though the state, for reasons discussed previously, is extremely influential in Singapore, states play a very active role in all of the newly modernizing societies across Asia. Suggestions for further research should therefore include a call to investigate the impact of the state on family life in other Asian societies.

The phenomenon “sandwich generation” is by no means exceptional. As it arises as a result of rapid social change, it is likely to arise at different points of time in different societies. In the context of the rapidly modernizing societies of Asia, further research can be pursued on how rapid social change affects cultural continuity across generations, and the strategies that different generations develop in the face of these challenges.

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# Glossary

*Ang moh*: means “red-hair” in Hokkien and refers to Caucasians.

*Boh chup*: nonchalant; a person who does not bother about others.

*Kaypoh*: busybody or nosey parker.

*Kampung*: a Malay term for village.

*Kiasu*: afraid of loosing out (Hokkien term).

*Kongsi*: Chinese mutual benefit organization.

*Kopi*: coffee with milk.

*Kopi o*: coffee without milk.

*Kopitiam*: coffee shop.

*Nanyang*: “south sea”, a Chinese term referring to Southeast Asia.

*Rojak*: a salad of mixed vegetables with sauce (Malay origin). *Rojak* is often used as an adjective with the meaning “eclectic”.

*Singlish*: The creolized form of English spoken in Singapore. Singlish is characterized by a non-conventional grammatical structure, and a mixture of colloquial words and phrases.

*Sinkeh*: Hokkien term meaning “new comer”. In colonial days, *sinkeh* referred to new Chinese migrant (usually labor migrants) as opposed to the local-born *Straits Chinese*.

*Straits Chinese*: local-born Chinese in colonial Malaya (called also *Baba* or *Peranakan*).



# Abbreviations

CPF	Central Provident Fund
FDW	Foreign Domestic Worker
HDB	Housing and Development Board
MCDS	Ministry of Community Development and Sports
MCYS	Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (former Ministry of Community Development and Sports)
MNC	Multinational Company
MRT	Mass Rapid Transit
PAP	People's Action Party
SAGE	Singapore Action Group of Elders
SARS	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome



