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Spaces of Silence: Single Parenthood and the 'Normal Family' in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

Alternative family forms have begun to emerge in the Confucian societies of East and Southeast Asia, concomitant with widespread demographic changes and new socioeconomic conditions. In Singapore, the state tends to configure 'single parents' – including divorcees, unmarried parents and widowed parents – as 'unfortunate' and constituting an unhealthy trend, in opposition to the normal, dual-parent household. This paper examines how single parents in Singapore reconfigure their definitions of the family both discursively and through practical means, in response to the 'traditional', Confucian concept of the complete family propounded by the government. Through in-depth interviews with middle-class Chinese Singaporean single mothers and fathers, this paper also explores how single parents employ strategies at two levels: in practical decisions relating to childcare; and discursively, through the articulation of remarriage and fertility desires, in which patriarchal notions of the roles of husband/wife and mother/father are embedded. Copyright © 2004 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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INTRODUCTION

Changing family structures throughout the developed world have long occupied the attention of researchers, although population geographers have been slower to recognise the importance and relevance of this research to the traditional concerns of the subdiscipline. Developing understandings of household and family transformations can be seen as part of population geography's remit to situate demographic trends within wider social, economic and political contexts (Graham and Boyle, 2001). Over the last few decades, 'alternative' family structures have become an increasingly visible part of the social landscape, and, as Ogden (1999) pointed out, these new forms result from changing demographic and socioeconomic behaviour. The burgeoning literature on single-parent households reflects the new reality of the family in North America (see Kitson and Morgan, 1990; White, 1990; Bumpass and Raley, 1995; Axinn and Thornton, 1996), but work on the comparable consequences of rapid urbanisation and changing demographic characteristics of other populations beyond the developed world remains sparse (Lee *et al*., 1999). Nevertheless, there is increasing recognition that demographic change in many parts of the world is leading to alterations in traditional family forms. Parts of Asia, in particular, have now entered into a period of low or replacement-level fertility. While demographic trends in Asia are often taken to emulate the demographic transition in North

America and Europe in terms of falling birth rates, rising age at first marriage and increasing cohabitation, sexual relations outside of marriage, and divorce, the similarities stop at the descriptive level. Beyond this, there is insufficient recognition that trends such as single parenthood are experienced differently across different societies, since important contextual factors (government, history, culture) vary. These factors mean that single parenthood in Asia, for example, is not seen as warranting the same sort of attention by researchers, nor viewed in the same way by society generally as it is in the Western world. The merits of directly importing ideas from the current literature to studies of the non-Western world are, therefore, open to question.

Yet research on both Western and non-Western contexts has acknowledged that in many areas of the world, the dual-parent family continues to be viewed – at least by the state – as a 'normal' and desirable basis for society, with the consequent exclusion of other family forms, such as single-parent families (Hartman, 1995; Struening, 1999). Hartman (1995) has couched the tension between the state and the family that can arise in these circumstances in terms of a dichotomy between individualism and familism, warning also against a familism in social policy that marginalises and 'sacrifices' women to the welfare of the family (Hartman, 1995: 190; see also Gordon, 1994). As a social pattern that sees the ascendancy of the family over individual interests, familism is viewed as an 'expression of modernism; a unifying, oppressive discourse now to be countered by the destabilizing projects of postmodernism' (Walter, 2001: 1). This definition, however, endangers the proper recognition of individual agency; that is, the ability of people to act according to their own needs.

The divergence between a collective familism and an agency-centred individualism is writ large in the Confucian societies of East Asia. The Confucian ethos, sometimes thinly veiled as a form of 'Asian values', has been used by states such as Hong Kong, South Korea, China, Taiwan and Singapore at various times to explain their impressive economic performances, as well as in viewing themselves as a foil to the decadent, liberal 'West'. The 'family' is ultimately constructed as the basis of society, from which the values of diligence and filial piety spring. The familism that characterises these societies largely emphasises the patriarchal basis of the family, rather than the concept of love-marriage or conjugalism (Grover and Soothill, 1999). The ideological emphasis on the family is often enmeshed with nation building discourses which consider the 'family' as the 'building block' of the community and nation. Although divorce rates are not as high as in some other developed economies, divorce among these populations is rising, and such trends are challenging the familial bases of these societies (Kim, 1993; Thornton and Lin, 1994; Young, 1995; Lee, 1999). The resulting tensions are also similar. In Hong Kong, the shift towards conjugalism (emphasis on spousal relations) has been associated with industrialisation, economic growth and increasing cosmopolitanism (Young, 1995). In Korea, similarly, new tensions are being expressed at the legal level, where there is dissatisfaction with the persistence of a 'patriarchal familism' in the Family Law (Lee, 1999). That said, the implications of these societal shifts have not yet been investigated (Thornton and Lin, 1994).

The influence of context on the way that such trends are experienced is well illustrated in the case of Singapore, where various aspects of social and economic life are strongly shaped by an interventionist government (Perry *et al.*, 1997), and where the persistence of state intervention in the private sphere is well-documented (Quah, 1994).[1] In the different phases of Singapore's development, the state has actively intervened in individual and household decisions about marriage, fertility (see Drakakis-Smith *et al.*, 1993), and family size and structure[2] in order to achieve the desired outcome of economic growth (Jose and Doran, 1997). Hence, in order to bring about certain 'desirable' social forms, certain configurations of the family – namely the dual-parent family and the extended family – are actively promoted, while other forms are discouraged. Single-parent families, widowed parents and unmarried mothers are seen as configurations that are 'less than ideal' for bringing up children and, ultimately, as potentially undermining a social reproduction that conforms to government goals for the population. Given the emphasis on the 'normal family' in daily life, there is a need to understand how single parents, outside the margins of this 'normality', whether divorced or widowed, reconfigure their ideals of the 'family',

and how they rework notions of the 'normal' family into their own lives discursively and through practical strategies, such as childcare. In examining the responses of middle-class single-parent families in Singapore, this study hopes to isolate the influence of government injunctions and rhetoric on single parents' negotiations of the 'family' and 'normality'. As we will see, members of the middle class in Singapore ascribe to certain proscribed goals and aspirations, and face certain pressures and 'fears' that, among other things, highlight the public emphasis on living within the spaces of the 'normal family', as well as shaping the reproduction of the patriarchal basis of society (PuruShotam, 1998). The study looks at how single-parents, as members of the middle class in pursuit of particular goals, subvert or reinforce the 'norm', including the gender identity negotiations that surface from the redefinition of the family according to their own ideals and constraints.

THE SINGAPORE CONTEXT

The family in Singapore has been variously implicated in both formal policy initiatives and public education campaigns. During the post-independence period of the 1970s for example, the extended family – comprising three or more generations of the family living under one roof – was regarded as an obstacle to development and discouraged as detrimental to the pressing economic priorities of a fledging nation-state (Kuo and Wong, 1979: 5; Chua, 1995: 115; Hill and Lian, 1995: 148). However, less than a decade later, the nuclear family form that had hitherto been promoted came into question as Singapore entered the 1980s with high economic growth, and as the government began to express anxiety over its ageing population and the future care of its older citizens (Teo, 1994, 1996, 1997). With Singapore entering the 1990s as a developed economy with global aspirations, the family was reworked into a discourse on 'Asian values', with the Singapore government attempting to set itself apart from the 'Western' developed world by emphasising the worth of 'Asian' norms in creating a diligent workforce that still retained its traditional roots. In spite of being recognised as a problematic construction (see Thompson, 2001; Chua, 1995; Kong and Chan, 2000 and PuruShotam, 1998),[3] the conception of Asian values espoused by the Singapore government has been viewed as a social, political and economic strategy for securing future stability and prosperity. Within this framework, the family is upheld as a bastion of a successful 'Asian' society, and is called upon to bear the responsibility of preserving traditional values and imparting them to future generations, thereby protecting the population from the 'evils' of Westernisation that have accompanied modern economic development (Kuo and Wong, 1979: 11), and now globalisation. This 'ideological confrontation' between Eastern traditions and Western influence is said to be reflected in the state privileging of 'communitarian' values over individualism (Chua, 1995: 187), but it also reinforces government support of the patriarchal basis of society (Kong and Chan, 2000).

Although the Asian values rhetoric has become muted, put aside with the onset of the Asian financial crisis which propelled the Singapore government to espouse the 'Western-style' values of creativity and entrepreneurship as a necessity for survival in an economically-competitive world, the family has re-emerged as a policy concern, albeit within a different discourse focused on the problems of low fertility, ageing and caregiving. However, the presumption of a dual-parent family has not changed. Indeed, the concern with below-replacement level fertility brings the family into focus again, as citizens, particularly women (Graham *et al*., 2002), are encouraged to bear more children, but only in the capacity of a 'wife' attached to a husband. Calls for the government to relax its stance on alternative family settings as a context for reproduction are likely to come to nought, as government rhetoric frequently cautions against allowing existing stigmas surrounding unmarried mothers, for example, to crumble, with the rationale that doing so would lead to the undesirable outcomes of declining moral standards (see Heng and Devan, 1995; PuruShotam, 1998). For example, Singapore's Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, claims that the acceptance of unmarried motherhood as a 'respectable part of society' is 'wrong', and 'by removing the stigma, we may encourage more women to have children without getting married' (*The Straits Times*, 22 August 1994).

Just as women having fewer children is seen to threaten social survival, so divorcees and unwed parents are viewed as antithetical to the national

ideology of the family as the foundation of nationhood. By extension, the loss of 'family strength' as caused by divorce is perceived to lead to a loss of Singapore's 'vibrancy', ultimately leading to a 'decline' in the standards of economic growth and living which Singapore has enjoyed (PuruShotam, 1998). Not only are single-parent families excluded in the government's vision of a civilised society, but the institution of marriage is glorified in a way that silences even those whose families have been truncated by the death of a parent:

> 'We are fortunate to still have strong family values and strong family ties. *Marriage* and *family* are two sacred institutions of a civilized society. The family as a basic unit of society is one of the five shared core values which we want to nurture and strengthen. [. . .] Our strong family structures and values hold our society together.' (Prime Minister Goh, speaking at a book launch in 1993, emphasis added)

According to the Prime Minister, not only will trends such as divorce 'weaken the family building blocks' (Goh, 1993a), but single parents themselves are 'disadvantaged in bringing up children as compared with dual-parent families' (Goh, 1993b: 3). This disadvantage is framed within the economic rationality of encouraging desirable individual behaviour, leading to the 'public good' of economic competitiveness. Arguably, there are also strong undertones of anti-welfarism, within which single-parenthood and 'incomplete' families are seen as a drain on the state's resources. Citing the example of New Zealand as a foil to Singapore's non-adoption of a welfare state system, Goh attributes the increase in single parenthood to the state-funded scheme to help single parents raise their families. Singapore, he says, has the 'good fortune' of not being 'crippled by state welfarism', which would have eroded the country's economic 'competitive[ness]' (Goh, 1993b).

One of the most effective ways for the government to enforce its vision and values is through policy directives. Public housing has been viewed as an important tool in upholding certain values which the government deems desirable for Singapore, values which include the importance of the family as the basic unit of society (Perry *et al.*, 1997). More significantly, as a means of social control (PuruShotam, 1998), the 'normal family' notion is sustained by the enforcement of current housing policies (even in the face of poverty). Public housing policies essentially encourage and privilege the formation of dual-parent families by being heavily subsidised for newly-formed household units comprising married couples. In a country where 85% of the population lives in these Housing and Development Board (HDB) flats, such policies have important implications for single-parent families (Ong, 2001: 51).

For example, there is a stipulation that applicants 'must have a proper family nucleus', comprising at least a married couple, in order to be eligible for the subsidised flat (HDB, 2001a,b). The requirement of the formation of a family nucleus in order to retain or buy a HDB flat has been criticised for possibly encouraging divorcees to file for custody of their kids as a means of keeping the flat (Ong, 2001), with the rigid adherence to this norm being blamed for causing the majority of financial disputes in divorce cases (*The Straits Times*, 12 May 2001). *The Straits Times* (21 April 1996) reported the HDB as saying that single, unmarried parents did not have any special rights to flat ownership, and must go through the same route as single adults, and that such a stance was 'to discourage single parenthood and to promote family values'.[4] Widowed persons are perhaps seen in a better light, or are treated with more ambivalence than divorcees, being perceived to have come into their circumstances not by their own volition. Widows have access to the same housing grants proffered to 'normal' households (HDB, 2001a), for example, but do not qualify for some benefits open to married parents. Eligibility for the 'Home Ownership Plus Education' (HOPE) Scheme, a new welfare scheme (starting in January 2005), points to a certain suspicion of widowed parents with children. This scheme will disburse grants for housing, education, skills upgrading and the day-to-day needs of low-income, poorly-educated parents and their children, with the primary aim of providing means for educating children of poor families so that they can break out of the poverty cycle. This scheme not only excludes divorcees and unmarried parents, and demands repayment of loans should couples in the scheme divorce, but also states that widowed parents with children will be considered only on a 'case-by-case basis' (*The Straits Times*, 22 August 2003).

Discrimination has also come in the form of the withdrawal of special tax rebates for divorcees with children. To encourage more births, tax rebates were introduced for parents with two to four children. These rebates automatically cease with the dissolution of marriage, meaning that divorcees no longer qualify for these substantial rebates. Only recently (for the tax year of assessment, 2003) has the government allowed divorcees to reinstate their claims for these rebates (IRAS, 2002). This change may be attributable to public pressure, voiced through letters in the press exhorting the government not to 'punish divorced couples and their children', because it is after all 'more taxing financially for a single-parent to raise three children' (*The Straits Times*, 22 January 2002). However, the tax relief granted to married women who employ maids, aimed at 'encouraging women to continue working after marriage', remains unavailable to singles, with or without children. The undercurrents of a strong pro-'normal' family ethic was revealed again recently in the response of the Second Minister for Finance to comments that married women were enjoying 'double relief' while singles had none: 'So if you want to get the relief, get married!' (*The Straits Times*, 27 November 2002).

SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES IN SINGAPORE

The government's efforts to discourage single parenthood imply that it is perceived as a threat to social stability. The crude rate of marital dissolution (i.e. the number of divorces per thousand residents) was 1.53 in 2001, falling from a peak of 1.78 in 1998 (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2001). Although divorces have gone up by 42% over the last decade, from 3600 in 1990 to 5200 in 2000 (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2001), the numbers are still low compared with other developed nations. With the Chinese population comprising 77% of the total Singapore population, it is not surprising that divorces among the Chinese have risen by the same proportion as that for the national population. In common with many other countries, more divorced men than divorced women remarry every year (Singapore Department of Statistics, undated). However, the remarriage rates of divorcees have also declined. In 1990, the remarriage rates were 22% for males and 11% for females. By 2000, these rates had fallen to 13% and 7% respectively. The decline was officially explained by the fact that the increase in remarriages is not as fast as the increase in the number of divorces (*ibid*.). No national data are available on whether the decline in the rate of remarriage is an indication of increases in cohabitation among couples. Divorced and widowed persons of Chinese ethnicity currently constitute 2.4% and 5.2% of the total population respectively (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2002).

Not all those who are divorced or widowed have dependent children, and 'single parents' include those who have never been married. This diversity is often ignored in official rhetoric in Singapore, where the concern about single-parent families, as in many countries (White, 1990), is also conflated with the issue of low household incomes. Half of single-parent families in Singapore have a monthly income of less than S$1500, well below the average monthly household income of S$3076 (1990 figure, Department of Statistics, 2000). Three-quarters of the 17,914 single-parent households are headed by women, and single-mother households are more likely to be worse off economically than those headed by single fathers (*The Straits Times*, 29 July 1994). Our study does not, however, include the most disadvantaged members of this group, but examines the other end of the income and educational spectrum. We focus on single mothers and fathers who are fairly well-educated, with at least secondary school education. Our interviewees cannot therefore be said to be representative of all single-parent families in Singapore, and this study deviates from others (Winchester, 1990; Blake and Nair, 1996) that focus on the experience of single parenthood compounded or defined by low income. Instead, we argue that the state's promotion of dual-parent family values and its exclusion of other family forms as undesirable have led to single parents – even those who are articulate and educated – becoming a 'silent minority' whose concerns are marginalised in favour of Singaporeans who form 'normal' two-parent families. We chose to focus on the better-educated and less disempowered in order to investigate the possible impacts of such rhetoric about the family – a key feature in national education at all levels[5] – on those not subject to the confounding discourse of welfarism.

Despite the similarity of educational backgrounds, we found that our interviewees experienced single parenthood in different ways and expressed a diversity of views on marriage and family. For example, their own family backgrounds played a significant role in shaping the choices made on childcare and other practical matters. The tensions between their positions as single parents and their aspirations as members of the middle class in Singapore society are also brought into sharp focus. A spectrum of society that is often neglected in work on marginalised groups, and indeed on single-parent families, the 'middle class' in Singapore is characterised by women who face the 'fear of falling', who desire to live in 'the normal family' (PuruShotam, 1998), and who engage in practices that reflect the demands of pragmatism (translated to an economic rationality) and patriarchy (Kong and Chan, 2000).

The study on which the following analysis is based is part of a larger project on 'Intergenerational relationships, fertility and the family in Singapore', involving in-depth interviews with 60 Singaporean Chinese men and women on fertility issues, family formation and parenthood (see Graham *et al*., 2002, for more details). While the larger project focuses on dual-parent families, this study takes on 12 additional in-depth interviews, comprising a group of nine single mothers (5 divorcees and 4 widows) and three single fathers (1 divorcee and 2 widowers).[6] Our respondents are all from the majority Chinese population whose divorce rates strongly shape the national picture. The other main ethnic groups were deliberately excluded because their responses to family formation are governed by different cultural norms. For example, it is well documented that Malay divorces under Islamic law have traditionally been high, but are constituted by a different set of conditions and practices (Jones, 1994, 1997; Leete, 1996). We have already argued that the details of context, including cultural context, play a key role in shaping how single parenthood is viewed and experienced. The minority ethnic groups in Singapore, therefore, require separate study. Sampling was done mainly through snowballing, with the initial contacts procured from a family service centre, a widows support group, and a support group for fathers.

It is noteworthy that the strength of the dual-parent family rhetoric in Singapore often clouds the distinction between families fractured by divorce and those affected by the death of the spouse. Biblarz and Gottainer (2000: 533) found that, barring some socioeconomic differences, divorced single mothers are 'not significantly different from their [widowed] counterparts in child rearing, gender role, and family values . . . and other dimensions of lifestyle'. We include both here because both are excluded by official descriptions of the 'normal' family.

FAMILY IDEALS AND THE IDEAL FAMILY

Single parents in Singapore must negotiate the terrain of their marginality with practical as well as discursive strategies. From our interviews with single mothers and fathers, we explore the embeddedness of the 'normal' family notion which underpins official socio-political discourse on the family. Single parents' engagements with the 'normal' family paradigm are articulated through their own ideas about the constitution of a family, both pre-conceived and reworked at different life-stages, as are those of parents in 'normal' family arrangements. Interviews with couples in the larger survey on fertility desires and family formation underscored the different emphases given on what constitutes an 'ideal family'. To Nathan and Mabel,[7] a married couple in their late twenties who were interviewed as part of the larger study, having children is central to the constitution of an 'ideal family'; and to Mabel, 'families are incomplete without children . . . And it wouldn't seem *right* without children'. While parents in 'normal' family arrangements tend to take on the 'ideal' dual-parent model without questioning the concept of the 'family', single parents, as a result of changed circumstances, are forced to redefine the 'family' less in terms of its structural characteristics and more in terms of its function as a space for love and care. Although their family ideal is fluid, changing with circumstances such as divorce and widowhood, the ways in which single parents redefine the family are by no means radical. Rather, they are reworkings that reveal similar ideas of the constitution of a 'normal' family to those of dual-parent couples. For Wee Ling, a divorcee in her early thirties with three young children, the gradual disintegration of her marriage and her subsequent divorce clearly brought her through a series of stages in her own

reconstruction of her 'ideal family', beginning from her experiences of growing up in a dual-parent family and leading to the development of an alternative definition of the family:

> 'Okay, actually growing up I got used to "father-and-mother-and-children", right? And my parents are, you know, they are not divorced, all my relatives . . . no one that I really know of are divorced. Umm, and then finally when I thought about how the marriage was not working, I guess by then I had matured as well and become more open to that a family is where people love one another and care for one another. So I see my children as having a great family. Because they are very loved, they are very confident kids, they are very happy, and creative.'

Mildred, a 43-year-old divorcee with a young daughter, likewise favours an emphasis on the functional aspects of family, which she regards primarily as consisting of herself and her daughter. But for her, the journey to her current understanding of the 'family' was fraught with dilemmas over whether to conform to the 'norm'. For Mildred, having a child was something she had resisted all along, because of her own parents' broken marriage, although her subsequent foray into motherhood transformed her cynicism to something positive, in spite of her own childhood experience:

> 'Okay as a child, [. . .] how I saw [the family] was the "mother father and children", that was "family" for me . . . and the father works very hard and so my impressions were very much my experiences with my family. And as I grew up, because of the way my parents' relationship went, I subconsciously chose not to have children. [. . .] so that was my "conversation" until I got pregnant [laughs].'

Although her pregnancy was unplanned, Mildred had embraced both her child and the experience of birth, and had planned to bring up the child without marrying the child's father. Ironically, she was advised by her own father, a lawyer, that there would be social and legal implications for her child because of the limits of the law which does not recognise 'illegitimate' children.[8] These include not being able to secure a place in school for her child, and potential problems with obtaining American citizenship (the father of the child being an American). Concerned over the possible stigmatisation of her unborn child, Mildred decided to get married with a conscious view to having her daughter grow up within a 'normal family' arrangement, sheltered from shame and well within the boundaries of what was socially acceptable. The marriage broke down a year later, leading Mildred to discard again the idea of a strict adherence to the definition of the family solely on the basis of its structural characteristics, as well as the reinforcement of her initial decision to be a single-parent. Her reworked definition of the family engages her own thinking about a child being raised by a community or a 'tribe'. While she lives with her mother, who helps to look after her infant daughter when Mildred is at work, Mildred claims that rather than specifying who constitutes 'the family', she prefers the view that 'everyone is a parent' to her daughter. To Mildred, not setting parameters for her daughter's learning avoids the potential association between children of divorcees and 'broken, dysfunctional families', which can leave children 'traumatized' if they lack care and love from particular individuals.

While Mildred embraces a considerably widened definition of 'family', which is characterised by 'learning', Kay Lin (early 40s, with two teenage children) articulates the 'family' within well-defined fields of care, reflecting an adherence to the prevailing norm. As for parents in normal family situations who take the accessibility of intergenerational networks into consideration when deciding to have children, the service of the grandparent generation as a viable child-care option is likewise central to some single parents' conceptions of the family. Arguably, single parents are more hard-pressed to draw upon such obligations. For single parents like Kay Lin, their perceptions of the 'ideal family' are derived from their own upbringing, drawing from their relationships with their own parents as a baseline for comparison. Kay Lin, a divorcee of nine years with two teenage children, felt herself blessed by the support of her own parents over her divorce. She separates her perception of 'family' into two spheres: one consisting of her own parents and siblings, in which she feels loved and protected from personal adversities such as her own divorce, and the other containing herself and her children as a unit, with herself

responsible for being her children's 'family', caregiver and resource. These two spheres sometimes overlap, with her parents taking care of her children, but she clearly distinguishes between where she draws her own emotional support from, and where her own children get theirs.

It is when the focus moves from the parent–grandparent generations to the relationship between parents and their children that the sense of broken ideals comes to the fore. For most single parents, their conception of the 'ideal' family became clearer in the articulation of their children's needs. Judy, a widow of seven years, reflected on how her vision of an 'ideal family' is overshadowed by the immediate concerns of getting her children adjusted back to Singapore from their long hiatus abroad, and of coping with the death of her husband:

> 'We don't really have time to think about broken dreams, because we have to move on. It was like, how do I help them assimilate to living in Singapore again, you know, how do I help them go on in the school system here, how do I help them move on without dad, and you know how should I start looking, what should I do next?'

The concerns of single-parents are centred largely on their children's abilities to cope with the fracturing of the 'normal' household structure. Their anxieties reflect the recognition that, while they have conquered their individual problems using strategies of their own, their children are left to the vagaries of the national education system which actively espouses the values and rhetoric of the government (Chua, 1995). Judy's sentiments reveal these anxieties:

> 'I am very sure they feel left out because so much is said about, you know, whole . . . family system and so on, and I suppose that is the reason why our children chose not to say "I don't have a dad". In fact many of their classmates don't even know. So asks my son: "So what difference does it make, mom? Would they treat me better? They might treat me worse." I think the feeling of being left out is still an unspoken thing. But do we feel it? Yes, we do. Yes, we can feel it.'

Wee Ling, a divorcee in her early thirties with three pre-school children, has anticipated the tendency for teachers in school to speak of families unquestioningly as dual-parent ones, and has consequently made a conscious effort to circumvent the negative effects of the 'normal' family ideology espoused in the Singapore classroom:

> 'I think [my kids] are more sensitive that there are children with mother and father living with them and there are children who only have mothers living with them. Or fathers living with them. Because we talk about that, you know, and I tell them it's okay, it's perfectly okay that your father doesn't live with you, you don't live with your dad, and so they get the assurance from me that there is nothing wrong with that. It just happens that way, and as long as they are loved it's okay.'

These single parents, whether divorced or widowed, feel the need to protect their children against possible negative reactions from others whose family lives are closer to the ideal so strongly promoted by the state. This protection can take the form of overt reassurance which challenges the dual-parent norm by asserting that other values, such as parental love, are more important. For others, however, protection is sought in secrecy, in not revealing their difference from the norm. This silence attempts to reassert the private sphere of the family, but may do so at the cost of wider social support. For the single-parent, practical support with the day-to-day care of their children is a central concern and it is here that the gendered nature of parental roles becomes especially significant.

GENDER ROLES AND EXPECTATIONS OF PARENTHOOD

The question of what an 'ideal family' is, while somewhat alien to those interviewed struggling with practical, day-to-day issues, became clearer when they were asked to reflect on their various child-minding strategies. When they did so, the notion of the 'ideal family' became transformed from a conceptual idea to one that manifested itself in childcare decisions based on the perceived needs of their children. Negotiations about gender identities, vis-à-vis perceptions of their roles as mother and/or father, also come into play.

The lack of an adult figure is central to the idea of 'loss' experienced by single parents, and interviewees perceived this sense of loss as an

obstacle to giving their children the best care. Teng, a widow in her forties, reflected on the need for another adult to reinforce her authority with her two teenage children:

> 'I don't have someone to come in between. I am not talking about a man figure. I mean an "auntie" or an "uncle" who can come in between to help me in the home, you know, or even let's say I am trying to discipline or teach a child. My situation [is] confined to myself. There may be other single parents who have this privilege of having extended families, but I don't have somebody who comes in frequently. Not at all. So what I teach my children, what I scold them, what I nag at them – it's all my own. I know I can be wrong sometimes. Pushy. Sometimes I try too hard. [This] is due to the anxiety of having so many rules [that she must enforce].'

For some parents who are able to fill the gap left by a 'missing' adult by tapping into extended family relations, or by hiring a domestic maid as surrogate caregiver, there remains the sentiment that these caregivers are not fully able to provide the kind of care they want for their children, which often translates to the care their children would receive from a 'real' parent. For the single fathers, such dissatisfaction with surrogate caregivers asserts itself more strongly than for the mothers. Andrew, a single father in his forties, resented the nanny whom he had hired to take care of his young daughter for interfering with the way he, as a blood parent, wanted to bring up his child:

> 'The nanny [acted] as if I cannot take care of my daughter . . . she reached a point when she said, "you must do this, you must do that". And then I was "hello?", this is my daughter, I will [bring her up] the way I want . . . So I realized that . . . and I also owe a lot to my late wife . . . Because what she will be, will be [how] I make it, not what other people do.'

Indeed, while both single mothers and single fathers gave expression, in one form or another, to the gap left by a spouse as possibly affecting the development of their children, the articulation of the 'need' for a new mother or father for their children is strikingly differentiated along the lines of gender. Judy, a widow in her forties with two teenage children, when pressed further, expressed the 'need' for not just another adult, but for a 'male voice' in her children's upbringing. As a female, she clearly experiences difficulties in assuming the role of an authority figure for her children. She admitted to being a 'tough' mother, attempting to take on the traditional male role of the stern disciplinarian, but felt that her attempts had fallen short of what her children need:

> 'I mean, in the teenage phase there are issues we contend with, and I have had to involve my brothers-in-law with my kids to discuss things because, you know, they question my authority as a mother. I mean I am a *tough* mum, but it's somehow not enough, because they need to hear from an uncle, they need to hear, you know, *another male voice*.' [emphasis added]

Judy's concerns highlight an additional dimension to the perceived problems and hazards of balancing childcare and work – the emotional wellbeing of children. These concerns were expressed especially by mothers of children on the threshold of adolescence, a point at which communication between child and parent often becomes strained, and the notion of the 'complete family' is invoked as the ideal situation. The single mother's apparent failure to give adequate care to her children is also attributed to the lack of time and attention channelled towards bringing up the child in circumstances where she is the sole income earner in the household. The sensitivities of single parents to such behavioural changes in their children are often heightened (even if these behaviours may be a 'natural' progression of the child's coming of age), and manifest themselves in guilt or frustration over not being able to deal with the psychological changes in their children. For example, Tracy, in her forties, gave up her old job as a real estate agent to start a business with more flexible hours in order to spend more time with her two adolescent children. Her husband had died of an illness when she was pregnant with her second child, a son. She indicated her own struggles with a mixture of pride and pain:

> '. . . My boy used to be very contented, very happy. You know? Very adaptable. Very independent. People who know him from young, from birth, know there is a change.

> You know sometimes as widows, or single parents, not just widows I think, we do have the guilt to[wards] our children . . . not giving them enough time. Giving them the best. You know? In the society. In the sense that it is very competitive. So I'm giving [up] my job to be with the children.'

The varying reflections on the need for a co-parent are also manifested in attitudes to re-marriage. As well as feeling the gap left by an absent spouse, these single parents expressed their desires for a sense of 'normality' in family life. For some this means a desire to return quickly to dual parenting, while others are more resistant to this interpretation of 'normality'. Opinions on remarriage are also strongly differentiated along gender lines. The interviews brought out the sentiment that while single mothers take the burden of child-minding upon themselves, surrendering to the possibility that they may never remarry, single fathers argued that the gap remains to be filled, and until they find a new 'mother' and 'wife', they could never be complete parents to their children.

For single mothers, whether widowed or divorced, the idea of re-establishing a dual-parent family arrangement is not greeted with the same enthusiasm as for the men. These single mothers all share a common belief that a new man in their lives would be an 'extra' burden that they would have to carry as new wives. Kay Lin's and Judy's sentiments echo the multitude of considerations that single mothers face when considering the possibility of remarriage:

> 'No, no. I don't think I can remarry . . . because I think I don't have the time to look after another person [. . .] because two children took a lot of time from me. And nowadays I can have my own career. I can support myself.' (Kay Lin)

> 'So, is he going to help me, as a stabiliser, or is he going to take from me? Ask from me, and demand from me? I think that's a very sobering thought, but that's what we [widows] talk about.' (Judy)

In her *Study of the Singapore Family*, Quah (1999: 15) pointed to a general adherence to the traditional pattern of division of labour in Singapore – that is, the man as the 'provider' and the woman as a 'nurturing' figure in the household. Interviewees exemplify what Croll (2000) identified as a traditional focus on gender difference in Asia, where there is a separation of activities based on an emphasis on the complementarity of male and female roles. One easily assumes that single parents, being thrown in at the deep end and forced to take on responsibilities that they have not been accustomed to, would subvert this idea of complementarity and gendered roles. Yet the interviews suggest that the traditional roles of a husband – financial provider, decision-maker – and that of a wife – carer and nurturer – become reference points for both single mothers and fathers coming to terms with a structurally fractured family.

Single fathers articulate an unwillingness to take on this 'unnatural' role of 'nurturer', using their experiences to justify the need for remarriage. Andrew's discussion of roles reflected the unease felt by the other single fathers in playing the role of 'a mother', thus bringing the unsubstitutability of roles into focus. On the one hand, Andrew did acknowledge the utility of interchangeable roles, this being reflected in his frustration in undertaking tasks that had previously been the responsibility of his late wife, such as bathing his infant daughter and making her formula milk. However, he was also quick to lament the rising divorce rates and breakdowns in marriages that he sees as attributable to the failure of the education system both to emphasise human relations and to convey the demarcation of 'proper' male and female roles:

> 'Schools do not teach us to be father and mother. Schools do not teach you how to bring up your kid. . . . As a girl, how are you going to be a mother, what a mother should be? As a boy, when you become a father, what is your responsibility?'

The idea of 'male' responsibilities, such as financial management and the ultimate decision-making for the family, is also evident in the way Teng perceives her main struggles:

> 'Being a single mother, being a parent after that is totally different. I have to decide on how the insurance comes about, how I add up my finances, everything. How should I meet my children's needs as both mother and father. Having a maid at that time was a headache. You know? Should I or should I not keep her?

> Where should I put my children? Foster them out, get my mom to come in, get my in-laws to come in, should we just survive on our own, and things like that. So all this are a lot of decision-making. And once decisions are made it's just, it's my own already. So I got nobody to blame.' (Teng, widow in her forties, with two children in their late teens)

Decision-making, normally under the purview of the 'head' of the household, is now the responsibility of Teng, who equates this with shouldering a heavy burden ('a real headache') and having 'nobody to blame'.

In Singapore, the husband is viewed – both by the state and society at large – as the head of household, while the woman faces an expectation to succeed both in work and as a mother responsible for childcare (Yeoh and Huang, 1995). These expectations reveal themselves in interviews with both single mothers and fathers, for whom coming into single parenthood has increased sensitivity to what constitutes being a 'good wife' and a 'good mother' for single mothers, and reinforces certain ideas about male and female roles and domains among the fathers. Tracy's (widow with two children) ambivalence about remarriage is couched in terms of what she views as best for her children:

> 'What will happen to our children if we remarry? . . . You might think that they need another male figure. Like my boy, I really feel that he needs one. But does it mean that bringing another man is going to replace his dad? He may at this point in time: "oh yes, I have one", but when he grows up he might not go along, but say: "hey you are not my dad". That kind of thing.'

Steven, a father of three boys aged two to six, has been widowed for three years. His desire to be remarried is couched in terms of what he feels is 'fair' and 'necessary' to the children; that is, to have a mother who can care for them in the traditional sense of a 'nurturer':

> 'When she first passed away I never thought about it (remarriage). . . . but it's not fair to the children. The children need a complete family. . . . When children are growing up they need the mother . . . that's what children need.' [translated from the Mandarin]

The men not only recognise that they have different physical needs, they also call upon their helplessness in terms of mothering, giving 'motherly love', and the chores that they face as single fathers. 'Motherly love' is seen to bring comfort, something that women are endowed with, being biologically connected to their children:

> 'You need someone – someone who can cook well – a maid, to take care of this – or other half (*ban nu*). Whatever you do what they also need is *mu ai*, what you call "motherly love", as well as "fatherly love". With a mother, the children will be more comfortable (*shu fu*), and have motherly love (*mu ai*). That's why you need a complete motherly love. Cannot just be me – even if I give them two or three times the love, it's not the same.' (Steven, 40s, widower with three young children) [translated from the Mandarin]

This is in contrast to the acceptance of the new situation which single mothers believe they must achieve and rework into their consciousness and practical living:

> 'Ideally the family should be "father-mother-children". Once the ideal is removed, whatever is left, we should just accept and move on. The remaining members can just work on what they have. Yes, a family should be built on care, understanding, love and support.' (Celine, late 40s, recent widow with two teenage children)

While remarriage is constructed as a 'burden' by the women, all three single fathers unequivocally state the necessities of remarriage to provide a maternal figure for their children and to fulfil their own need for companionship. However, underlying the reticence of the women towards remarriage is an idea that, as women with children, they are often not considered ideal partners by men, who might view their commitment to their children as an unacceptable burden. Marriageability is foremost in the minds of single mothers – especially in Singapore's context where second marriages are still uncommon and bring with them certain taboos. Wee Ling, the youngest of all the single parents interviewed, expressed her desire to get married again, but was also grounded in the reality of the situation in Singapore:

> Wee Ling: 'I think I would like to get married again. I don't think I would give up that whole institution because of course I failed one time. When I was thinking about divorce and all that, I faced the prospect that I would never get married again. You know, the whole thing about three kids, I mean, you know, it's not a very common thing, for any man to be ready for that kind of responsibility.'
>
> Interviewer: 'Especially in Singapore.'
>
> Wee Ling: 'Especially in Singapore, yeah.'

The idea of single mothers with the perceived 'baggage' of children from a previous marriage is not unfounded. The rationalisations of Andrew, a widower with a young daughter, highlight a practical reason for preferring to remarry women without 'attachments':

> 'You tend to meet another divorcee, if you're divorced. Two families. You're taking two packages and merge them into one. Not only the adult – the man and her kids, her kids and the man, and the kids and the kids. So I learn a lesson. If I want to get married, I'd rather choose a single person. With no kids. No baggage. Then she can accept me better. Less combination to satisfy.'

In relating her thoughts about remarriage, Tracy confirms Andrew's views. She attributes them to the inherent differences between men and women, but also affirms the patriarchal nature of role divisions, in which women are expected, and conditioned, to place their 'family' first, and in which men are free to 'choose':

> 'You know, the men are not prepared to do a lot of things. For some guys, you know, like housework, children, this is really beyond them, they couldn't want to be bothered. So they just get another woman. Without thinking much about "will the other woman be able to accept the children". But . . . ladies are more emotional. We think about all these areas. What will happen to our children if we remarry?'

'SINGLE' AND 'ABNORMAL'? BEING PARENTS IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Ho, writing on divorce in Singapore in 1979 (p. 7), said that 'divorce is viewed as a personal tragedy which carries the implications of a marriage failure', and divorced women are ascribed with 'a certain degree of social stigma' for their 'presumed inability to keep their men'. In 1989, a decade on, this did not seem to have changed, with Lau (1989: 104) lamenting that 'divorce is very much taboo', with 'social support sometimes limited only to the family, and withheld from friends and colleagues'. In 2002, the pronouncement of linkages between rising liberal attitudes towards divorce, cohabitation and homosexuality on the one hand, and a 'slow erosion of family values' on the other, is still a common refrain (*The Straits Times*, 7 July 2002).

The question remains: how do single parents respond to the persistent privileging of the normal family in aspects of daily life – at work, and even at play? Outside of the domestic sphere, where women are apportioned decision-making responsibilities, single mothers – particularly divorcees – are 'blamed' for not getting their houses in order, as the experience of Soo Yen shows. A divorcee in her early thirties working in public relations, she felt that the disclosure of her divorcee status to work colleagues would threaten her job:

> 'My company don't know [about my getting divorced], okay? Because I didn't want them to . . . I live in a society where I work . . . so [at] the moment . . . I feel the society where I live is very real, okay?' (Soo Yen, early 30s)

Attempts to fill the gaps of parenting through caregivers are sometimes hindered not by outright policies, but by the inflexible subscription to the normal dual-parent family model. Wee Ling's experience of taking her three children to the zoo reflects the lack of awareness and accommodation of family forms that deviate from the two-parent model:

> 'When we went to the zoo, we found that the family package which was meant for entrance fees for "father, mother, and two kids". I was like, okay, what if I want to put my sister in; of course she might be the one that helps me to look after the kids, or my mom, you know, or a friend. You know? Cannot! [The zoo management insisted that] it must be a married couple, and the kids. . . . And I was very offended, and very upset with the close-mindedness of it all . . . And I don't think that just because you are open to the single parents and a partner or

> single-parent and a relative, we are going to encourage people to get divorced. I don't think that works. I think when people choose such a life-changing thing, they have gone through a lot of thinking and a lot of pain, to go to that . . . to come to that conclusion. We are not going to go "oh, because I can still get a zoo membership" or whatever . . .' (laughs) (Wee Ling, young divorcee with three children)

Beyond zoo memberships for families, however, tax policies reflect a deliberate exclusion of single parents. Wee Ling, whose experience at the zoo is indicative of attitudes to single parents in Singapore, professed that she loves children and would like to have more should she remarry, but notes the irony of the government's calls for women to bear more children in the light of the disincentives for single working mothers like herself who have done their 'duty' but are seen as outcasts in the system:

> 'I mean I can't imagine that I would get married, have children, just to enjoy that tax benefit, and then go and get divorced for the fun of it! Yes, and we are like being punished for being divorced! Which I find is very unfair. And then . . . and I can't see that because of this tax, because I will lose the tax benefit, I would want to stay in an abusive marriage, to enjoy 20,000 dollars. I think I might be dead! You know if government has been saying "please have children, please have children", and we did, and I don't think I had children because of the tax benefits. Right? Then I had the children – give it to me, don't take it away from me.'

Indeed, when procreation is now elevated to an issue tied to 'national survival' (*The Straits Times*, 6 April 2002), there can be no room for 'a future in which women might conceive and raise children with the support of society, but without the check of a paternal signifier' (Heng and Devan, 1995: 202). The rhetoric of 'Asian values' or, more specifically, the threat to patriarchal authority, remains transcendent – but at what expense? The concern expressed by interviewees on the lack of engagement with the issue of incomplete families is summarised by Steven's words:

> 'In the newspapers the other day they introduced two types of families: families who like children and families who don't like children. They have both been the subject of debate. They might exclude us, not talk about our issues, don't give us any weight, perhaps because they don't want to expose our problems, with kids, and discourage unmarried people from having children. But if you do a check, everyday there are people who die in traffic accidents . . . at least one. . . . and these people who die come from families, with small children. You should let the government know, have they offered a helping hand to these people?'

CONCLUSION

Interviews with single parents in Singapore reveal constructions of the family that are different from the model of the dual-parent family promulgated by the government. In spite of recognising that single-parenthood is still a taboo in Singapore, single parents display a reflexivity in redefining the family in their transformed circumstances, with these redefinitions reflecting the functional rather than structural characteristics of 'family'. In examining the dynamic ways in which single parents negotiate the terrain of their marginality and needs, the study hopes to have heeded Cherlin's (1999) call to avoid 'extreme' positions on the effects of parenting and growing up in single parent households. By drawing attention to the amorphous character of 'family' as emphasised by single parents, the study shows that in the engagement of various strategies – such as enlisting the help of intergenerational and extended networks – parents often try to counter the perceived negative effects of marital dissolution on themselves and their children.

The desire to make up for the loss of the spouse reveals certain patterns that seem particular to Confucian societies such as Singapore. Firstly, this desire, as well as ideals relating to the family, is articulated on behalf of the children, with single parents expressing fears that their children are not 'normal' and will not be 'normal' (read: complete) without both parents. This reveals a taking-on-board of the notions of 'normality' and the 'normal' family. Secondly, remarriage, as a way in which to return to normality, is treated with ambivalence, if not pessimism, by single mothers, and optimism by single fathers. Remarriage is viewed as a 'necessity' by fathers, a definite strategy that helps the family 'become

normal' again. Mothers, on the other hand, view remarriage as 'nearly impossible' and 'burdensome', but their responses also reflect doubts over their 'marriageability'. The analysis reveals the male belief that the roles of the mother and father are clearly demarcated and therefore complementary, while mothers are more inclined to view roles as substitutable, even to the extent of berating themselves for not being able to 'act' as a father would. The situation of single parenthood echoes the similar tensions of women in 'normal family' situations being expected to be nurturers of future generations, as well as labourers contributing to the progress of the national economy. These tensions are also said to underpin family laws and rhetoric in Confucian societies such as in Korea (Lee, 1999). Even more telling is the indication that men, in spite of having experienced the pain of loss, whether through a divorce or the death of a spouse, are averse to marrying single mothers. Therefore, while single parents successfully negotiate the practical issues, in discursive terms the gender roles remain traditional, with reflections on remarriage generating the greatest resistance to change in the perception of gender relations.

The relationship between single parents and the public sphere is an uneasy one. Within the public consciousness, single-parent families straddle the line between being seen as 'poor', disadvantaged and unfortunate, and being indirectly implicated into discourses about declining morality and 'crumbling' Asian values. Either way, they seem to be silenced and glossed over in current discourses of singlehood, fertility and the 'normal' family. Although single parents say that the practical concerns of continuing to adjust to single parenthood take over their thoughts of 'broken dreams', the anonymity, and indeed ignominy, heightens the affliction of being persons who have undergone painful divorces, suffered the death of a spouse, and experienced the pain of parents who feel they cannot give the best to their children. The silencing of single parents in public discourse denies their right to be 'normal' parents, but from these interviews there is evidence that single parents work around the adversities, opening up their own 'spaces' for leading 'normal' family lives, functionally, if not structurally.

The cultural and political discourses that marginalise this 'silent minority' thus shape their experiences of reproducing the next generation. While births can be counted and fertility measured, deeper and more differentiated understandings embracing alternative conceptualisations of fertility and reproduction (Sporton, 1999) must attend to the ways in which individuals negotiate the 'spaces' of family life in a variety of cultural, economic and political contexts.

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NOTES

(1) Although assessing the impacts of state policy on demographic trends is fraught with difficulties, it has been noted, for example, that individuals often echo what the state promotes as 'proper' behaviour as their own publicly-expressed opinions. Teo and Yeoh's (1999) study of responses to the shifts in population policies in Singapore show that, while doing so, individuals may contradict themselves when they distinguish between the constitution of a 'public good' versus that of a 'private good'.

(2) Hill and Lian (1995: 148) called this the 'proletarianization of the family'.

(3) PuruShotam (1993, cited in PuruShotam, 1998) exposed the inherent problems with the idea of the 'normal family', arguing that the 'normal family' has been variously reconstructed as extended kin relations and as households resulting from monogamous unions over the relatively short period of Singapore's history. Further, she claims that attempts to base the 'normal family' on Chinese history are also flawed, given the multifarious configurations of the family throughout its long history.

(4) The consequences of such restrictions on home ownership have obviously impacted most on the poorer segment of the single parent population (see also Lee, 2001). In 1996, *The Straits Times* (21

April 1996) reported a rise in the number of battered wives and single parents, and their children, living in half-way houses, which were originally meant to be temporary shelters for troubled persons. These single parents included those who had been unable to take advantage of the HDB's housing schemes, and were therefore forced to seek a roof over their heads at these homes for long periods of time.

(5) 'Civics and Moral Education' classes are mandatory at the Primary and Secondary levels. These classes contain aspects of 'National Education' content, which includes imbibing the idea of the 'family as the basic unit of society', 'marriage as a lifelong commitment' and 'Singapore Family Values' (Ministry of Education, 2000a, b).

(6) There were difficulties in finding single parents to interview, especially unmarried parents. The taboo nature of single parenthood may be a contributing factor, as some support groups which helped single parents were protective of their members' feelings and identities. We were unable to find unmarried parents willing to be interviewed.

(7) All names have been changed in order to ensure the anonymity of interviewees.

(8) Such discrimination includes the stipulation that only parents of 'legitimate' children can claim special tax rebates (IRAS, 2002), where 'legitimate' refers to children born within marriage.

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