

Roads Not Taken

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Shirley Hsiao-Li Sun, *Population Policy and Reproduction in Singapore: Making Future Citizens*, London and New York: Routledge, 2012. 184 pages. ISBN 9780415670685.

Your masters kennel you in neat boxes, doctor your females, [and] control litter size according to pedigree.

– Gopal Baratham

The elevation of the economic over the social is a recurrent concern in Singapore letters. The suspicion that the state operates in many ways as a non-state actor – a vast corporation – generates anxieties which have a mediated yet specifiable presence in Singapore cultural production. Kuo Pao Kun's *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral*, for example, uses the situation of the 15th century Muslim-Chinese explorer – an eunuch, unable by definition to have progeny – as a means of giving to the expressive genres of the city-state the task of creating a syncretic culture that would help fill an existential vacuum. Similarly, discomfort with the frenetic pace of urban development is a significant strand in the poetry of Arthur Yap and Lee Tzu Pheng, while the salaciousness of much of Gopal Baratham's fiction is arguably an effort to meliorate the productionist orientation of Singapore's social lifeworld.

Shirley Sun's monograph, throwing light on the constellation above, shows what happens when important questions about sociality are shunted aside. Tracking Singapore government policies which encourage individuals to have children (or more children), she finds them ineffective; in comparison with other countries, much more can be done, and a paradigm change is therefore needed, a willingness to re-think the current characteristic "economic production-at-all-costs approach".

Sun's innovative "snowball" sampling technique – facilitating over 200 interviews and focus-group discussions involving some 220 Singaporeans of different ethnicities, age groups, income levels and gender – allowed her to hurdle the challenge of gathering data about sensitive matters. The result is absorbing vignettes like homemaker Mrs Yap noting "[M]y sister-in-law in Australia. She's

stay-home, and she has like a monthly 300 Aussie dollars"; contract teacher Mrs Hamid raising the option of "flexible" hours and "on-site childcare centres"; and human resource manager Mrs Ravindran sharing the frustration of staff who cannot take paid child care leave after the stipulated seven-year age limit. (The names are pseudonymous).

From such vignettes, Sun builds up a picture of a complex, variegated phenomenon and makes some surprising discoveries – e.g. that many of her interviewees lack knowledge about the raft of measures introduced to encourage more births, such ignorance comparing poorly with public awareness levels when (around 1965 to 1982) the state made a concerted effort to publicise population control measures to *reduce* fertility rates.

Sun also uncovers a residual elitism underpinning such policies, a finding that may surprise anyone with knowledge of the area. Historically, Singapore's population policies went through three distinct phases: the above-mentioned anti-natalist stage when fertility plummeted to below replacement level, raising the prospect of a rapidly aging population faced by many mature economies; a "eugenics" phase (1983 to 1986) during which better- educated women were encouraged to have more babies and less educated women to sterilise themselves; and since 1987, pro-natalist policies, the most important being the "Baby Bonus" cash incentive introduced in 2000.

Referenced by the epigraph from Baratham's novel above, the emphasis during the "eugenics" phase alienated a large swathe of the population with resulting electoral losses for the incumbent party. Nevertheless, as Sun astutely points out, traces of the past remain. While the overt "eugenics" thrust of the middle period is gone, government policy is still focused on the well-off and the better-educated. The tax rebates for couples who have babies don't reach many whose income levels don't attract tax. Moreover, the Baby Bonus scheme operates on a two-tier basis. While a fixed sum is disbursed in the first tier, a second tier to the scheme sees the state matching dollar for dollar the money that parents put into a designated account, subject to stipulated limits. As one respondent notes, "lower income" families cannot access that second tier.

Sun observes that there is a "differential class-specific" thrust to such measures. In many countries, means-testing is used when deploying scarce resources so that help goes to those most in need of it. However in Singapore, help goes to those already most able to help themselves. Such emphasis – and the message it sends out – is not accidental. For Sun, the emphasis fits an entire governance mode geared towards minimising expenditure in certain areas, with its lynchpin being the Central Provident Fund. Conceived as a social security savings plan, the scheme has evolved over the years to foster "self-fund[ing]" in the areas of health, education, and housing. As a result, Singapore's public expenditure on

social welfare (calculated as a percentage of GDP) is low in comparison with many countries.

Sun argues cogently that such a governance mode defines citizenship as individual and familial responsibility. The citizens who matter are the economically productive ones. But as many of her respondents are saying, this has to change. If it is serious about raising birth rates, the developmental (“productivist”) state may have to contemplate citizenship-as-social-rights, to introduce legal protection for women so that they can take maternity leave without fear of losing their jobs. It may have to consider flexible working rights like those enshrined in legislation in Britain and Norway. Or a right to a home-maker allowance. In his novel cited above, Baratham suggests that when people are treated like Pavlov’s dogs, they turn to heterodox religion and may even foment rebellion. No such bleak scenario inheres in Sun’s text. People don’t like to be treated like Pavlov’s dogs, of course; what they really want is a place to call home.