THE CONTEMPORARY FAMILY IN SINGAPORE

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SYMPOSIUM ON SOME VIEWS ON CONTEMPORARY ASIAN FAMILIES

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In a recent interview with Foreign Affairs, a prestigious American Journal, our Senior Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, stressed that "East Asia Succeeds because it emphasises family, not government, as building block" (Straits Times, 11 March 94, pg 3). It reflects clearly that Mr Lee emphatically exalts the vital role of the family in the success of a country. This is what he has to say about the Singaporean family:

"....we have focused on basics in Singapore. We used the family to push economic growth, factoring his family into our planning. We have tried, for example, to improve the lot of children through education. The government can create a setting in which people can live happily and succeed and express themselves, but finally it is what people do with their lives that determines economic success or failure. Again, we were fortunate we had this cultural backdrop, the belief in thrift, hardwork, filial piety and loyalty in the extended family, and most of all, the respect for scholarship and learning."

(Straits Times, 11 March 94, pg 32. Excepts taken from Foreign Affairs' "Culture is Destiny - A conversation with Lee Kuan Yew).

At the same interview, Mr Lee admitted frankly that Singapore has also caught up with the problems and changes in family structure and lifestyle of Western affluent societies (Straits Times, 11 March 94, pg 32) - postponement of marriage, declining birth rate, increasing divorce, more women in the labour-force and ageing of the population (Quah, 1990)

CHANGING PATTERNS IN FAMILY SYSTEM AND FAMILY RELATIONS

The rapid economic development in the 60's and 70's has led to labour shortage and created attractive job opportunities for the females. Female participation in the work force in Singapore is among one of the highest in the world (50% in 1990). The steep rise in the female labour force rate has direct effects on the family system. Working mothers have to rely on domestic servants (usually from Philippines, Indonesia and Sri Lankan), relatives and child care centres or foster day-care nannies to look after their children.

As more women delay their marriage to establish their career, their child-bearing years are also reduced. Hence the family size has become smaller. The average number of children born to ever-married females has slided from 3.4 in 1980 to 2.9 in 1990. The number or childless couples increased from 9 percent inn 1980 to 11 percent in 1990 (Census of Population 1990). A 1990 survey found that one out of every four female graduates remained single. As the nation becomes more affluent, the divorce rate has also accelerated. Divorces also result in single parent families.

Urbanization has also put an end to the traditional extended family system where several generations lived together as a household. In its place is the modern nuclear family. In Singapore, the process of disintegration of the extended family system is accelerated by the large-scale public high-rise housing programme. The socio-psychological implications of this structural change in the family system are multi-farious.

To keep up with the high standard and cost of living, many families are two-salaried families. This means that both parents have to leave their home for the greater part of the day. Their roles in the education and development of children are hence diminished and relegated to other substitute care-givers. Because of a busy working life and social activities, parents are spending less time with their children. The situation is even more difficult for parents who have to venture overseas to invest or to work. The generation gap between the parents and their children is therefore widening.

The life expectancy of Singapore residents has risen to 71.9 years for males and 76.5 years for females in the 1990s (Chang, 1993). When young couples set up their own homes, they become independent of their parents who are sometimes left without anyone to care for them in their old age. In recent years, some old folks who lived alone were found dead in their apartments only when the corpses started to decompose and cause a stench.

As the nuclear family gets smaller and lives away from the network of relatives, the socialization of the children has also undergone changes. The Asian cultural values of filial piety and respect for the elderly are usually practised in the extended family system. Without the presence of grandparents in a nuclear family, it is much more difficult for young children to observe and practise filial piety and respect. This is especially difficult for a modern family who subscribes strongly to individual interest, liberal values and hedonistic pursuits.

Emotional depression, frequent change of care-givers, isolation, over indulgence by parents, affluence, pressure from competition and academic excellence, overwhelming seduction of a free and unfettered lifestyle can interact to create insecurity, hedonistic tendencies, selfishness, suspicion, complacency and hostility in both children and adolescents alike.

Working parents, especially career mothers, often feel harassed and torn between the demands of their dual roles as employees and parents. Being influenced by both traditional and modern values, the Singapore married woman faces the contradictions of a pervasive feeling of inadequacy as a mother and the strain of shouldering the burden of home management in addition to her job responsibilities (Ministry of Social Affairs, 1984). Burnout has also created tension in family relationships.

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MEASURES TAKEN TO PROMOTE ASIAN VALUES

The Singapore government is aware of the adverse effects of the breakdown of the traditional family system and the erosion of Asian values. One of the steps taken to preserve Asian values is the introduction of the bilingual policy which requires every child to do a second language, preferably his mother tongue (Chinese, Malay or Tamil). English is the medium of instruction. This is aimed at intra-community communication and to ensure awareness of one's own cultural heritage.

Moral Education is taught to students at both the elementary and secondary level. In the elementary school, moral education is taught in the mother tongue. The government makes concerted effort to promote values like filial piety, harmony, discipline and thrift.

Other policies are also introduced to retain some features of the traditional family system. For instance, income tax relief aims at encouraging young people to have their parents stay with them. Priorities are also given to related families to be assigned apartments in the same housing block or within the same housing estate. This would create an urban *"kampong"* (village in Malay) where hopefully both social and physical distances would be shortened and assistance can be rendered to each other within the extended family system.

A National Family Institute is being proposed to help people cope with family problems like child abuse and family breakups. It will also serve as a research centre for parent education and counselling and a library (Straits Times, 31 December 92, p 19).

To commemorate the International Year of the Family and to reaffirm Singapore's strong belief in the importance of the family, the Committee on the Family, which is a sub-committee of the National Advisory Council on the Family and the Aged, has compiled a document identifying five core family values commonly shared by Singaporeans. The five commonly shared values identified are:

1. Love, Care and Concern
2. Mutual Respect
3. Filial Responsibility
4. Commitment
5. Communication

Singapore is a multi-racial, multi-bilingual and multi-religious country. One of the first tasks which Singapore as a new nation has given importance is the creation of racial harmony and the forging of a common group identity. This conscious effort of Singapore to create racial tolerance and harmony is not only essential for its own internal stability but it also creates a sense of security for foreign investors.

In 1990, the search began for Singapore's national values and after much discussions and debates the following Five Shared Values are adopted.

1. Nation before Community and Society above Self;
2. Family as the basic Unit of Society;
3. Respect and community support for the individual;
4. Consensus instead of contention;
5. Racial and religious harmony.

These Five Shared values will bind Singaporeans from different racial background together and help Singaporeans, young and old alike, to keep their Asian bearings as they progress into the 21st Century (Straits Times, 6 January 91, p 17).

Conclusion

Singapore is among one of the first Southeast Asian countries to industrialize. It began as a quest for survival in the midst of combined adversities. Through far-sighted and careful planning and quick adaptations, we manage to survive the crises but there are prices to be paid for affluence and for being an open society. Modernization and urbanization brought on by industrialization have changed the physical and social environments of Singapore. In turn, people have to develop new attitudes and change their life style to accommodate these changes. Unfortunately, not all the changes have positive effects on the family and human development.

Many of the good Asian values which have helped to pull Singapore through during its crises are being threatened and in danger of being eroded. They should be retained at all costs. What are these values? The good Asian values are:

"a, the work ethics;
b, thrift;
c, strong families, including concern and support for members of one's extended family who are in need of help;
d, modesty and humility, two values which have largely disappeared from Singapore;
e, respect for one's education
f, respect for one's elders, teacher and righteous rulers; and
g, communitarian values".

(Porf Tommy T. B. Koh, 1991, p 5)

Government policies and social measures have attempted to ameliorate the adverse effects on family life and good Asian values. Formal and community education would hopefully create awareness in the people who would consciously resist the temptation to subscribe to undesirable values. It is our aim to produce citizens who are tolerant and are equipped to live and work effectively in Asia as well as western societies.

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