

Exactly Foundation Residency #17 - National Service

Artist Statement

13 August 2022

Won't somebody please think of the children?

As Singapore's resident TFR (total fertility rate) continues its gradual decline, it is no wonder that the government has babies on its mind. Pro-family policies are tweaked every few years, ostensibly to support young families who decide to have more children. The messaging that accompanies these policies is clear - families are the key building block of society, therefore a strong Singapore requires strong families. The state is the benevolent nanny, offering assistance and clearing obstacles where required.

In reality, the very private business of family planning in Singapore has always been inextricably intertwined with the state's desire for population control at the national level and within targeted demographics. From the anti-natalist policies of the 1960s and 1970s - most memorably the campaign exhorting 'Stop at Two' - to the unabashedly eugenistic policies of the early 1980s encouraging (only) educated women to have children, the state has viewed fertility, specifically women's fertility, as a national asset to be harnessed towards constructing an ideal population.¹

Although Singapore has shifted squarely towards promoting fertility as a form of nation-building since the mid-1980s, its pro-family policies appear to have floundered in the face of a maturing economy and changing societal norms. Women seem to have taken the brunt of the blame for this, abandoning their societal duties to pursue careers and reclaim the definition of femininity, as if the willingness and ability to bear children is part of an individual or relationship's worth. The state's continued insistence on an 'ideal family', relayed through public policy and reinforced via pervasive references to a 'traditional' notion of family, rankles in contrast to a reality full of diverse families trying to grow their roots in home ground.

Against this backdrop, I have been one of the lucky ones.

Lucky to have exercised agency over whether and when to have children.

Lucky to fit into the state's parameters for a family nucleus.

Lucky to be able to afford childcare at home and therefore pursue interests outside the home.

When my sons reach the age of conscription, my national service will be complete.

A flippant statement perhaps but one which I think captures the spirit of Shirley Sun's keen observation that "(w)ith regards to citizens who have citizenship status, the discourse of 'human resources' not 'human rights' - predominates in Singapore".²

Fertility is linked to many thorny social issues, such as the role of women and how their labour is valued; the necessity of immigration to maintain our workforce; even the ability to maintain future conscription (and the widely believed but vehemently denied discrimination against Malays in the armed forces).

Underpinning these issues is the constant pressure that Singapore faces to provide sufficient labour to meet its economic needs. Why then does the state still practise what Teo You Yenn terms 'differentiated deservedness', "in which a Singaporean's access to various public goods - public housing, health care, education, childcare support, retirement funds - is dependent on her/his familial form and practices"?³

(please turn over)

¹ Timeline of policies referenced from Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir and Bryan S. Turner, "The Future of Singapore: Population, Society and the Nature of the State", Routledge (2014)

² Shirley Hsiao-Li Sun, "Population Policy and Reproduction in Singapore", 16, Routledge (2012)

³ Teo You Yenn, "Population Problems, Family Policies and the Naturalisation of Differentiated Deservedness" in "The Future of Singapore: Population, Society and the Nature of the State", 66, Routledge (2014)

Is any one child, to put it crudely, worth less to the state than another and therefore less deserving of support?

One morning early August 2022, I read with horror a *Straits Times* opinion piece⁴ that drew a straight line from the repeal of Section 377A (criminalising sex between males) to the breakdown of marriage and family as social institutions. “Put children first,” exhorted the writers, asserting that children can only thrive in homes with both a biological mother and father happily wedded to each other. But are policies and practices that discriminate against single parents and same sex parents really prioritising the needs of children, or pursuing the punishment of their parents? Do we really believe that equal access to public goods will suddenly create an incentive to procreate rather than merely aid in reducing the burden of raising children?

From the moment I started thinking about this project, I knew that I wanted to prioritise representation, sorely lacking in our media landscape today. Real families of different forms, just trying to get through the day without any romanticisation of family life.

Fertility is not just a female issue that ends with childbirth and as self-apparent as it seems, the decision to have a child has life-long consequences for all parties involved. By documenting different families and their routines at similar times of the day, I hope to bring to life these ‘consequences’ as a way of instigating reflection on the following:

- 1) What support do families need from government and from society - what needs (if any) are currently underserved or what barriers need to be removed? How consequential are these to the decision to have children?
- 2) Why is the government still signaling that fertility is only desirable in certain demographics?
- 3) How is the role of women changing both inside and outside the home? How is this likely to affect fertility / motherhood as a part of female identity and self-worth?
- 4) What taboos remain in public discussion of fertility or family life, and why?

I remember distinctly an anecdote from my photography subject Crystal, a single mother with three sons. A minister was conversing with her son at a community event and asked him what he wanted to be when he grows up. “I want to be a soldier!” her son replied. She mused how all her children would have to serve National Service for a country that did not accord them the same rights as other citizens.

I am so grateful to the families that welcomed me into their homes and intimate spaces. Thank you for letting me see you. Deborah and Farhan, Pearlyn and Brenda, Jacinta and Chris, Crystal and parents: I salute your courage and perseverance, and I treasure your candidness and trust. And to Li Li the ‘Wart, ever curious, ever open, thank you for widening the space for discourse in Singapore and for being ever so supportive.

⁴ Jason Wong and Mohd Khair, “Section 377A: Putting children first”, *The Straits Times* (August 3, 2022)