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From Citizen-Duty to State-Responsibility: Globalization and Nationhood in Singapore

Shirley Hsiao-Li Sun

Abstract

This paper explores how nationhood is being affected by the contemporary processes of globalization. Through the lens of Robertson's theory of the global field, I analyze documentary data and fieldwork data collected from 165 in-depth personal interviews and 39 focus-group discussions in the globalized city-state of Singapore. Data analysis shows that both government officials and Singaporean citizens hold a "relativized" view towards its key nation-building pronatalist policies. Moreover, individual citizens actively questioned the effectiveness of policies by comparing them with policies perceived to be in operation in other national contexts. Globalization thus enhances citizens' capacity for imagining the nation. This study opens up the possibility that, under certain conditions, state authority may be weakened but, paradoxically, nationhood may be strengthened.

KEYWORDS: relativization, glocalization, global field, pronatalist policies, nation

INTRODUCTION

The binary logic which seeks to comprehend culture via the mutually exclusive terms of homogeneity/heterogeneity, integration/disintegration, unity/diversity, must be discarded.... Rather we need to inquire into the grounds, the various generative processes, involving the formation of cultural images and traditions as well as the inter-group struggles and interdependencies, which led to these conceptual oppositions becoming frames of reference for comprehending culture within the state-society...

—Featherstone, M. (1990: 2), *Global Culture: An Introduction*

Globalization as conceptualized by Roland Robertson (1992: 8) “refers both to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole”; in other words, “globality” is a theoretical perspective “in line with the increasing acceleration in both concrete global interdependence and consciousness of the global whole.” Moreover, Robertson (1992: 29) suggested that processes of “relativization” characterize the relationship between the four components of his model of “the global field”: selves, national societies, the world system of societies, and humankind. The term relativization is meant to “indicate the ways in which, as globalization proceeds, challenges are increasingly presented to the stability of particular perspectives on, and collective and individual participation in, the overall globalization process” (1992: 29). Furthermore, as Robertson (1995: 40) pointed out, “even though we are, for various reasons, likely to continue to use the concept of globalization, it might well be preferable to replace it for certain purposes with the concept of 'glocalization.' The latter concept has the definite advantage of making the concern with space as important as the focus upon temporal issues.”

This article, at the broadest level, explores how nationhood is being affected by the contemporary processes of globalization. The purpose is threefold: to document the “global consciousness” and the attendant processes of relativization evident in state policy-making and citizens’ responses in Singapore; to illuminate the dynamics surrounding glocalization through analyzing public discourses; and finally, to suggest the conditions under which “nationhood” can be strengthened or undermined in light of the divergent ways in which the national community is imagined.

Drawing on data collected from 165 in-depth interviews with individuals and 39 focus group discussions in 2007 and 2008 in Singapore, I found that among other things, citizens actively questioned the effectiveness of policies by comparing them with policies *perceived to be* in operation in other national contexts. For instance, France and Canada were highlighted as countries that

provided generous cash benefits to larger families. China and Denmark were mentioned to suggest that Singapore's then three-month maternity leave was too short by comparison and Germany and the United Kingdom were used as examples to argue that employers in Singapore were not as respectful of employees' requests for parental leave. Interviewees also characterized the Australian government as pro-family in providing monthly allowances and sustained education and health subsidies, and in facilitating reduced work hours. Such responses became more serious and intense during focus group discussions when interviewees talked about instances of migration to other countries among family and friends, as well as their own intention to migrate, for reasons related to lack of supportive state policies in Singapore. This article thus highlights the importance of state policies 'on paper' and the context in which such policies are viewed by citizens. Citizens are not passive recipients of top-down policies. Instead, they are active agents who assess policies by drawing upon their globally connected awareness and *perceptions* of exemplary policies in other nation-states.

In short, while state institutions are often oriented to support nationhood as a salient form of belonging, it is also clear that globalization equips citizens with knowledge that enhances their capacity for imagining the nation. To the extent that the nation is viewed as a "sentiment of solidarity," its strength depends on how successful the state is in recognizing and negotiating with citizens on the ways in which a particular problem of the "social-collective" should be solved. Weighing up all the evidence, I suggest that the construction of nationhood is embedded in the mundane process of state policy formation. This study opens up the possibility that under certain conditions, a paradox exists whereby state authority is weakened but nationhood can be strengthened.

LITERATURE REVIEW ON GLOBALIZATION AND SINGAPORE'S NATION-BUILDING

The literature on the topic of globalization is vast and rich. For instance, globalization is conceptualized as a world system (Wallerstein, 2003; Chase-Dunn, 2003), as global culture (Appaduri, 1990; Hannerz, 1990), as hybridization (Pieterse, 2003; Friedman, 1990), as world society (Meyer, Boli, Thomas, and Ramirez, 1997), as a world market (Altvater and Mahnkopf, 1997; Grennes, 2003), and as reflexive modernization (Beck, 1994; Giddens, 1994). In this article, I highlight Robertson's (1990, 1992, 1995, 2003) treatise on globalization, which I found to be of direct bearing in understanding the empirical patterns uncovered in state-society dynamics in contemporary Singapore.

As noted earlier, Robertson advanced the theoretical framework for understanding globalization as a "global field," in which societies, individuals, the international system of societies, and humankind are the four main elements of

the global-human condition. In other words, “nation-states are not seen simply to interact but to constitute a world, a global context in which the world becomes a singular place with its own processes and forms of integration” (Featherstone, 1990: 5). Moreover, processes of globalization, such as relativization, operate in “relative independence of conventionally designated societal and socio-cultural processes” (Featherstone, 1995: 5). In Robertson’s view, “it is not a question of either homogenization or heterogenization, but rather of the ways in which both of these tendencies have become features of life across much of the late-twentieth-century world. In this perspective the problem becomes that of spelling out the ways in which homogenizing and heterogenizing tendencies are mutually implicative. This is in fact much more of an empirical problem than might at first be thought” (Robertson, 1995: 27). Indeed, it may be that glocalization is a preferable term in certain circumstances, and most importantly for the purpose of this article, “strategies of glocalization are themselves grounded in particularistic frames of reference” (Robertson, 1995: 28).

Singapore as an empirical site

Earlier studies on Singapore’s nation-building have primarily analyzed state (rather than individual) actions, particularly in relation to the state’s management of ethnic identities that might threaten the formation of a national identity. For instance, Chua and Kuo (1991: 28-30) suggested that:

While the nature of the new national identity and national culture was never clearly spelt out, the need for survival had dictated the tasks of nation building almost exclusively in terms of the economic concerns at the national level, correspondingly, in terms of betterment of the material conditions of everyday life at the individual level. On the other hand, ethnic culture and ethnic identity, although often voiced by politicians as worthy of preservation, are relegated to the private sphere of the individuals or of voluntary groups.... Despite their linkage to things tradition, all the programs for inscribing ‘Asian-ness’ are ultimately aimed at shoring up the production and growth orientation of the economy, and more importantly perhaps, the existing political order.

Chua (1995: 10) argued that “by promoting formal ‘equality’ between the ‘races,’ the state claims for itself a ‘neutral’ space above all racialized groups, without prejudice or preference.” Hill and Lian (1995: 1) showed how citizenship in Singapore was conceived as conferring “duties” in the process of nation-building, notably “in a state which has firmly rejected welfarism, and whose

political leaders have constantly maintained that the values of the collectivity over those of autonomous individuals are essential to its very survival.” Furthermore, Bokhorst-Heng (2002: 560-562) explained the government control of the media in Singapore in the larger context of the state’s agenda of nation-building; he wrote that

the Western model, wherein the press is seen as a 'fourth estate' and watchdog of the government, is strongly rejected in favour of a 'responsible' press that works together with the government for the 'national good' (usually defined by the government)... In addition to fostering social cohesion and political support, the press has an overt role in educating Singaporeans concerning government ideology, policy and action.

Koh’s (2005) analysis showed how the government used the media to construct its “impoverished” national identity and then filled in the constructed lack of a national identity through a state-led curriculum intervention known as National Education.

Another frequent area of study that has emerged relatively recently is the analysis of state actions in connection with the individual experiences of citizens. The government has pursued a two-pronged strategy to “globalize” Singapore. On the one hand, it encourages Singaporeans to work overseas to expand the Singaporean economy beyond its territorial limits; on the other hand, it actively draws foreign professionals, investors, and entrepreneurs (known as “foreign talent”) to settle in Singapore. Kong (1999, emphasis mine) demonstrated how “Singaporean transmigrants in Beijing, living and working amidst mainly but not exclusively Chinese in the particular transnational contexts, the allegiance to Singapore as a 'nation' seems to be unquestioned and, indeed, *reinforced*.” In contrast, Yeoh and Chang (2001: 1028), based on their analysis of the government’s “best practices” in constructing Singapore as a global city, concluded that “perhaps the most obvious tension lies in the local-foreign divide.... reconciling the goals of a 'global city' and 'best home' will be difficult if these tensions remain unresolved.” In a similar vein, Ho (2006: 397) documented how the state-sponsored cosmopolitan project was contested by Singaporean citizens and suggested that ‘the concept of citizenship is contested between the state and citizens, and accentuated by the inflow of newcomers and the privileges granted to them...[additionally] reactions towards other Asian newcomers are mixed.’ Kluver and Weber (2003: 376, emphasis mine) further argued that the globalizing strategies adopted by the Singaporean state have “*undermined* a sense of national identity and hence patriotism.”

This article complements recent studies aimed at understanding the ways in which individuals themselves, affected by globalization, negotiate their ties to the nation. Moreover, it focuses on an aspect of globalization that has received surprisingly little attention: the relatively autonomous processes of *relativization* and *glocalization* and citizens' sense of national identity. As will be illustrated later through the qualitative data from interviews with Singaporeans, while the state may have crafted a "neutral" space above ethnic culture and ethnic identities, its relation to productive capital (or social class divisions) is heavily, if silently, questioned by citizens. Findings on Singaporeans' requests for direct and universal pronatalist subsidies partly informed by citizenship in other national-societies, as well as their suggestions for more flexible workplace practices and work hours, are indicative of a way forward for creating a sense of national solidarity. That is, the pendulum is swinging from an interpretation of citizenship as a set of individual duties at an earlier stage of "emerging" or "creating" a nation, toward a conceptualization of citizenship as a constellation of state responsibilities during the current stage of "maintaining" and "developing" nationhood.

THIS STUDY: LOW FERTILITY AND PRONATALIST INCENTIVES IN SINGAPORE

Fertility in Singapore fell below replacement level in 1977 — and has remained so since. In 1987, the government launched policy incentives under the theme :Have Three, or More [Children] if You Can Afford It." The emphasis was now placed on the adequacy of economic resources rather than parents' educational qualifications. Drakakis-Smith and Graham (1996: 69) examined the views of Singaporeans on such policy measures based on a representative survey carried out in 1992. The authors concluded that "although differences in fertility behavior may be rooted in ethnic identity, the control that the government wishes to exert over that behavior as part of its nation-building project has largely been effected through class interests."¹ In recent years, further policy amendments have been implemented, with incentives becoming wider in scope and more elaborate in order to pursue the objective of "bringing Singapore's population growth back to the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman" (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2007). In 2000, the policy theme was "Strong and Stable Families," and in 2004, the slogan was changed to "Singapore. A Great Place for Families."

The government's actual expenditure on pronatalist policy initiatives doubled from approximately S\$160 million in 2002 to S\$358 million in 2005 (Ministry of Finance, various years). In the latest policy expansion in 2008, Prime

¹ Measured as monthly household income.

Minister Lee Hsien Loong unveiled a series of measures in his National Day Rally speech. These measures included extended maternity leave, which he said added up to more than S\$700 million (US\$496 million), “bringing to \$1.6 billion the total amount that it spends a year on promoting marriage and parenthood” (Li, *The Straits Times*, 2008b).

I identify seven pronatalist policy initiatives currently being implemented in Singapore that can be categorized under the economic approach to raising fertility: income tax relief, tax rebates, the childcare subsidy, the use of Medisave accounts (i.e., savings in the medical savings account of the Central Provident Fund), maid-levy subsidies, cash benefits, and grandparent caregiver tax relief. The first five policy incentives (those listed above from income tax relief to maid-levy subsidies) have been in existence in some form since 1987. The government instituted two additional economic initiatives (i.e. cash benefits and grandparent caregiver relief) in 2000. In what follows, I provide a brief summary of the pronatalist benefits in place as of August 2008:

1. Income tax relief: Tax relief was increased to S\$4,000 per child for all children in 2008. In addition, the percentages of tax relief claimable for each child have been increased, varying between 15 per cent and 20 per cent. The maximum amount claimable vis-à-vis working mothers’ earned income has also increased to S\$50,000;
2. Tax rebates: The S\$20,000 tax rebate introduced for the third child in 1987 was extended to the fourth child in 1989, and conditionally to the second child in 2000. In 2004, prior conditions related to claims were removed, and in 2008, the tax rebate was further extended to the first (S\$5,000) and fifth child and beyond (S\$20,000);
3. Childcare subsidy: For working mothers, the monthly infant-care (2-18 months old) subsidy was increased to S\$600 and the monthly childcare (19 months to 7 years old) subsidy was increased to S\$300 in 2008. For *non-working* mothers, both infant-care and childcare subsidies were increased to S\$150;
4. Use of Medisave account: In 1987, parents were allowed to use their savings in the medical savings account (of provident fund savings) for delivery and hospitalization charges for the third child; this was extended to the fourth child in 2004, and was further extended to the first four children in 2008. Since 2004, the use of this account for assisted conception procedures has also been permitted;

5. Maid-levy subsidies: Maid-levy tax relief was introduced for working mothers in 1987; the amount of the levy was reduced in 2004 and the reduced amount remained in force in 2008;
6. Cash benefits: Cash benefits are arguably the most recent and proactive form of economic incentive. In April 2000, the government started the “baby bonus” scheme. This scheme consists of a two-tier payment made annually by the government for six years after the birth of the child. The first tier is a cash gift, whereas the second resembles a co-savings arrangement whereby the government matches dollar-for-dollar the annual amount the parents put into the child’s children-development account. The baby-bonus scheme was extended in both April 2004 and August 2008. The cash gift parents receive now amounts to S\$4,000 each for the first and second child and S\$6,000 each for the third and fourth child. There is, however, no cash benefit for the fifth child and beyond. The co-savings arrangement enables parents to receive a maximum of S\$6,000 for the first and second child. Matching for the third and fourth child is capped at S\$12,000. For the fifth child and beyond, the government contributes up to S\$18,000;
7. Grandparent caregiver tax relief: Since 2004, working mothers have been able to claim tax relief of S\$3,000 if their parents or parents-in-law look after their children younger than 12 years old. The relief remained unchanged in 2008.

The government has also offered a range of non-monetary incentives since 1987 to encourage childbirth. Indeed, nine pronatalist policy initiatives supporting work-life balance were in place in August 2008: public sector flexible work (since 2000), public sector leave (since 2000), third-child maternity leave (since 2000), a five-day work week (since 2004), extra paid maternity leave (since 2004), paid childcare leave (since 2004), the Work-Life Works! Fund (since 2004), unpaid childcare leave (since 2008), and maternity-leave protection (www.family.gov.sg).

The changes in pronatalist policies supporting work-life balance introduced in August 2008 include the following: 1) extending paid maternity leave from 12 to 16 weeks, with the possibility of the last eight weeks of leave being taken flexibly over a period of 12 months if there is mutual agreement between employer and employee; 2) maternity leave protection whereby employers are required to pay maternity leave benefits if the woman is dismissed

without sufficient cause within the last six months of pregnancy or retrenched within the last three months of pregnancy; 3) extending paid childcare leave from two to six days per year; and 4) six days of unpaid infant-care leave. Thus, while the pronatalist policies supporting work-life balance are primarily about family-leave benefits and protections, there are also other forms of incentive in the areas of education, housing, and fertility treatment.

METHODS

This article is based on documentary analysis of press releases issued by the state apparatus and *Straits Times* reports retrieved from the Lexus-Nexus database concerning pro-natalist policies instituted in Singapore since 2000, in addition to semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions held with Singaporean citizens. Singapore's public policy makers have accorded top priority to pronatalist concerns since 1987, and have arrived at a multi-pronged approach that the government revisits and fine-tunes on a regular basis (Yap, 2009). Moreover, as Chen and Kuo (1978) have demonstrated, Singaporeans regard the print media as the most useful and reliable source of information among all forms of mass media.

I collected data from two sources—semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions—to understand how Singaporean citizens residing in the country perceive and respond to current state policies. As Goss and Leinbach (1996) have observed, focus groups are particularly useful for gaining an 'interactive' understanding that would not be obtained by simply aggregating individual replies. I started with 11 research assistants who were senior university students (seven were Singaporean-Chinese, two were Singaporean-Indians, and two were Singaporean-Malays). Each of these 11 research assistants then contacted 15 interviewees who were women of childbearing age, the target group of the pronatalist population policies. In total, these research assistants carried out semi-structured interviews (for which I proposed and revised the schedule based on the pilot study) with 165 women aged between 19 and 49. The interviews were conducted in English, Malay, or Tamil, depending on the comfort level of the respondent. The length of the semi-structured interviews in the first stage was usually 30-45 minutes. Each interview was recorded on tape and transcribed (and translated where necessary) verbatim. Of the respondents, 51 were married individuals and 114 were unmarried individuals; 32 identified themselves as Malays, 24 as Indians, 105 as Chinese, and 4 as 'others;' 105 respondents received or were receiving university education during the interview period and 60 did not have any university education (one interviewee did not disclose her educational level); 131 respondents lived in government-subsidized apartments

(Housing and Development Board units) and 32 lived in private properties including condominiums and private homes (two interviewees declined to disclose their housing type). Finally, in terms of monthly household income, 40 individuals lived in lower-income households with a monthly income of below S\$3,000; 85 lived in middle-income households with a monthly income of S\$3,000–7,999; and 38 lived in higher-income households with a monthly income of above S\$8,000 (two interviewees declined to reveal their income level).

Once the respondent felt comfortable with the topic, I asked her to participate in the focus group discussions together with the individuals she had identified in her survey answers, as having had a strong influence on her childbearing decisions. Individuals included in the focus groups were mostly husbands or boyfriends, and in a few cases were friends of the same sex. In addition, the focus group interviews were conducted with the individual woman (and/or her significant others) and her parents or parents-in-law. All participation was voluntary, and respondents who joined the second and third stages provided their written demographic details after the discussion. In total, I conducted 39 focus group interviews. There were typically four to six participants in each focus group interview. The length of the discussion was usually 60-90 minutes. While the interviews in the second stage were carried out either in respondents' homes or in an interview room at the university, all interviews in the third stage with the respondents' older family members were held at the respondents' homes.

All 204 interviews, including both individual and focus group interviews, were conducted between October 2007 and July 2008, and were audiotaped, transcribed, and translated (where necessary). Two research assistants and I independently read and coded all 204 interview transcripts on the respondents' perceptions and responses. As Berg (2009: 148) writes in relation to analyzing data obtained from interviews, "typically, a systematic indexing process begins as researchers set up several sheets of paper with major topics of interest listed separately.... Ideally, this process should be accomplished by two or more researchers/coders, independently reading and coding each of several transcripts." After independent reading and coding, we then met up to discuss our coding so the whole data set could be entered into one master index sheet and analyzed using the SPSS quantitative analysis software and the NVivo qualitative analysis software. Where there was disagreement over which category any given respondent should be assigned to, the resolution process was as follows: (1) to follow the majority opinion (when one coder disagreed with the other two coders); or (2) to reach a consensus after discussion (when each coder assigned the respondent to a different category). Most of the responses were coded directly into the master copy and the computer software programs because the codes assigned by all of the coders were identical.

FINDINGS

Information about population policies figured prominently in official discourses. However, I will also illustrate various ways in which Singaporeans draw on foreign examples in their responses to the state's pronatalist policies, especially with reference from what they have heard from relatives, friends, workmates and acquaintances, including as "third-hand" information. Indeed, their references – sometimes accurate, sometimes vague – reflect the nature and intensity of Singaporeans multi-dimensional global connections: the number of Singaporeans and permanent residents who stay abroad for a continuous period of at least 12 months "hovers between 70,000 and 90,000" since 2003 (*Straits Times*, 5 February 2008). Among Singapore's total population of 5.08 million in 2010, there were 3.77 million Singapore residents, comprising 3.23 million Singapore citizens and 0.54 million permanent residents, and 1.31 million non-resident foreigners, i.e. more than a quarter of the population in Singapore are non-resident foreigners (Singapore Department of Statistics, *Key Demographic Trends*, 2010). Overseas travel has become more prevalent among the Singapore residents (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2002).

Work-family-balance policies

As the following three instances show, the Singaporean government has legitimized the institution of work-family-balance policies by drawing on the experiences of European countries. First, in 2004, Dr. Vivian Balakrishnan, Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports and Senior Minister of State for Trade and Industry, remarked:

Work-life harmony has been high on the Norwegian national agenda for many years. We can learn much from Norway's experience. Our tax structures and social safety nets may be different. *But some fundamentals remain the same.* Businesses in our countries need to consider how they can better compete globally (MCYS, 2004, emphasis mine).

Then, in 2007, Mrs. Yu-Foo Yee Shoon, Minister of State for Community Development, Youth and Sports, said:

research has also shown that countries with strong employer and government support for work-life flexibility and family support services, such as childcare, have higher female employment and fertility rates. For example, the Nordic countries have a high female labour participation rate

of over 70%, yet managed to have a fertility rate of over 1.7. Australia and Netherlands also have a female labour force participation rate of 69%, with fertility rates of 1.81 and 1.68 respectively (MCYS, 2007).

Lastly, in 2008, it was reported that

At the dialogues held in the past four months, one key concern was the Singapore woman's struggle to balance children and career. It was highlighted yesterday by Senior Minister of State for Finance and Transport, Lim Hwee Hua, who chaired the dialogues with five MPs. She said the participants gave various solutions while the Government has also looked into what other countries, like Sweden, have done. Ideas include giving maternity leave beyond the current three months; introducing paternity leave [to civil servants] which will stress shared responsibility between mothers and fathers, and providing affordable quality childcare (Li, the *Straits Times*, 2008a).

On the other hand, the government also draws on the experiences of other countries to explain the decision *not to* offer certain policies. For example, the rationale for the government's declining to extend paternity leave policies to all male employees was reported as the following:

The Government did consider giving paternity leave, but decided not to because of the experience of other countries. The majority of men in places like the Scandinavian countries did not take up the paternity leave offered to them, said Mr. Wong Kan Seng, the Deputy Prime Minister, who is also in charge of population issues. He did not provide details on the take-up rate, but media reports said that in Britain, for instance, just 20 per cent of fathers take the two weeks that they are entitled to when their wives give birth. Thus, the Government here decided against paternity leave per se, said Mr. Wong (Li, the *Straits Times*, 2008c).

While the government emphasizes offering help to balance work and family by extending the number of days of maternity leave and providing public childcare services, my interviewees suggested further restructuring of the employment relationship in the form of flexible work hours and flexible workplace practices. More importantly, their ideas were also globally informed. For instance, Mrs. Pang (age 46, Chinese, monthly household income S\$4,000-4,999) responded as follows when asked about how the government could encourage citizens to have more children: “[In] other countries, you know, the

mother can work at home. Especially, I think in London they are having this...or Switzerland. Some of my friends there are working at home.” Mrs. Zukifli (age 46, Malay, monthly household income S\$5,000-5,999) contrasted Singapore with Australia in suggesting that work hours should be shorter:

Singapore is a busy country...[everyone] stressed, everyone rushing. Go to work rushing. Maybe...how the government can help.... If possible the time to go in [office] should be 8 till 4 in the afternoon, like in Australia; in the afternoon they are free, relaxed, no stress, all shops are closed. Shorter [work] time, [then] citizens can consider [having more children]. Make them happier. That’s what I think.

In addition, as the following extracts from the interviews with Mrs. Osman (age 34, Malay, monthly household income S\$3,000-3,999) and Mr. and Mrs. Wong (both age 27, Chinese, husband is a family business owner and wife is a professional human resource manager, monthly household income S\$6,000-6,999) illustrate, citizens challenge the government’s claim that adequate work-family balance policies are in place by articulating the perceived differences between employers in Singapore and those in other countries such as the U.K., Germany and Australia.

Interviewer: If you are deciding whether to have another child, is there anything the government can do to help you decide?

Mrs. Osman: This is a bit tough, because it depends on the [your] position. If you are a professional, let’s say, you have a profession as an accountant, then yes, you do have the option to go into all these flexi-scheme and work from home. But other than that, other jobs most likely they require you to be there... But I guess at least you must allow two days that the staff work at home, because that’s what currently some companies in [the] U.K. and Germany are doing... Because I do have friends in [the] U.K., and they have colleagues who actually come in on certain days? Within that five days, Germany, for example, within that five days, three days this secretary will work from home. Three days work from home, and then the other two days will be at work for only half the day. Just to get stuff... and to give reports and whatever, cos’ there’s those things that you need to physically submit or do.

Interviewer: But they are also paid like a full time worker?

Mrs. Osman: That depends on the individual company. Some may pay like per hour [i.e., hourly rates]... But they do, the point is, they do allow such arrangement. Unlike down here [i.e., Singapore], the majority of the companies are not willing. The moment you say part time, they are not willing. And even if you go to [the employment] agencies, when you tell them, "I'm a housewife, and I still want to look after my kids, at the same time I also want to be financially independent and have a job to work part time," they cannot give you that, you know. They always tell me, no such thing! So what does that mean? Companies are not willing, even though the government is encouraging. But nothing is done. Only encouraging. That's all.

Similarly, a newly-wed Chinese couple talked about their friend who intended to settle in London because of the perceived pro-family work culture.

Mrs. Wong: This is the problem of Singapore culture. Singapore culture as in Singapore employer culture. As compared to the other countries, as in maybe London. I actually have a friend. She's working in London, and she mentioned that her colleague, who's actually a Singaporean. She actually wants to quit her Singapore job and she wants to settle in London, because the employers there are very pro-family. It's like when she's pregnant, they have a room for her to rest. Because pregnancy stage is very tiring, so they will allow her to nap for one or two hours. And London's maternity is like six months, so I guess the employer is very nice in a way whereby you can go off when you finish your work, just to spend time with your family. You don't need to stay until 5:30 when it's the official time to knock off.

Mr. Wong: You cannot compare Western country and Asian country.

Mrs. Wong: You see, this is the mentality of a Chinese employer, I mean, a Singaporean employer.

Mr. Wong: If we do like what the Western countries did, Singapore cannot survive economically. We cannot fight [i.e., be competitive].

Mrs. Wong: So that is the problem. I guess because of the work. So I guess many women, they don't want to have another child, I guess because of work. It's only when you stay at home and you don't have the stress from work, you don't have the pressure, then you will think about taking care of your family, having a big family.

Indeed, it was not only women, but also men, who pointed out that employers were not family-friendly. For example, Rahimi (age 27, Malay, monthly household income S\$3,000-3,999), a male professional nurse, said that he intended to 'vote by suitcases' and migrate to another country because of the lack of a good understanding of work-life balance in Singaporean workplaces.

Rahimi: I have observed Australia and some pro-family countries. In Singapore if they [the employees] ask for compassion[ate] leave or some time off to send the child [to] see [a] doctor or to go to the doctor, you know that it's frowned upon by employers. It's not accepted whereas in those countries, you can just tell a superior: I need time off to send my child and which is actually approved.... If they [Singapore employers] frown upon it, you don't have a good feedback.

Moderator: Do you have friends that actually have this kind of experience?

Rahimi: Yes, I've got some friends who are nurses from overseas. So, that's why [they] choose to run there and not come back...only thing is we vote by suitcases. I intend to be one of them.

In summary, while the state draws on policy expertise in European countries and Australia, the knowledge Singaporean citizens have gained through personal networks in these and other nation-societies, similarly enables them to counter-offer what might arguably be called a more progressive agenda: the state should restructure the employer-employee relationship via routinized provisions

on flexible workplace practices and work hours. They also point out the perceived situation in which they live. That is, how employers are not, at present, accommodating employees' family needs that, in turn, dampen the effectiveness of the state's work-family-balance policy. In the parlance of globalization studies, this can be seen as an incidence of the need to obtain the support and cooperation of local employers to localize globally informed work-family-balance policy needs.

Pronatalist financial incentives

While only a few interviewees intended to exercise the option of migration in part due to unfavorable work-family balance issues, a significant number of respondents talked about how childrearing (and thus childbearing) was daunting and how the government could do more to help. Indeed, based on in-depth personal interviews, approximately one out of five interviewees said that education in Singapore was expensive, and more than one third of interviewees expressed a desire for more education subsidies.

For example, when the interviewer asked, "if you're deciding whether to have a child, is there anything that the government can do that will help you decide?" Jasmawathy (age 22, Indian, monthly household income S\$10,000 and over) replied with the example of Australia in mind:

I would want to make sure that in the years to come, there would be more subsidies.... Compared to Singapore, there are many other countries out there like in Australia, you have a lot of subsidies for the kids...[parents] can send them to additional enrichment classes and all for free. So, I would hope we would have this kind of subsidy for children. That's basically it, [and] health subsidies maybe. If I want to take them to a clinic, like they will have subsidies for the kids. Basically that's all.

More tellingly, in the following focus group discussions with Mr. and Ms. Balasingam (age 34, Indian, monthly household income S\$4,000-4,999), the provision of free education to encourage childbearing among citizens was explicitly tied to the notion of citizenship in the U.K. and Australia. Mr. Balasingam said:

I think we stopped at two [children] basically because of a few reasons. Primary reason is financial aspect of it. I think the government can do more by providing free education from pre-school to university. As in say, countries like [the] U.K., Australia... as long as you're a citizen, they

provide this for you. As long as your child can study and meet the grades, I think it is only fair that the state supports you because first, any male child you have will be liable for national service... So we will feel that our child going to national service... the state has done us a favor, it has helped us bring up the children so it is only right that our kid serve the nation. Unlike now where you really have to bend real backwards to make sure that the child gets a really thorough education, plus he has to go and serve national service which means he loses two years of his life.

It is notable that Mr. Balasingam justified his recommendations of free education and healthcare for citizens in relation to National Service, which is compulsory for male citizens when they reach the age of 18 (but did not comment on what happens to female citizens). Mr. Balasingam, nonetheless, continued to emphasize the general inadequacy of the existing state education grants:

This is a key factor I would say, education and the policies surrounding it as to why they are not providing free education. Grants are not enough, I mean they give you a yearly grant of I think, \$400 into your account for your child up to 20, which works out to about a dollar plus a day. So in theory, it looks good on a piece of paper which says you have \$400 a year of which they pay you in two payments: one at the beginning of the year, and one six months later. \$1.50 a day doesn't cover a child's bus fare to go anywhere.

In addition to the suggestion of providing more substantial education subsidies or universal free education to encourage childbearing, some respondents also recommended that rather than taking "half measures," the state could provide direct financial subsidies in the form of an ongoing monthly allowance and/or fully subsidized basic expenditures in the early years of a child-citizen's life. For example, when asked "is the government making it financially possible, or easier financially for people to have more children?" Mrs. Yap (age 42, Chinese, monthly household income S\$4,000-4,999) replied:

It's a 'no' answer. I mean comparatively to my sister-in-law in Australia. She's [a] stay-home [mother], and she has [a] monthly [subsidy of] 300 Aussie dollars, they call it 'nappy money' or whatever you know! (Laughs) Stay-home mother have that kind of incentives, it's very good! 300 dollars per month is very useful, but [when] it's per year [as in Singapore], oh, it's peanuts.

Similarly, Mrs. Osman also suggested a monthly allowance for housewives as she drew on her knowledge of such practices in Europe:

It's good if they can give housewife some allowance. Even it means hundred dollars or hundred and fifty per month... it's still an allowance for housewife. At least as a housewife, you feel that you are being appreciated in bringing up the future generation. And in fact some European countries are actually doing that. Giving allowance to housewife. Do you know? [A] housewife actually gets allowance from the government.

More importantly, this idea of state-provided monthly allowances was not only proposed by women in their role as housewives,² but also by men, as the following interview excerpts demonstrate.

Mr. Goh (age 46, Chinese, monthly household income S\$3,000-3,999):

Like in Canada, milk powder [during the initial stage], they pay you [monthly payments] to [age] 18. Wow, I don't mind having a few more children because I think the government will really help me to sustain because I can't guarantee my job for the next 18 years, right?

Rahimi (age 27, Malay, monthly household income S\$3,000-3,999, mentioned earlier):

I have got some friends who studied architecture overseas, and then they just got married over there, just stay over there and they never come back. [Interviewer: But do they have concern for children's education?] They've got everything there. Like the Australian government actually gives subsidies every month. What we need actually is maintenance for us monthly, on a monthly basis. Whenever you give us \$200 allowance every month

² Mrs. Zukifli also suggested that a monthly household allowance be paid by invoking the Australian example. 'More children? If possible I don't work. For example...in Australia, wives don't work but the government helps with money. Especially marketing [i.e., grocery shopping], three hundred or four hundred. Singapore money. If [it was] like that, maybe Singaporeans could give birth to more children; maybe they [could] consider and agree to give birth to more babies. If the government was like that of Australia.'

for shop, I think that helps a lot, rather than [the] \$3000 one-off [payment in the baby bonus scheme].

To be fair, citizens responded according to their perceptions of practices in other countries, which may not have been accurate and precise. Furthermore, Singapore's government does offer financial subsidies; in particular, tax rebates have been in existence since 1987. However, financial subsidies in the form of tax rebates do seem to have their limitations, particularly for lower-middle income families, as the following extract from the focus group interview with Mr. Chong (age 49, Chinese, monthly household income S\$2,000-2,999) and Mrs. Chong poignantly shows. The couple talked in detail about their personal experience of the inadequacy of existing policies. On the one hand, they did not benefit from the pronatalist tax benefits.

Mrs. Chong: This tax rebate program is only useful for people with higher pay. How much tax can be deducted from people of the middle class like us? Honestly speaking, they have not deducted a cent of tax for my employment of more than ten years because there is nothing for them to deduct. The same goes for him (referring to Mr. Chong).

On the other hand, while education credentials have become a key mechanism for social mobility in the knowledge-based economy, education costs have increased dramatically.

Mrs. Chong: Children these days are different from the past. We can no longer teach and nurture our children the same way as in the past.

Mr. Chong: Those talent-nurturing classes she [i.e., Mrs. Chong] is talking about are those that we could not afford in the past. Till now, my son is still lamenting about the fact that he was not nurtured and developed holistically due to our financial incapability.

Moderator: He hopes to attend these talent-nurturing classes?

Mr. Chong: We do not have the financial ability. When he is pursuing his dreams, he will easily give up in the middle of the journey, thinking that it is impossible for him to do so

anyway. Like the case of university education, he never thinks he has the financial ability to go [to] university anyway. His dreams have already been shattered. If your dreams have already been shattered before you pursue [them], how could you become a talent? These so-called 'talents' depend heavily on themselves for their own success, if they are better off one day and are given a good opportunity, do you think that they will want to stay in this small island? I can only say that talents will not be here. Those who are left here, like us, are not regarded as talent. We are neither high nor low, only suppressed by the higher authority.

Notably, Mr. Chong later signaled a sense of discontent by raising the possibility of migration:

If our society continues to work this way, honestly speaking, the people will only make one move. It is to sell their houses and strike out for themselves new paths in another country. They will all migrate and leave Singapore if they manage to find a good place. There are many who already doing this. They moved together and not singly.

Moreover, Mr. Chong, like his counterparts Mr. Balasingam and Mr. Goh introduced above, framed his requests for state assistance in the early years of a child's life within the notion of citizenship.

Mr. Chong: In the case where we wish to increase our population, regardless [of] whether one is poor or rich, there can be a scheme where all the people can bring the child's birth certificate to claim the milk powder subsidized by the government. Whether the child needs two and a half or three years of supply, purchase the milk powder with the birth certificate. It should be equal to all regardless of race. Education is free for all, be [they] Chinese [or] Malay. As long as you are [a] Singapore citizen, it is free.

The idea of introducing more universal and direct financial subsidies to support childrearing (and thus childbearing) was a repeated theme that was even voiced among the younger-generation respondents. Jessica (age 26, Chinese, monthly household income not available, five-room apartment) talked about

France in her interview: “in France, the government actually gives [a] cash bonus to women who have many children.” Perhaps the most succinct statement was made by Masumah (age 22, Malay, monthly household income S\$4,000-4,999) when she half-jokingly stated that “the only thing they [the Singaporean government] can do is be like the Brunei government... paying a lot of things for the people and they will be very happy [to consider].”

Nonetheless, the state seems to be resisting such measures. As reported in the *Straits Times*, “Mr. Eddie Teo, Permanent Secretary to the Prime Minister’s Office and Head of the Working Committee on Marriage and Procreation, says that his committee was deeply aware that ‘no other country has ever succeeded in raising the fertility rate, not even Sweden.’” More recently, Mrs. Lim Hwee Hua, Senior Minister of State for Finance and Transport Member, National Population Committee, wrote in the *Straits Times* that “the differences in the social-political environments of Singapore and Sweden should be considered. She suggested that “Sweden has a high tax regime that helps sustain its high governmental expenditure on family, with VAT (GST-equivalent) rate of 25% and income tax rates as high as 60%, while [the] Singapore tax regime is much lower” (Long, September 23, 2000).

Intriguingly, while it may be citizens in the lower-income strata who experience the immateriality of certain policy provisions, citizens in the upper-income strata seem to understand the state’s logic and resistance. However, they too are questioning such measures, as Mr. Lee elucidated:

They [i.e., the government] always have this paranoid fear of a crutch of welfare, you know, mentality, that they want to help but they holding back some, they give you some, holding back some, and that’s why you end up with all the half measures. It’s very frustrating. So it comes to a stage where I think most, for us and the people we know, don’t base our family planning on government incentives.

The above quotation suggests that half-measures are not effective and that citizens wonder why “fuller” measures are not in place. Moreover, given the half-measures implemented in Singapore, government interventions become irrelevant to citizens’ family planning.

In sum, first, while the Singaporean government has legitimized the implementation of “work-family-balance” policies by pointing to the existence of such policies in European countries, the citizens interviewed for this study questioned the effectiveness of such policies by invoking their knowledge of practices such as flexible workplace provisions in England and Germany and

shorter work hours in Australia. They also emphasized the *comparatively* unsympathetic nature of Singaporean employers. Second, while the government resists the idea of more generous and universal state-provided subsidies, the citizens elaborated on their perceptions of such benefits in Australia, Brunei, Canada, France, and the U.K. Respondents suggested that more direct state financial subsidies, especially subsidies for education and young children's daily needs, would encourage and further strengthen a sense of national belonging. Third, the citizens invoked the notion of migration to signal their discontent with current state policy provisions.

CONCLUSION

The question of how nationhood is affected by the contemporary process of globalization can be addressed in different ways depending on how the nation is defined and how globalization is understood. In this study, the dynamics of state pronatalist policy and citizens' responses in Singapore, are analyzed in relation to the theoretical model of the global field and the attendant process of relativization. In particular, the documentary and interview data discussed here suggest that while the state "relativizes" society when promoting a particular policy *via* comparisons with those in place in European societies, Singaporean citizens also relativize their societal references by invoking perceived practices in a wide range of societies. While the most frequently cited examples are Australia and the U.K., perhaps reflecting the British colonial legacy, Canada, France, Germany, and even Brunei also rate a mention. In other words, both social actors – state officials and individual citizens – are aware of the world system of societies in their "imagination." This ability and the adeptness of citizens in making 'counter-offers' and providing examples from other societies reflect the impact of globalization. That is, even if the state has a relative monopoly in the local media, citizens have personal networks (e.g., family, friends, and colleagues) that serve as alternative sources of information.

Nonetheless, there seems to be a disjuncture between what the state has implemented (or glocalized) and what citizens think should be implemented. Thus, while the state has promoted work-family-balance policies, the citizens interviewed for this study pointed out what needed to change both structurally (e.g., flexible workplace practices and work hours) and culturally (e.g., employers' attitudes) for such policies to be effective. While citizens voiced their desire for the types of universal and direct state financial subsidies perceived to be available in other nation-states, the Singaporean state has similarly invoked the structural changes that must take place for this to occur (e.g., higher taxes). As Berger (2009) points out, judicial decision making is affected and constrained by

“embedded knowledge structures,” and our understanding of the dynamics of globalization and nationhood can be further advanced by future research that examines the social-historical formations of global connections – hence “knowledge structures” that lead to different imaginations of the Singapore nation – at the level of state officials and individual citizens.

The disconnect between what the state thinks and what citizens think regarding how public policy should address the issue of social reproduction is not trivial. What is at stake is ‘nationhood’ as understood according to the Weberian notion of a “sentiment of solidarity.”³ When the perspectives of citizens are constantly ignored by the state, migration, a form of moral protest, becomes an option to be taken seriously. However, all is not lost because the debate remains an ongoing negotiation in which there is the possibility that, while state authority may be undermined, nationhood may be strengthened if the state is also able to respond to citizens’ concerns made in the light of international practice.

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