Book Review "Population policy and reproduction in Singapore" (Inter-Asia Cultural Studies)

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Why are developmental citizens reluctant to procreate? Analytical insights from Shirley Sun’s *Population Policy and Reproduction in Singapore* and Takeda Hiroko’s *The Political Economy of Reproduction in Japan*

Yoo-Jean SONG, Kyung-Sup CHANG and Gabriel SYLVIAN


Lowest-low fertility in East Asia

In recent years, a low—in fact, “lowest-low”—birth rate has continued to be a feature of East Asian societies. Kohler and his colleagues (2002) have designated total fertility rate (TFR) below 1.3 as “lowest-low fertility.” In 2012, TFR in East Asian societies including Singapore, Japan, etc., ranked lowest among 224 countries in the world. The country with the lowest total fertility rate in the world is Singapore (0.78); followed by Hong Kong (1.09 at number 222), Taiwan (1.10 at number 221), South Korea (1.23 at number 219), and Japan (1.39 at number 206) (CIA 2012). Birth rates for these societies began dropping below the so-called replacement level (i.e., total fertility rate of 2.1) in the 1970s. The transition in birth rate to a total fertility rate of 2.1 (replacement level) is classified as “First Demographic Transition,” and reduction to figures below 2.1 as “Second Demographic Transition.” East Asian societies all have been undergoing rapid fertility decline and, since the turn of the century, have recorded lowest-low fertility rates.

Unlike Western societies where fertility rates have changed gradually over a long period of time, drastic changes in fertility have occurred in East Asia within a very short span of time. The important role of birth control policies actively implemented by developmentalist governments is also a distinctive characteristic of East Asia. A number of Western countries experiencing lowest-low birth rates for a time have recently shown a tendency to recover higher birth levels (Goldstein, Sobotka, and Jasilioniene 2009). East Asian societies meanwhile have continued to experience lowest-low fertility despite aggressive government interventions to reverse the trend.

So what caused this fertility decline in East Asian societies, so rapidly and so quickly? Why has low fertility level persisted despite active governmental involvement to encourage births? This issue needs to be examined along with the fertility impacts of individualism and gender equality that have been held responsible for the Second Demographic Transition (Van de Kaa 1987; McDonald 2000). Two recent path-breaking books on Singapore and Japan—i.e., Shirley Hsiao-Li Sun’s *Population Policy and Reproduction in Singapore: Making Future Citizen* (2012) and Takeda Hiroko’s *The Political Economy of Reproduction in Japan: Between Nation-State and Everyday Life* (2005)—offer us a unique opportunity to look into these issues in the Singaporean and Japanese contexts.

Singapore and Japan resemble other East Asian countries in terms of their recent historical conditions and developmental policies, under which their states were newly constructed or reconstructed after...
the Second World War and set on the path of government-led modernization and economic development. On the other hand, they differ from other East Asian societies in their establishment of relatively autonomous modern state systems accompanied by long-term, stable maintenance of independent political cultures and social management strategies. In addition, Singapore and Japan resemble each other in terms of their authoritative state-civil society relationship and strong governmental engagement, with biocultural-political undertones, in various social reproduction issues such as fertility, sexuality, education, health, etc. The two states may be classified as conservative developmental regimes as compared with the more liberal developmental regimes of South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

The purpose of this article—and the books of Sun and Takeda—is not to evaluate the demographic effectiveness or consequences of their population policies, but to understand the politico-economic and cultural conditions underlying the two countries’ state-citizen relationship through the aperture of population policy and reproduction behavior. The two books differ in historical periods covered (Sun on the latest era in Singapore; Takeda on the post-Meiji long-term change in Japan) and empirical methods adopted (Sun mainly using in-depth interviews; Takeda relying on archives, private records, literature, and a host of other socially available materials), but considered together, they complementarily help us understand the highly complex problems at issue.

Population policy in Japan and Singapore

Sun begins her discussion by noting that Singapore, which achieved miraculous economic growth based on developmentalism and productivism, was the first country in East Asia to switch its population policy from one discouraging births to one actively promoting them. Sun questions why Singapore’s birth rate has not risen despite a long period of strenuous governmental efforts to encourage births.

To answer this and other questions, Chapter 1 introduces the concept of citizenship, pointing to the necessity for research on social citizenship as it is experienced by the individual in day-to-day contexts. Chapters 2 and 3 respectively outline Singapore’s fertility trends and the birth incentives currently implemented in that country, and discuss policy changes that appeared in the process of economic development.

Chapters 4 and 5 present the results of interviews conducted with about 200 men and women. They reveal a gap between how citizenship is defined by the Singaporean government and how it is defined by the individual. That is, while the government perceives citizenship as responsibility or duty—or citizens as human resources—the individual Singaporean defines citizenship as human and social rights. Additionally, there is a difference between what the government perceives as the ideal type of care and the type of care desired by the individual Singaporean. The results also indicate an asymmetry between the type of citizen identity expected by the government and the individual’s day-to-day self-perception about citizen status.

The government’s ideal is a “postmodern care model,” in which women are expected to be “superwomen” simultaneously responsible for both economic activity and care work; while the individual (or citizen) is oriented towards either a “traditional care model” (such as the traditional housewife) or a “warm modern model” (institutional support for care work with sharing of tasks by both genders in the family) depending on the individual’s attitude toward work and family. When a government deals with its citizen only as a “worker” to be mobilized for national (economic) development, the individual is called upon, in effect, to become both “citizen as worker” and “citizen as parent” simultaneously. This difference in perspective between state and citizen is posited as a crucial factor contributing to the chronic
failure of the Singaporean government’s pro-birth policies. In addition to differences in perspective, Chapter 4 presents interview data suggesting that high living costs negatively impact the individual’s decision to produce offspring, and that government communication and publicity for its birth incentive policies have been insufficient, further contributing to the failure of those policies.

Separating female interviewees into two categories, family-centered and career-centered, Chapter 5 claims that the government’s pro-natal policies prove ineffective because they are implemented across the board without considering heterogeneity among Singaporean women. Even though paid maternity leaves and other policies for balancing work and family serve to benefit family-centered women, their career-centered counterparts receive no strong relief as long as they are threatened by loss of jobs.

Based on interviewee responses, Chapter 6 notes that the two virtues young Singaporean parents want from their offspring—social capital as communal subject and human capital as capable worker—are contradictory. While increasing the number of a child’s siblings is important for promoting interpersonal competence seen as social capital, the pursuit of individual competitiveness, seen as human capital, necessitates investing maximum resources on fewer children. Decisions about childbirth can vary depending on which value is accorded more importance.

While Sun’s research relies on literature review and interviews, Takeda adopts an historical perspective, dividing Japan’s population policy into several periods. Agreeing with criticism raised against the distinction between public and private spheres (by Habermas, etc.), Takeda argues that reproduction, the sphere thought to be the most private, should be understood in its relationship to the public sphere. Chapter 1 of the study introduces the concept of “governmentality” to show how population policies have continuously changed according to the needs of the state, and how the individual, and particularly the woman, has been accordingly mobilized and controlled.

Chapter 2 explains how, in the process of modernization since the Meiji era until the Second World War, the Japanese government intervened in the individual’s day-to-day life, and how it shifted its childbirth-related policies during the period to reflect the changing needs of the state. Under the Meiji-era urgency of rapid modernization, focus was given to the need for mothers who were competent in bearing and raising children for a strong and civilized nation-state. Thus, women’s education became more commonplace, and the concepts of health and hygiene were widely disseminated. A new concept of family (katei) emphasizing the nuclear family, horizontal relationships, and emotional intimacy was also introduced. It differed from the traditional concept of family (ie) centered on vertical relationships with an extended family. After the First World War, there was brief interest in curbing births, and contraceptives were introduced to the public. But apart from that short period, Japan continued to maintain policies encouraging childbirth from the Meiji era until the Second World War.

Chapter 3 sheds light on the period from the 1930s until Japan’s defeat in 1945. The Japanese government emphasized population growth throughout the Second World War, and women were mobilized for the war in a variety of ways. Immediately following the war, however, national reconstruction and economic development were given top priority, and the introduction of new birth control policies resulted in a rapid downturn in fertility rates. Chapter 4 focuses on the period of post-war economic growth during which there were a growing number of housewives and a corresponding decrease in fertility rate under a governmental birth control policy.

Chapter 5 introduces the New Life Movement, which emerged in 1952. While pursuing economic growth in terms of quantity and quality, the movement was
premised on planned rationalization of the family's daily activities for the purpose of actively harnessing production labor. Initiated under government leadership, the movement's main target-cum-subject was the nation's housewives. Specific agendas of the movement included: (1) family planning, (2) savings/budget management and household maintenance plan, (3) construction of a healthy home through education in scientific parenting and hygiene awareness, (4) reconstruction of order at home through juvenile crime prevention and family education, and (5) promotion of social morality through education in citizenship, public morality, and traffic safety. Case studies are used to show how, in concert with the movement, government intervention in the day-to-day life of people and strategic mobilization of women encouraged women's participation in social activities while at the same time restricting them to the domestic sphere.

Chapter 6 presents changes in birth trends and associated policies from the 1970s until the present. Birth rates in Japan decreased steadily from the 1970s, plummeting to a shockingly low TFR of 1.57 in 1989. From the 1990s, the Japanese government turned to birth incentive policies using various enticements, but lowest-low fertility remained constant. As rapid economic growth was edged out by economic recession coupled with natural disasters such as the Kobe earthquake, as well as by the impact of neoliberalism and globalization, this led to increasing popular anxiety and mistrust of the government that proved itself incapable of delivering effective countermeasures. Such are pointed out as circumstantial reasons for the failure of government policies to encourage childbirth.

In her conclusion, Takeda argues that women were always the main target of policy in the process of these periodic shifts and were paradoxically able to augment their status and roles as active agents through negotiations and compromises with the conservative state. On the other hand, such expanded social status and participation were based on maternalism and therefore served to reinforce conservative maternal values. She interprets the low fertility phenomenon as a result of strong familialism, appearing in the context of increased social uncertainty, rather than as a result of a maximization of individualism as has been suggested by many Western and some Asian observers.

Reproduction under the developmental nation-states

In summary, the studies by Sun and Takeda reveal several commonalities between the population policies of Singapore and Japan. First, the population policy under developmentalism changed constantly according to the needs of the state. In addition, the government penetrated and deeply involved itself in the everyday life of the individual. States promoting economic development presume that they may freely mobilize individuals as developmental resources according to their strategic needs. With national reconstruction and economic growth as top priority, the states of Singapore and Japan actively intervened in reproduction across all sectors (i.e., economic reproduction, biological reproduction, and social and political reproduction).

Through several wars beginning with the Meiji era, Japan gave the highest national priority to the creation and maintenance of high-quality soldiers and industrial human resources. This fostered increasing interest in producing women (as well as men) as high-quality human resources, and universal education for women was accordingly instituted. Likewise, health-related concepts such as hygiene and nutritional status were also given special emphasis. Similarly, subsequent to its independence in 1965, Singapore placed top priority on the goals of national construction and economic growth. A city-state with no natural resources, it expanded public education and offered relatively equal employment opportunities based on performance skills regardless of gender or race, by which it
secured plentiful human resources and political stability. Notably, in both Singapore and Japan, interest in education and health issues did not stem from concern for the welfare or quality of life of individuals, but rather as a means to raise the resources necessary to (re)build the country.

In Japan, during periods of portending war, qualitative aspects of population shared equal importance with quantitative aspects. Thus, from the Meiji era until the end of the Second World War, Japan steadily pursued both aims of population quality and quantity. Immediately after the Second World War, orientation was toward population control, but from the 1980s, in the face of excessive population decrease, low birth rates, and an aging population, the government turned to promote birth incentives. Shortly after its independence in 1965, Singapore viewed excessive overcrowding as a burden on economic growth and so focused its policies on ensuring population quality. Like Japan, it turned to birth incentives from the 1980s. In both countries, population policies for encouraging and restricting childbirth were strategically alternated according to the needs and circumstances of the state. Each time, the woman’s body was viewed as a target to be closely controlled or managed.

Population policy was not the only realm in which the government actively intervened in everyday life. It did so in other ways under the guise of “rationalization” and “enlightenment.” Introducing Western-style concepts such as modernization and rationalization in the process of national reconstruction, the Japanese government involved itself in the everyday life of the individual and family (Ochiai 2013), remodeling the Japanese kitchen after the Western style, developing and recommending healthy menus for family meals, and introducing new methods for laundering and cleaning. This was undertaken in an attempt to find efficient ways to produce and manage a quality labor force.

On the other hand, the welfare of the individual was left entirely to the responsibility of individuals and families (Ochiai 1997). Familial care work, as well as various other tasks such as healthcare and livelihood maintenance had to be borne by individuals and families themselves, and the central role in these responsibilities fell to women. In terms of welfare institutions, Singapore seems to have been much more innovatively conservative than Japan. For example, it did not introduce a public pension system, but instituted a unique “Central Provident Fund,” an individualized compulsory monthly social security savings program in which the employee takes a portion out of his/her salary each month and places it into a personal savings account, while the employer saves a similar amount each month for the employee. Health insurance is operated in a similar manner, so individuals, businesses, and families bear responsibility for the entire welfare system without commensurate state aid.

So, one may ask, how does the state justify its deep involvement in the daily life of the individual, when it leaves the responsibility for social welfare entirely up to the individual and its family? Just how deeply can the government intervene in the individual’s life? Why doesn’t the individual challenge the state’s encroachment into day-to-day living and its evasion of responsibility for social welfare? A clue may be found in the special attributes of the developmental state and its socio-political culture in Singapore and Japan.

Singapore and Japan both suffered a profound sense of crisis in their modern history. In the process of Singapore’s secession from Malaysia at the end of British colonial rule and its development as a new nation-state, the government and people of Singapore shared a sense of urgency and crisis. Japan, as an island country, attempted repeated foreign aggression and wars, and a common conviction was formed by the state and its people that Japan must grow into a strong nation. Against this background, the impact of Confucian culture played an important role in combining the nation and
people. The Confucian supposition that individuals must sacrifice for the sake of the whole, and that within hierarchical power relations, they must serve the king (state) like a father, was ingrained in the popular mind. In the West, with its full-fledged individualism, privacy and the private sector must be protected; but in Singapore and Japan, where collectivism is the norm, there is relatively less (overt) rejection of state interference in the individual’s daily life. When the state experienced crisis, its people sacrificed personal interests for the sake of national reconstruction and successful economic development, and complied with the requirements from the state. Centered in developmental policies, the robust state’s command over the nation with centralized leadership played an important role in its ability to make use of the people’s innate Confucian perspective.

Of course, trust in the nation is presupposed in this process. People have been induced to believe that if the individual cooperates, the state will reach its proposed goals, that if the state grows and develops, the individual will reap the benefits, and that once a job is landed, lifelong responsibility will be taken for the individual and his family. Such beliefs all operated as dynamics to make the individual comply. As a result, both Singapore and Japan experienced rapid economic growth and successfully rebuilt their country, and these achievements strengthened the confidence of their citizens. Nationalistic pride is also thought to have had an influence in this process. As one of the four East Asian tigers, Singapore created an economic miracle; and Japan, in growing to become a powerful country sharing world economic hegemony, reinforced its people’s self-confidence and national pride that “the country can do it.” In both countries, these factors seem to account for the absence of political resistance by the individual and the popular compliance with the national policy.

Second, a eugenic approach has been latent or sometimes even explicit in the population policies of Singapore and Japan. The government’s requirements for population control were reflected in childbirth policies according to the needs of the state, while concern about the quality of the population was expressed through the expansion of universal education and maintenance of an intrusive health care system, as mentioned above. However, concern about the quality of the population grew distorted, becoming entangled with eugenic perspectives.

In a formal speech, Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew once pointed out that high birthrates among uneducated Singaporeans and immigrants and low birthrates among highly educated Singaporeans constitute a serious social problem causing potential deterioration of the Singaporean population (Teo 2007). With an open premise of class and race hegemony, Lee devised various policies to boost childbirth by highly educated women. Interviews conducted by Sun also reveal that the birth incentive policies presented by the current government (i.e., tax rebates, Children Development Accounts, etc.) also reflect a eugenic perspective that favors the educated upper class.

In the 1950s, the Japanese government attempted to turn an extreme eugenic perspective into a reality. Specifically, people with health concerns such as disabilities, genetic diseases, or mental illnesses, were examined by bureaucrats, and with the consent of each subject’s guardian, were subjected to sterilizations or forced abortions. Strong objections and anger by the disabled to forced abortion and compulsory sterilization led to an easing of the eugenic drive. But even today, attention to quality of population often translates into an interest in genetic considerations, and continued efforts are made to encourage upper class educated women to bear children.

The question arises as to in what degree the quality of a population or an individual can actually be measured or evaluated. According to Becker (1960), decline in childbirth occurs as the result of rational choice between quantity and quality of children.
The concept of “parenting” first appeared in the process of modernization, and as its importance was highlighted, individuals chose to reduce the number of children in their family in order to focus on the qualitative aspects of their offspring. At the personal level, standards for evaluating the quality of a child boil down to her/his academic achievement, and the quantity-quality relationship pertaining to children is often understood as a zero-sum equation.

Yet on the national level, standards for evaluating the quality of the population remain ambiguous. Although standards for assessing population quality may vary according to the extent to which one can contribute to the success of the country’s development, proposing a single and unambiguous criterion is difficult. Nevertheless, the most obvious method of determining population quality focuses on the presence or absence of those who pose a burden to society because of health and other issues. These subjects are not only unable to contribute to national advancement, but they also require care from society or the nation. In addition, government narratives lauding procreation within a nuclear family context operate to reinforce conservative religious and cultural values that suppress non-nuclear families and non-heterosexual voices, resulting, for example, in the denial of basic legal protections for sexual minorities. In this trait, Singapore has been much more blunt and obstinate. Examples are the retention of British colonial-style statutes penalizing sexual relations between males, government-sanctioned discrimination against effeminacy in men, the banning of free association of sexual minority groups and publication of sexual minority literature. To promote population quality, goals are proposed for removing the production of so-called “lower quality” populations, or silencing them. Recently, emphasizing economic contribution as qualitative criteria for the country’s population, Singapore encourages women to have three children only if their children can be a source of economic power. Permitted levels of fertility for immigrants are differentiated according to their salary level. The eugenic perspective possesses the fatal flaw of ignoring basic human rights, but it is being packaged and licensed in the name of securing excellent human capital needed by the country for national development.

Third, women are always the main target of shifting population policies. Where responsibility for welfare is shifted solely to individuals and families, the main duty is imposed upon women. To recognize the expertise of full-time housewives, Japan has recognized a variety of family-life related areas such as “Food and Nutrition” and “Home Economics Management” as scientific disciplines and has propagated these concepts through a movement to enlighten citizens on daily life. In addition, women are encouraged to form self-help groups and engage in social activities and thereby become active agents in regional communities. But thorough adherence to patriarchal values and traditional gender roles has continued to confine the duties of women to the home. Women’s chief roles and responsibilities consist of the fulfillment of childbirth and dutiful parenting to provide the state with good-quality citizens. A typical yet noble Japanese example is Princess Masako, who worked as a skilled diplomat but, upon marriage, had to devote herself to assisting her husband and rearing children. Increasing numbers of Japanese women are engaged in economic activity, but the restriction of women to housework, child-rearing and care work defines the practical reality of gender in Japanese society. Many women leave their job during childbirth and parenting and later re-enter the job market only once familial care work has been substantially reduced (Ochiai 1997).

For the purposes of political stability and utilization of human resources, Singapore provides equal employment opportunities regardless of gender, thus encouraging women’s economic activities. On this point, it differs slightly from Japan. But the two countries are similar in that the
subject of responsibility for personal and family well-being is still the woman. In other words, a woman’s body is controlled or managed depending on the needs of the government for its population policy, and the role and status of women is simultaneously expanded and limited depending on technocratic needs. Of course women have been active agents through various social movements (i.e., New Life Movement in Japan) and undeniably the roles and statuses of women have expanded compared to the past. Some women may occupy the same social position as men. But the ideology that femininity and maternalism must be emphasized for women to advance socially is fundamentally contradictory. The absence of any big backlash from women academics in Japan and Singapore to the intense political use made of women’s bodies and roles is also unique. This can be interpreted as the combination of a public atmosphere emphasizing the importance of maternalism for national reconstruction and development, and civil commitment to the fulfillment of the roles and responsibilities granted by the government. This is even more the case in Singapore, with its strong centralized governing system.

Citizenship as responsibility versus citizenship as social rights

Then why is “lowest-low fertility” maintained in Singapore in Japan, where individuals are mobilized by strong developmental regimes for national reconstruction and economic growth? Sun and Takeda present three main factors: state–citizen differences in perception of citizenship, individual dilemmas under strong familialism, and gender asymmetry in care giving. These factors respectively pertain to the three major sets of social relationships surrounding familial procreation—namely, state–citizen relationship, individual-family relationship, and man–women relationship. According to Sun and Takeda, each of these relationships has been strained by historical and structural contradictions.

Sun argues that the gap existing between citizenship as defined and ordained by the state and that lived and argued by the individual has given rise to the failure of Singapore’s childbirth incentive policies. This appears applicable in the case of Japan as well. The Japanese government’s perspective, which defines the individual as one who is to be held accountable for the country’s development as a member of the nation-state, has always been imparted to individuals with full expectation of compliance. This has been possible because, as mentioned earlier, the state and the individual shared the same goals and even the same sense of crisis, creating a mutual trust between the two subjects. In addition, the myth of the national economic miracle has bestowed on individuals considerable national pride and dignity, reinforcing their compliance.

On the other hand, once a certain level of economic development has been attained, it is hard to expect further rapid development and success. Additionally, the aftermath of neoliberalism and globalization has dismantled the concept or norm of lifetime employment, so even if the individual sacrifices for the country and fulfills all his responsibilities, due reward cannot be assured (cf. Chang 2012b). In a reality where the welfare system is weak and individuals and families are responsible for their own welfare, the individual must make strategic choices. Accordingly, the individual views herself/himself less as a welfare-responsible citizen and more as a citizen who possesses social rights, as a citizen who wants and demands those rights to be recognized and implemented by the state. The individual expects the state to provide an environment meaningfully conducive to childbirth and parenting. And if such environment is not secured, childbirth becomes difficult.

Unable to adapt to the changed relationship between the national and the personal, or to the individual’s new perspective of citizenship, the governments of Singapore and Japan persist in maintaining
their developmental perspective, placing the highest value on economic growth. Owing to this cultural-ideological lag of the state, real gaps have begun to appear between the desires of the individual and those of the national leadership, leading to chronic popular dissatisfaction and conflicts. The erstwhile slogans for “educating people properly” and the policies emphasizing responsibility and sacrifice while appealing to patriotism are no longer effective. Effort appears needed to tackle questions such as how to reflect the diverse desires of the individual focused on quality of life and well-being, rather than on national economic growth, and how the government’s role must change to accommodate the new demands of citizens, particularly women. Also important is the task of identifying how the individual defines herself/himself, how he/she earns a living, and what his/her life experiences are, in order to mutually harmonize often conflicting perspectives between the national and the personal.

The individual’s strategic decision within familialism

Singapore and Japan achieved rapid and sustained economic development based on strong familialism. The family serves as an important mechanism for supplementing their weak social welfare systems. In both countries, a national strategy emphasizing universal education for attaining quality human resources has induced a private focus on children’s education for the aim of education-based social advancement. In this strategy, the child’s educational achievement is used as a measure of the success (or failure) of the family as a whole.

In the past, the family was responsible for its own welfare, and its investment in children’s schooling met with a certain level of social and occupational compensation. Life-time employment was guaranteed by diplomas from good schools, and many other opportunities were available through formal education. Education was used as an important resource for moving up the social ladder, and the entire family could reap compensation for its sacrifices. A strong tradition of filial piety meant no worry about post-retirement life. But, recently, intensified competition has made opportunities for advancement through education more and more difficult. The norm of supporting parents in their old age has weakened, and the child’s ability to do so has deteriorated. Having many children, working hard to educate them, and investing everything in their upbringing, would now appear an unbearable and unreasonable burden. This has translated into a diminished number of childbirths. Added uncertainty and anxiety for the future and pressure for families to take on the responsibilities of education, care work, and welfare, have resulted in widespread flight from the family, particularly among relatively young generations.

But this phenomenon cannot be seen as a result of sheer individualism, as has supposedly been the case in the West. Individualistic tendencies have also appeared in East Asian countries such as Singapore and Japan in the process of modernization. The norm of supporting one’s own (old) parents has significantly weakened compared to the past, and divorces are increasingly met with an attitude of permissiveness—evidence that the family is rapidly and radically changing in many respects. But as Chang and Song (2010) have shown, family and children remain important values in East Asian societies. Marriage and childbirth, moreover, are still regarded by all generations as important (“natural”) tasks in life. Sun and Takeda similarly show that unmarried women and men in Singapore and Japan and their married counterparts who hesitate to have children are not negating or seeking to escape marriage and childbirth per se, but are approaching the issues carefully in order to make the best rational choices. This can be interpreted as a paradoxical result of East Asia’s strong familialism (Chang 2010; Chang and Song 2010).
In the uncertainties of contemporary risk society, the family—once the stable base of support against crises—can no longer fulfill its once taken-for-granted functions. But both the government and the individual still look to the family as a safety net that is expected to protect its members from all sorts of modern hazards. In Singapore and Japan, where most welfare duties have remained within the confines of the family, the individual still responds actively to the state, and would not demand a full welfare state or resist traditional familialism. Accepting the reality that the welfare system is weak and internalizing traditional familialist values, they strategize passively. That is, when they are unable to implement their ideal type of family, they strategically avoid decisions to form new ones. This has resulted in various alterations in family forms and processes, including delayed marriage and drops in birth rate.

**Gendered care society**

The “lowest-low fertility rate” phenomenon in East Asian societies is often described as the result of a reproductive “strike” by women, insinuating their “selfishness.” But care work has been pinned almost entirely on women, with emphasis on good-quality childrearing and intensive mothering. As expounded in *Centuries of Childhood* by Aries (1965), the notion or norm of childrearing is a modern construct. In the past, focus was simply on providing children with basic food, clothing and shelter; and notions of child development or education were weak. Under modernity, however, childrearing has come to be thought of as a task that requires the full powers and sacrifices of the parents, and the mother in particular.

The governments of Singapore and Japan take it for granted that care and protection will be spontaneously undertaken by women even without social recognition or provision of adequate compensation for such services. They presume, as Folbre (2002) has criticized, that the issues of care and welfare will be resolved by an “invisible heart.” In particular, the Singaporean government adds to women’s burdens in the expectation that they will act as “super-women,” performing economic activities and maternal roles simultaneously. It is an extreme example of a government shifting all responsibility to the family in the absence of seriously redistributive and socialized welfare services. A typical governmental action was seen in the introduction of a foreign domestic worker policy in 2004 to encourage Singaporean women’s participation in economic activities while simultaneously enabling the continuation of privately organized care work (Kim et al. 2007). To balance the division between work and household, the individual bears the financial expense of hiring a foreign worker while the government needs only to allow care workers into the country and monitor them. As long as all burdens are shifted to the family/women without serious public support, trusting that women will make sacrifices, low birth rates are likely to continue.

Japan also has policies implemented to reconcile work and family; but socially, it still emphasizes motherhood, stipulating that “children must be reared by the mother until they are three years old.” According to the “Ten Commandments of the Good Mother” advocated by Japanese gynecologists in 1988 (Jolivet 1997), women should “experience the pain of natural childbirth,” “breast-feed for a whole year,” “wash the baby’s diapers by hand,” “abandon all professional activity for at least five years,” and “tirelessly seek to rouse the maternal instinct.” Absolute responsibility for childrearing continues to remain with the mother under the claim that a mother’s love and care decisively contribute to the formation of the child’s personality. Maintaining a job outside the home, or even using commercially-sold diapers is implicitly criticized as “selfish” and “lazy” behavior that displays a lack of love for the child. Such emphasis on women’s care, if socially shared and internalized, can serve only to
exacerbate women’s guilt and burden, resulting in their continued avoidance of marriage and childbirth.

**Conclusion**

The two highly valuable studies by Sun and Takeda provide important clues for understanding the phenomenon of lowest-low fertility in a number of East Asian societies. The time in which East Asian societies achieved spectacularly rapid economic growth through strong and intrusive state leadership is now past (Chang 2012b). All that remains now are polarization due to a deepened gap between rich and poor, the anxious individual left defenseless within a system of endless competition, and citizens who reject demands that they sacrifice unconditionally for the nation-state and instead argue for their social rights. Government policies that refuse to face up to reality while continuing to emphasize the ideals and philosophies of the past are doomed to fail. A state that claims to be powerful but neglects social welfare will find it difficult to obtain sustained sympathy and support from its people. In different yet complementary ways, Sun and Takeda convey the same message. They raise a variety of hard questions in respect to stable demographic—and, for that matter, social—reproduction, including how the relationship between the state and the individual should be re-established, what the role of the state should become, and how the issue of social welfare should be resolved.

The situation of Japan and Singapore appears both different from and similar to the situation of South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong as analyzed by numerous scholars. The latter group has approached national development under more liberal political culture in recent years. But systematic and concrete comparative analyses of the two groups of East Asian societies have yet to be produced. In such studies, it is necessary to view population policies historically, identify important similarities and differences, determine the distinctive characteristics of current policies for encouraging childbirth, and understand the consequences they imply. The two books reviewed here present an appropriate starting point and a valuable space for thinking about chronic low fertility in East Asia, or anywhere else, from the citizen’s own perspective. Developmental citizens in Singapore and Japan may be greatly envied by people of less prosperous countries, but their life is also beset with a complex set of frustrating conditions that tend to chronically discourage and limit reproductive wishes.

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**Notes**

1. East Asia may denote both Northeast and Southeast Asia, or just Northeast Asia. Singapore is geographically part of Southeast Asia, but its cultural and political economic characteristics are quite similar to those of Northeast Asian countries. Thus, when we classify Singapore as part of East Asia, it is assumed to share many Northeast Asian characteristics.

2. See Chang (2012a) on the definition and class bias of developmental citizenship.

**References**


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