Families as sites of production:

Changing childcare practices in Singapore

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Abstract

As Singapore emerges from celebrating her 50th year of independence, we are given an opportune moment to reflect on her route to modernity. The story of state and urban working class family in Singapore captures in part the locally embedded reproductive logic of capital adapting to the shifting demands of capitalist value regime. This thesis takes the case of expanding preschool services in Singapore to examine how relations of familial, care, and of education, are organised and structured to reproduce the mechanics of appropriation and extraction. These sets of relationship, I argue, are captured in a local culture of 'community'. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and interview data, I show how different actors of the urban working class navigate and negotiate the community to mediate tensions of disembedded childcare in their everyday practices. It shows, on one hand, the common problems and interest faced by preschool teachers and parents. On the other hand, it is confronted with the distinct interests of the Singapore state and capital.

The family must always be a place where,

when something good happens to one of its members,

they know that others will be there to celebrate it with them.

- Amoris Laetitia

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Introduction

The cold November rain beat down on the tinted windows of Thomson Medical Centre. It struck that I was born in this hospital many years back. The odds were rather high though, considering the number of hospitals in Singapore. Still, the feeling was rather pleasant. Today, Jasmine and her family welcomed its latest addition to their family of four. Elisha, 7, and Elijah, 4, could hardly hide their excitement as the nurse handed wrinkly Alisa over to her mother's endearing arms. The chilling rain tattering outside did little to dampen the soft warmth radiating from this maternity ward. It was a joyous day indeed. Cuddled in her mother's bosom, little Aly remained tucked away in the loving embrace of her father and two brothers. Time stood still and eternal. Little Aly whimpered. Her outburst instantaneously broke the enchantment of the blissful family. Panic ensued. Standing in the corner of the room with my then-partner, I felt amused. As though duty beckoned, she instinctively stood forward to calm the screaming infant. "Hush hush, there is no need to cry", she whispered while stroking little Aly's ear. It soothed the infant girl and brought a brief period of silence. "There is something almost magical about you with children. You have your way around them", the mother remarked. The father hastened an awkward smile. Unlike his wife, he was a quiet and somber fellow.

Just two weeks ago, Averial and I caught up with Jasmine over lunch. We had known Jasmine and her family for a good number of years. Averial welcomed young Elisha into preschool when he was a chubby eighteen months old. It was her first class as an apprentice teacher in 2009 – her baptism by fire. A handful of parents drew closer to become family-friends while many others remained as clients. Jasmine was one of

those who stuck on to our delight. “Why did you leave”, questioned Jasmine, sheepishly annoyed. “I tried to reserve a place for Aly at the school, but the waiting list is too long. We just have to see. The school is different without you. El cries all the time. You must understand: The kids, they like you. We would have shifted if not for the trouble of having to find a new school. I mean, without these subsidies, it will be almost impossible for me to send all three to Learning Vision.” Jasmine’s struggle to balance the domestic and wage work is common among young Singaporean families. Some rely on their parents for help while others scale back to being a single wage earner. But for the most part, in recent years, young families chose to send their children to preschools. Today, it is not uncommon to find a preschool in Singapore popping up at every other corner. Learning Vision (LV), Montessori, People’s Community Foundation (PCF), and the National Trade Union Congress (NTUC) were some of the major operators that monopolized the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scene. Many other independently operated preschools have since jumped on the bandwagon. As my second chapter shows, the earlier generation of baby boomers would not take to this childcare arrangement kindly. Unlike her mother who left work to care for her children in the late 1970’s, Jasmine had chose to enrolled baby Aly in an infant care center instead. There are other considerations to be made – mortgages, loans, overheads and most importantly, Aly’s education.

Childcare work is an important aspect of the household but often regarded as a mundane, and less pertinent issue to study. Yet through Jasmine, we are given an insight to the intricate relationship between care and work. These relationship are deeply embedded in the nation state’s economic and labor strategy. The story of state and urban working class family in Singapore captures in part the locally embedded

reproductive logic of capital adapting to the shifting demands of capitalist value regime. The Singapore urban working class family has been governed with an eye on production. This thesis takes the case of expanding preschool services in Singapore to examine how relations of familial, care, and of education, are organised and structured to reproduce the mechanics of appropriation and extraction.

Community as an analytical concept is full of complexity and flexible. In cultural anthropology, community is seductive and fraud with conceptual problems and loopholes (Creed, 2006). Community has thus far been conceptualised as, a place that people come from, places with distinctive type of social relations, forms of identity, distinctive social ties, and the list goes on and on (Clarke, 2014). William writes,

> "The idea of a community provides a way of discussing processes and problems of social change… and for the way it mobilises a particular understanding of social order and its social relations."

Communities capture and make visible the capitalist relations that we seldom examine nor consider how they are formed (Li, 2014). It is through this lens that I will examine the other relations of care, of familial, and of education encapsulated by the changing practices of childcare.

Since gaining independence in 1965, the demands of establishing a modern nation state equipped with a developed industrial economy have been imposed on its population (Chua, 2006). The population has been governed with an eye on productivity. Yet, with an eye on colonial history, pre-independent Singapore had been part of the Western 'modern' as a British colony and trading outpost (Chua, 2006). The polarizing effect of the modernization effort was recognized by the proto-

state albeit in the frame of western individualism. Singapore's route to modernity, as such, takes on "Asian Values" and "Confucian Values" as an oriental approach to modernization. The core of which highlighted the prominence of collective interest over the individual. Over the years, this ideological position had shifted to reflect the changing demands of capital over labor. Drawing from historical weight of the traditional, the state as the "protector of traditions" and "spear-header of development" continued to reimagine the community as a site of rural imaginary to maintain the family as a site of politics and production (Clarke, 2014; Teo, 2015). As he continued to write,

> Here community designated an integrated and intimate set of social relationships different from the atomized and anonymous relationships that characterized modern society. In this way, communities are stable ways of living, held together by a shared way of life and a common culture (ibid).

"Asian values" (Chua, 1999) and "Confucian values" (Chua, 1995) captured in the communitarian ideology articulate a set of relationships marked by distinctive social ties. The Singapore route of modernity (Chua, 2006) made Singapore "Westernized and developed, but yet somehow better" (Teo, 2015). The community served as a critique of modern life, and "identified a sense of lost order, stability and continuity" (Clarke, 2014). As my second chapter would go to show, Singapore rapid ascension to economic success brought far-reaching changes to the lifestyle and expectations of the emergent middle class (Teo, 2015).

Care labour remains largely the responsibility of the family, extended kin and broader community. Particularly so, the unpaid work and responsibilty of caring for the family continues to underscore the subordinate lived experience of women (Vogel, 2006). In

the 1970s, the boom in domestic labor literature highlighted significant interest of scholars in trying to analyse the women's unpaid work through a Marxist analytical framework. This paradigm identified family household as sites of domestic production, and care work as domestic labor (Vogel, 2006). Vogel in her seminal work, "Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory" (1983), centered the question of social reproduction in terms of labour power and its reproduction. She wrote,

> For clarity I therefore restricted the concept of reproduction of labor power to the processes that maintain and replace labor power capable of producing a surplus for an appropriating class. (Ibid)

From her position as a feminist marxist, her analytical framework was helpful in returning focus to the role of women in capitalist production. In writing the aforementioned, Vogel captured the understated production capacity of women at work. Domestic production of use value in terms of familial care took precedence in her analysis – in her view an important component of what Marx termed as socially necessary labour. Vogel wrote,

> "Necessary labor has, I argued, two components. The first, discussed by Marx, is the necessary labor that produces value equivalent to wages. This component, which I called the social component of necessary labor, is indissolubly bound with surplus labor in the capitalist production process. The second component of necessary labor, deeply veiled in Marx's account, is the unwaged work that contributes to the daily and long-term renewal of bearers of the commodity labor power and of the working class as a whole. I called this the domestic component of necessary labor, or domestic labor." (Ibid)

The domestic labor literature insisted that women's oppression was central to overall social reproduction. Despite all its problems, this insight remained valid (Vogel, 2006). While Vogel continued to argue that the women's position, and her lived experiences, remained a critical caveat, it is ultimately also a limitation.

French structuralist sociologist, Claude Meillassoux, in "Maidens, Meal and Money: Capitalism and the Domestic Community" (1975) also highlighted a similar caveat. In his analysis, he further theorised the role of domestic work in reproducing and expanding the capitalist mode of production. African communities continued to provide for the reproduction of migrant labor to France through rural community. Cheap labor was subsidized in the "modern" core while the "traditional" community form was simultaneously reproduced (Newberry, 2012). Meillassoux cited the limitation of Marx's general theory of unity in production and reproduction. Expanding upon the work on Engel, Meillassoux posited that production and reproduction did not necessarily have to be of the same nature. Through his fieldwork, he articulated the crucial position of domestic production in capitalist mode of production. While I do agree with Meillassoux and Vogel in their claims that Marx's conception was based on the assumption of a fully functioning capitalist circulation, contemporary situation may prove different. As we move into an advanced capitalist economy, the general theory of unity seemed even more resounding. This theoretical position, I opine, is best captured in the case of preschool transformation in Singapore. As the economy, or rather the relation of production changes over time, a corresponding shift in social reproduction of captial relation is observed. More specifically, framed in terms of Vogel and Meillassouxs' analytical framework, what

is the role of the family in an advanced capitalist economy? How has it changed? Who are involved in this process of change? What are its implication?

Rosa Luxemburg in the Accumulation of Capital (1913) wrote,

> The regular repetition of reproduction is the general *sine qua non* of regular consumption, which in its turn has been the pre-condition of human civilization in every one of its historical forms. The concept of reproduction, viewed in this way, reflects an aspect of the history of civilization.

The notion of reproduction can be understood as a process of "simple reproduction". A more nuanced conception captures the historical continuity between transiting modes of production. Every social formation, as Althusser (1970) argued, spawned from and in respond to a dominant mode of production. Its existence is intertwined with the modes of production. As such, for the social formation to exist, it must therefore reproduce the productive forces, and relations of production (Ibid). Production is not the production of things. It is but the production and conservation of social relations of exploitation and extraction. The analysis of social reproduction thus reveals the 'invisible chains' that binds the wage earner to the capitalist class. These chains however are of differing quality and implications. The ECCE industry offers a descriptive insight into how inequalities are justly and legitimately reproduced. How can we account for whose interest is preserved, to what extent, and at whose expense? Jan Newberry's work (2012) approached the question of carework and domestic labour by drawing in the state as "a point of production" and making explicit the "connection between local community and global capital". In expanding this perspective, Kalb (2016) writes,

> "intimate worlds of the everyday are necessarily embedded and structured, in identifiable ways—though not predetermined, logically derivable, or 'reducible'—within the social networks that capitalism spins and from which it extracts and appropriates the surplus value that keeps it alive."

The story of state and urban working class family in Singapore captures in part the locally embedded reproductive logic of capital adapting to the shifting demands of capitalist value regime. This thesis takes the case of expanding preschool services in Singapore to examine how relations of familial, care, and of education, are organised and structured to reproduce the mechanics of appropriation and extraction. These sets of relationship, I argue, are captured in a local culture of 'community'. This idea of community is historically embedded and conflated with a particular understanding of "social order equated with stability" (Williams, 1976). As my thesis goes to show, the community is not necessarily stable and conceals what William argued to be its contradictory character marked by social inequality and unequal power relations (ibid)

1.1 Background

Here I provided a brief orientation to the case of expanding preschool services in Singapore. In 2000, the millenium development goals was adopted to promote equal access to education for children. Rapid innovation in early childhood education followed in recognition of the critical developmental period of the child. Consequently, the early childhood care and education (ECCE) field staked a strong disposition towards child-oriented research in pedagogy and educational content. Likewise, the ECCE scene in Singapore had undergone similar transformation since 2008. The practice, meaning and responsibility of child caring had no doubt

undergone significant changes over time. What used to be an integral part of domestic responsibility was increasingly commercially outsourced to preschools. These shifts reflected the changing demands and requirements of family, state and the broader economy. Arguably, what remained missing is a critical examination that focus on whose interest is being represented, to what extend, and at whose expense.

Since 2008, the Singapore state initiated a series of policy reforms aimed at further regulation and strengthening of child-care provisioning. Public provisioning of child-care is limited in scope and heavily supplemented by private operators. Through the incorporation of the Early Childhood Development Agency in 2014, the state geared towards providing quality, affordable and accessible child-care services. This was achieved by raising the qualification requirement of teachers, establishing a more rigorous accreditation process for school operators, and providing greater subsidize to parents. These reforms served two purposes. Firstly, it sought to provide a learning environment that trained children towards creative and participatory learning. Secondly, reforms targeted middle class young families, in particular women, to incentivize and aid continued labor participation and employment. More importantly, reforms in the ECCE sector bore strong public-private cooperation. The state, and its functionary, limited its scope to areas of regulation and accreditation. Private operators were subsidised through the 'Partner Operator' scheme. Operating and training costs were heavily subsidized through national budgets. The Singapore state though capital injection and fiscal policies strategized ECCE to be affordable and accessible to parents. In the 2014 national budget, it was announced that a further 4 billions SGD will be allocated to the advancing of ECCE sector. The movement of social policies in Singapore reflected an increasingly global phenomenon of

commercialisation of care labour, and a growing cooperation between state and capital in organising the provision of social policies and welfare. The demand of work and increasing dependence on wage income slowly displaced care labour from the core responsibility of the family. The externalization of childcare made visible processes of extraction on the family, and exploitation of care labor.

1.2 Research Process

My involvement with the early childhood and education (ECCE) scene began in late 2008 when Averial became a preschool apprentice. I had since developed a stong curiosity with her job, her relationship with the parents and her workplace. This thesis built on the initial curiosity and further developed over the years. Preschools captures the uneasy tension of optimal labor participation and childbearing responsibility of women.

I spent two months conducting field observation and interviews. My research took place across four preschools[1] in Singapore. In all, I conducted 17 interviews, and numerous casual conversations with parents, teachers, and center owners. Two of the preschools were franchisees operating under the Montessori branding. The third school is situated in Tan Tock Seng Hospital, and operated under a different franchise – the Learning Vision group. The fourth school was privately owned, and located at the heart of the Central Business District. These four preschools were Averial's

[1] These schools are under the purview of the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA), and overseen by both the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF).

previous workplace. My relation with her gave me a window of opportunity to request for field visit. Site access to preschools is usually restricted. When I declared my intention to conduct fieldwork in the centers, it was typically met with rejection. They had assumed that my object of study with respect to the children and the quality of education. After several round of clarification, access was granted.

My research schedule centered around three days of field observation, and a day of library work. I visited one preschool each week and spent about three to four hours per visit. Much of my observation hours were outside of curriculum time (between 9am to 4pm). My fieldwork took place over an hour lunch and the hour(s) leading to closure. During lunch, I had the opportunity to listen to the teachers talk about the work and life. Most of these conversations occurred in the pantry [away from the prying ears of the administration]. If time permits, I would invite teachers to have lunch at a nearby café much to their delight. In the evenings, I had a short span of time to speak to parents and caregivers[2] before their swift departure. Most parents were reluctant to speak to me while others afforded me with their precious minutes or so[3]. Grandparents and maids, on the other hand, were more generous with their time. That being said, my evenings were best suited for observing interactions between parents and teachers.

I adopted an interview style that combined semi-structured and unstructured questions. This style of questioning allowed me to prompt my interviewee while

[2] More often than not, I see grandparents and maids coming to fetch the children.

[3] This was a rather interesting observation. The "lack of time" code came up frequently in my field notes.

covering a broad range of topics. What I enjoyed about this form of interview was that it allowed me to react freely to how the conversation was taking place. My interviewees were not forced to continue in a direction that did not suit them. On the contrary they were given space and time to articulate what was important in their narrations. Most of my interviewees were friends. During the interviews, I placed much effort to ensure that the setting was informal and light. Even though I had a list of questions, they were not strictly followed. These questions served more as a guide. Despite having most of my field observation in the workplace, I often made sure that the interview took place out of the prying ears of fellow colleagues or bosses. This allowed my interviewee to speak their mind, and also allowed me to relax. The relationship between the informant and researcher is one that ought to be carefully threaded. It is difficult to find the right balance between observing proper research etiquette and while maintaining a good relationship with people whom you do not necessarily agree with. On the other hand, before I entered my field I had assumed my close relationship would ease my informants into talking with me. This proved to contrary. Most of informants had to be persuaded on multiple counts before they spoke to me. Even when they do, it was obvious that they were self censoring. On one instant, I had let my emotions get the better of me. It was the episode where I found myself speaking to the center owner who had vehemently cheated an employee of their wage. I was sworn not to let the cat out of the bag. However, when he started explaining the different manner in which profits could be maximized, I questioned him about the false contract. He did not take the episode well and I was not sure what happened to her. This is the only incident whereby I let my code of ethics slipped by accident. This served as a stark reminder to remain compost no matter what.

My position in this retelling was peculiar. I had journeyed with Averial in her teaching career since late 2008. As her close confidante, I would hear of her many struggles and challenges faced at work. An overly enthusiastic companion, I accompanied her to various school functions and staff retreats. Her workplace was my proverbial exotic other. What lies beyond the frosted glass? The preschool was a bounded locality occupied almost exclusively by the female crew, and an occasional male owner. The place remained out of bounds to all but few. In tracing her everyday experience at work, I begun to gain visibility in this ecosystem of care albeit with some biases. Threading between the lines of being an insider and outsider, my position as a researcher was sympathetic, but at an arm's length. This was reflective in my earlier question that sought to understand preschool in terms of Burawoy's *politics of production*. I had assumed an inherent conflicting relationship between various stakeholders. My relationship to my interviewees is almost often tinted by my relationship with Averial. At times, this association proved helpful in bridging connections and gaining trust with colleagues and staff. The teachers grew familiar with me over the years and were comfortable in sharing the negative episodes at work.

How does one make sense of the social group with which they are examining. In this thesis, I encounter a difficulty in putting forward class. How do categorize those that I am studying – working class, middle class, professional class? Class identification is weak among Singaporeans. With those I spoke to, most identify themselves as middle classes. Even the center owners who are capital owners and investors identified themselves as middle working class. In this section, I try to justify my use of the urban working class as a mean of drawing out social relations, and my non-use of

class category such as working class etc. Contrary to other local researcher such as Teo (2015) who adopted the language of the rising middle class, I found it difficult to draw arbitrary line of demarcation. While I could refer to income as a measurement of class, it was not without conceptual problems. David Harvey offered a conceptual position that was more faithful of the Marxist tradition (Kalb, 2014). Harvey (2012) contended that the "working class should be seen as all those on a wage who are working to produce and reproduce urban life". This conceptualization was more helpful in allowing me to make visible the relations of care, and of work. Rather than fragmenting into a multitude of social positioning, the broad conception of the urban working class gave clarity to a group of people of common problems and common interest.

Chapter 2 - Family, State and Economy

Singapore is one of the many economic miracles. The success story of Singapore is often attributed to its orientalist model of development that brings together the west and east. Singapore as one of the newly industrialized economies ascended to economic prominence in the 1970s. Alongside Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong, Singapore experienced a period of high growth rates and political stability. After gaining independence in 1965, Singapore's export-led development strategy was made possible by a combination of familial and social policies aimed at shaping the family as a unit of politics and production. The family and its broader community were seen as the driving force behind Singapore's route to modernity (Pyle, 1997).

The provision of group childcare services in Singapore dates as far back as 1942 during the Second World War (Lim, 1998). As various scholars had demonstrated, the state since self-independence had managed the population with a keen eye on economic growth and productivity. With more women entering the economy during the post war period, crèches and childcare centers played an important role in the bringing up of children. In 1955, there were six crèches managed by the social welfare department (Lim, 1998). When Singapore attained self-independence from the British in 1959, these six crèches catered to some four hundred children (Koh, 2013). By 1971, the number of crèches had doubled. Singapore's export led economic model was designed to offer a readily supply of female surplus labor to attract the foreign direct investment that typically employed women (Pyle, 1998). An increase in female labor participation rate saw a subsequent demand for childcare. Meant as temporary provision, the growing demand for childcare soon exceeded its intended

capacity. By the 1970s, women played a crucial role in Singapore's industrialization through employment in low-paid and labor-intensive factory work (Pyle, 2001). As more women enter formal employment, the "traditional" role of women as full-time caregivers was slowly diminished. During this period of industrialization and post-war recovery, the state encouraged women to actively participate in the workforce. As Teo (2015) noted, the anti-natalist and pro-natalist policies were rooted in economic concerns. Developmental experts warned of the dire effect of overpopulation in the years following World War Two on the national's economic growth (Saw, 1990; Wong, 1979a). The two "Five Year National Family Planning Programs" between 1966 and 1975 sought to slow down population growth (Wong, 1979a) by encouraging people to "Stop at two". Singapore's route to modernity took measures to shape the familial as a mean towards economic development (Teo, 2016). Consequently, Singapore's population growth rate dipped below the replacement rate in 1975. Labor shortages, however, were felt as early as 1970 and prompted the state to reverse its fertility policies.

After its first recession in the 1980s, the Singapore state recognized the need for a larger supply of skilled and trained labor to stay competitive. In the interim, women were once again tapped upon to fulfill labor demands. The development of kindergartens and childcare centers in the early 1980s (Seng & Lazar, 1992) was accompanied by the turn towards pro-natalism. The number of childcare centers also increased drastically from 18 in 1980 (Seng & Lazar, 1992), to 185 centers in 1989 (Quah, 1993), and 434 centers in 1996 (Lin, 1998). For the government, the problem is not one of simply encouraging graduate women to become mothers but "rather to be both mothers and productive workers simultaneously" (Lyon-Lee, 1998). In

response to the needs of working graduate mothers, more childcare centers were built and further subsidises granted. Between 1981 to 1992, the number of childcare centres increased from 33 to 297 (Quah, 1993). These policies were not evenly distributed. Legislation regulating childcare and subsidy scheme in 1988 meant that most low income groups were not able to afford childcare (Seng & Lazar, 1992). Unlike policies targeting graduate mothers, those who were had not received college education were encouraged to have no more than two children and to care for their own. State policies in this manner favoured one group over the other in hopes of pushing more families to adopt education as the key means of social mobility. Childcare services were only made available to those "whose labour was needed by the state" (Goldberg, 1987). However, by 1990 the nation state had almost expended its army of surplus female labor – employment rate was at an all time low of 1.7% (Pyle, 1998).

In tracing the history care provisioning, it remained clear that the centrality of economic is privileged over the family. The story of state and urban working class family in Singapore captured the locally embedded reproductive logic of capital adapting to the shifting demands of capitalist value regime. In summarising the capitalist relation, Teo writes,

> "The [incumbent] state has historically privileged the demands of global capital – for docile labour, for the biggest pool of educated workers, for modern infrastructure – over those for preserving culture. (2015)"

The recent policy changes in childcare provision continued the aforementioned trajectory in seeking to "combine the optimal labor participation and childbearing of women" (Pyle, 1998). The logic of state running had been consistently placing the

economy before the family. The relations of care, of familial, of work is historically embedded in the state's attempt to court foreign capital. Contemporary changing practices of childcare also articulate a similar trope with one stark difference. While childcare was once a mean towards enabling women to work, it has now been transformed into a site where capital is valorized and profits accumulated.

Chapter 3 - Work and Care

This section explores the relations of work and care that connected the urban working class together in Singapore. It introduces the different characters and people figured in this recount, and explores the tensions of outsourcing childcare to preschools. While alternatives to preschools are available, young urban working class family stressed the importance of education as the key motivation. This places them with a close working relationship with preschool teachers, and also among parents themselves. For the urban working class, the outsourcing of care forms the texture of everyday life.

3.1 Family and care work

In May 2015, I had received news from a friend that Desmond was expecting the birth of their second child. Desmond, a close friend from high school, invited a couple of close friends for their baby showers. The party was hosted at his apartment in a young public estate located a distance from city center, and so the journey took a little longer than anticipated. We arrived shortly before dinner and were promptly ushered into the house by their domestic helper. It was a lively affair with many other young children, toddlers and infants at play. The hall was littered with toys of all sorts, while the television was screening an episode of Sponge Bob. Desmond and his wife were busy entertaining the guest while his mother kept watch over the infant girl with the aid of Maria, their domestic helper. "Who takes care of the baby?" I asked casually. "Mam, takes care of the baby on Saturday and Sunday, baby goes to school in the morning and sir brings her home at night. I help to look after her with mum," she replied. "The children goes to school with sir, and I stay at home to look after the cooking and cleaning. Sometimes, mam will stay with us to help look after the children". This was

my brief introduction to the arrangement of care work in Desmond's household, and the relation of work and care responsibility. The family and its relations of kinship were created through the negotiation of work done within and without the family. In the case of Desmond's family, the arrangement of domestic care work reflected an uneasy relationship between the husband, wife and parents-in-law. As dual wage earners, the domestic work in reproducing the family involves individual beyond immediate kin relations. Grandparents assumed a certain degree of responsibility and earnest in raising the children. In performing unpaid care work, the grandparents exchange their labor as an exchange of gift that is in turn reciprocated in monthly stipends. This reflects an understanding of the 'Asian Value' discourse that underpins the prioritization of the family over individual benefits (Chua, 1999). This position emphasized the role of the family, and its broader community, as the main pillar of support and resource. Households are based on the nuclear family unit of 'three generations under one roof' – the husband and wife, their children, and their parents. Conceptualized as a site of production, the proto-typical model accounts for the ideal and less than ideal caregivers. Grandparents expected to care for their grandchildren as a gift of care labor in exchange they are supported by their wage. In Desmond's household, the children are sent to a preschool while they were at work. He sought out a preschool located closest to his workplace, and enrolled both the children. "The school has excellent curriculum, and it is near my work. We need to prepare the children for primary school. We try to teach but the teachers do the best jobs," Desmond remarked. "It will be great if my parents can help with childcare. But it just makes more sense to put both the children in the same school. Things are different now. The teachers, they know better." Desmond would seek the aid of his parents to care for the children if not for the inconvenience of living under separate apartments.

Factoring in state subsidies, he and his wife agreed that it would be a wise investment to make. 'You can never be overly prepared, there is always things to do', remarked one of the visitors. There was no lack of advice on how to best navigate the social policies for maximum utility. "You have to get the best deal from *Ah Gong*", rambled one of the visitor. *Ah Gong*, the colloquial term for grandfather, referred to the state. It was not surprising to see young Singaporeans well versed with the latest social policies, its bureaucracy, and the benefits avail to them. After all, "it is Ah Gong's money, and it's free," Desmond crackled. Desmond and Jasmine were familiar with how the Singapore welfare state operated. While it advocated an arm's length approach in provisioning, the Singapore state was perceived by the urban working class to be a necessary provider. Secondly, it spoke of the relationship between the Singapore state and the urban working class. Teo (2015) coined the term *neoliberal morality* as a concept to explain the political relationship between family and state in Singapore. She argued that the consumption of social provisions is a negotiated and fluid process that shapes and informs the family as a political unit. As Desmond added, "to do anything less would amount to not making best use of resources at hand". The cost of preschool constituted a significant component in the family's monthly budget. As I understood from Desmond, the monthly fees of childcare for both children would amount to about S$900 (equivalent to 670 USD) after subsidies. With a combined income of S$7,000, the figures were significant. In shifting away from the ideal caregiver, operators of preschools seized the opportunity to capitalize the early childcare industry. The demand for preschools had significantly increased in the recent years. The year 2015 saw an enrolment number of about 95,500, from 64,000 places in 2011. These figures did not account for infant care enrolment numbers.

3.1.1 Ideal and less than ideal caregivers

Traditional care arrangement appeared to be fracturing. Changing practices of childcare produced a shift in how different social actors relate to each other. In sending his children to the preschool, Desmond inevitably challenged the traditional role of his parents and their capacity to gift or not. Marcel Muass's conceptualisation of gift giving and exchange offered an avenue to understand the nature of childcare practices in Singapore. The concept of gift giving is a cycle of reciprocity that involves the obligation to give, to receive and to reciprocate. The act of giving and receiving creates, reproduces and maintains social relationships. Like Jasmine and her family, the urban working class referred to preschools as the less than ideal caregiver but nonetheless necessary. In the case of Jasmine, her father-in-law took on the task of sending and receiving the children to school. On alternate days, the children were dismissed early to spend time with their grandparents. This arrangement was made to reconcile the demands of the grandparents. In exchange for care work, Jasmine and her husband would supplement the income of her grandparents by means of a monthly contribution. One significant difference from the earlier mode of childcare was the "traditional' gendered division of labour within the family. There was a strong sense of the central role that women play in childbearing and childcare (Teo, 2015). "My mother left her job to take care of us. I remembered seeing photos of my grandparents bathing and taking care of me. It was a much simpler time. My mother had the help of her mother. Things were definitely much simpler then," remarked Desmond. "I cannot expect my wife to do the same. She is a good mother, no question about that. But we agreed that it is best that we both work for a stable income." On issues of childcare, the urban working class experience great conflict between expectations and

desires, ideals and realities. Changes in family policies have shaped their ability to leave the household to participate in wage labor. Through various education and family policies, the state encouraged this surplus population to join the economy. These initiatives were more apparent in the earlier generations of Singaporeans where the role of women was largely kept within the household in domestic work. In the1980 and after, the state recognized the role of women as key reproducers of the next generation of workers and in the workplace. Changing childcare practices reflects the manner in which family and fertility policies were shaped to maximize labor participation. By making provision for cheaper childcare, women are able to enter the workforce while maintaining their position as the main caregiver although in different manner. In sending their children to preschools, they reproduced the set of dynamics and relations embedded in broader considerations. From the perspective of governmentality, Teo (2015) argued that the state policies as an extension of Singapore's modernity narrative presumed and reproduced the ideal that "women are inextricably linked to the family". The absorption of female labour force into the market challenged the premise of domestic production confined within the private sphere of individual household. Employment trends highlighted a substantial increase of women undertaking formal employment. As with Jasmine and Desmond, the decision to continue in a dual wage arrangement was largely influenced by the availability of state subsidies to the cost of childcare. Most of the respondents I spoke to agreed that the early years of childcare should be spent at home in the care of the family, but realistically in a preschool combining both education and care. As noted earlier, the arrangement of childcare work reflected an uneasy relationship within the family. In outsourcing the care to preschools, intergenerational relation of kinships

were challenged and the capacity of grandparents to gift care work greatly diminished.

Desmond and his wife were uncertain about how their parents would have felt about this arrangement. Desmond argued that preschool were a "necessary evil that is somewhat good". The question of childcare was often overshadowed by other practical concerns such as mortgages, university loans, insurance and bills. Rather than a point of conflict, the husband and wife had came to terms with the necessity of being dual wage earners. It also gave them a sense of independence over their finances, thereby allowing them to consider mid- and long-term goals. Other young couples that I spoke too also reflected a similar position. The dilemma of childcare was quickly resolved by an abundance of preschool choices. The decision for preschool ultimately resided in the hands of the husband and wife. Up till 2008, infant care services were far and few between. Most establishments provided preschool and kindergarten services for children between the ages of two and upwards. Care work during the period of infancy was confined within the boundaries of homes. Domestic helpers and grandparents played an important role in supplementing care work. Care work was reciprocated with monthly contributions. However, with the recent expansion of infant care services, these roles were diminished. While at the party, I had a casual conversation with the grandmother (Desmond's mother) on the issue of childcare and her role in the family. A young grandmother at the age of fifty-six, she mentioned that these practices were not a source of conflict. Rather, she and her husband recognized the importance of "getting the children ready for school". Like her son, she had been hearing about the prevalence of preschools from her friends at work. "It is normal," she remarked, "everyone does it. If we don't then we will lose

out." While other grandparents were in disagreement with such arrangement, Desmond's parents appeared to be rather casual about it. Through these everyday conversations, the urban working class begin to make sense of what it should be. People take cue on the issues of childcare from those around them. It is in context that we can perhaps draw out a certain sense of community – not in the sense of a bounded group of people but rather one of perceived common interest and common problem. In my conversations with young parents, the problem of childcare was easily matched with a corresponding solution – preschools. This solution was made available and normalised through social policies in the form of fees reduction. Grandparents, in some cases, also reflected the same nonchalant nod of the head. Others painted a bleak picture. However, as noted in Teo (2015) research on issues of childcare in Singapore, her informants noted "it is somehow wrong and irresponsible to put infants in institutions of care". My interviewees also articulated a similar point despite having sent their children to preschools. Indeed, the outsourcing of childcare seemed particularly problematic along the lines of "Asian values" and "traditional culture" as spelled out in my earlier section. The challenge to the grandparents' capacity to gift care work was worrisome to some as the following paragraph elaborates.

3.1.2 Elderly care and filial piety

The sense of reciprocity underpinning the relations of kinship understood that care would be reversed in the long run with the younger generation taking care of the old (Teo, 2016). Filial piety, expressed in terms of "Asian Values" and "Confucian Value", captures an oriental understanding of gifting and reciprocity embedded in relations of kinship. The dependence of the elderly and the young pivoted on the context on rapid economic change, and realistically on financial constrains. My

question on childcare easily transposed into onto issues of elder care. While eldercare is beyond the scope of this thesis, it presented a caveat through which my respondents articulate tropes of conflict and discontent. "Preschools are good for the children. What happens when I am old? Will they send me to a home like how they send their children away?" Desmond's mother lamented. She continued in an awkward chuckle, "What if I am too expensive to keep? Will they throw me to the roadside?" She acknowledged that separate living and care arrangement signalled the demise of the 'traditional' family. She had seen and heard of many other stories where the grandparents were abandoned and left to their own demise. These were extreme examples no doubt, and proved the contrary the rule. Desmond was adamant: he would not allow for such. He was not alone either; other respondents replied without a second of hesitation likewise. Elaine, when questioned about her attitude towards childcare and elderly care had this to say:

> The Chinese culture has bigger responsibility lah. I take care of my kid now, next time they will have to zhao gu (take care of) of me too. I sent my kids to preschool because there got better people to teach him. It's like living in a kampung lor. Maybe when the time comes, my parents will go to an elder care centre. They will have more kakis (friends) to lim teh (drink tea) and play mah-jong.

Her mother, ironically, had this to say, "Xiao ah! (Are you crazy?). These relations of care were built from both within and across households. Exchanges of care work were at times reciprocal and at other times unilateral. These tensions between working for wage and caring for the family form an integral part of the texture of everyday life. These fears were not unwarranted. As the later section would show, the Singapore state has implemented a series of social policies to regulate and fund the operations of

preschool services. With an eye on productivity, these policies enabled the urban working class to commit to full employment but at a cost. This section highlights the intergeneration tension occurring on the level of the nuclear family unit. Labour allows for the reproduction of life. The changing practices of childcare capture the uneven demands of the state and capital on the urban working class to reproduce. By framing childcare as an issue of labour, we can get a clearer picture of the necessary labour required to reproduce life (Kalb, 2016). The importance of examining the mundane aspect of domestic care work should be understated as critical connection can be drawn between the family and household life with global accumulation (Newberry, 2012). The case of expanding childcare practices in Singapore highlighted the reproductive logic of capital embedded with the nuclear family unit in its appropriative and extractive practices. As Kalb (2016) succinctly puts it, labor maintains with the networks of capital and the ways in which capital gleans surplus value from it. In the 'traditional' arrangement of care, the gift of care work was largely unpaid work. The expansion of preschool services as the model of choice presented preschool operators with greater opportunities for extractive behaviors. This will be discussed in greater detail at a later section.

The earlier segment provided an ethnographic recount of how urban working class negotiate and navigate through the demands and tensions of sending their children to preschool. In brief, traditional arrangement of childcare performed within the confined of the household was gradually replaced by preschools. Through Jasmine and Desmond, I made the case that the family is a site of production and reproduction. The externalization of childcare work reflected a shift in the demands of work, and repurposed what was once unpaid work into an extractive practice. While the

expansion of preschool services allowed for greater economic participation, the cost borne by the urban working class was uneven. Moving away from the family to the domain of preschool, the following section examined preschool teachers in relation to work and care.

3.2 Preschool teachers

I first got wind of her decision on the summer of 2009. Fresh out from junior college, Averial had made the decision to pursue a career in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) industry. For the casual observer, this was not a lucrative or promising career option. Most of the preschools then were either hiring foreign care worker from Philippines, India or China. Most of the local hires were mother returning for a second career after having established their own families. Preschool teachers were seen primarily as caregivers rather than educators. The barrier to entry was relative low during those years; a certificate of basic knowledge in childcare would suffice. In the years leading from 2008, the Singapore state paid greater attention to the regulation and organization of the industry. The industry likewise moved in response to reform its hiring process. An apprenticeship program was created to equip the fresh hires with technical and practical knowledge required for the work. At the end of the course, participants were awarded with a Diploma. This was seen as an attempt by the industry to professionalize the industry. Averial registered in the program and was hired under Learning Vision, a subsidiary of the Knowledge Universe Group. My first visit to her academy was less than successful. The academy was located in one of the many commercial towers in the Central Business District. Hosted in an office space on the ground floor, the academy had an office, alongside four classrooms and a small library. The library, the size of a small

classroom, had clear windows running down the length of the wall. Passerby had a clear view of the library and its users. Standing in the now vacant library, I took notice of the women entering and leaving the compound.

This was my introduction the community of preschool teachers that I will be closely acquainted with for many years to come. The following section analyzed care work performed by preschool teachers through the conceptual tool of community. Community in this case does not refer or imply a bounded group of people in a particular geography. Rather, my analysis drew from the relations of work and care situated across various social actors and schools. Community examined in this level captured the common experiences, common interest, and common problems of preschool teachers. As Raymond Williams wrote in Keyword (1976),

> The complexity of community thus relates to the difficult interaction between the tendencies originally distinguished in the historical development: on one hand the sense of direct common concern; on the other hand the materialization of various forms of common organization which may or may not adequately express this. Community can be the warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships, or to describe an alternate set of relationships. That is most important, perhaps, is that unlike all the terms of social organization (state, nation, society, etc.) it never seemed to be used favorably.

As this section will go on to show, the use of community, as a point of mediation in the changing practices of childcare seemed to carry with it the historical weight of the 'traditional' reinvented in the 'modern locations' in unsettling ways (Clarke, 2014). More than a 'site of sociality in urban setting', I argue that in the case of externalizing

childcare, community became a way of masking the tropes of tension brought forth by capitalist relations of care and familial.

3.2.1 Extractive Relations

Averial and her group of classmates made up the third cohort of apprentice. Each cohort then consisted of about fifteen to twenty students. Apprenticeship required individual trainees to commit to a three-year bond after successful completion of the diploma. Apprentices were also expected to take up positions of assistant teacher three days per week in their assigned unit of operation. During one of my visit to their gathering last year I spoke to a number of them with regards to their apprenticeship experience, and work in general. Vanessa, a close friend and colleague of Averial, left the deepest impression. Unlike most of her colleague, Vanessa was had taken a career switch from being working in the Navy to being a preschool teacher. She had a straightforward personality and spoke right of the top of her mind. "The contract was bullshit, it had so many hidden clauses that were not explained to us," she retorted. Vanessa recalled questioning the legitimacy of the curriculum provided by the apprenticeship, and how the program was organized. She continued,

> "Firstly, there was no standard benchmark as to what the passing grade was. It could be a 75 for a module, and a 90 for another. We had to write many assignments back to back. I remembered having to write four papers over the week. This was not the worse. They (the administration) later informed us that we have to pay a penalty for failing to pass modules. More payments were demanded for us to be re-registered and enrolled into subsequent classes. Our attendance determined if we passed or not. We were not informed of the specifics before hand. Even the lecturers were not certain of the rules

themselves. At one point of time, almost the entire class had to pay the penalty for not making the grade. We had to pay almost $600 to retake a module, can you believe that?"

Averial later supplemented that they had to take up more classes than was agreed. Some of the trainees even had to fill in as the form teacher even though it breached state regulation. "I was made the form tutor of a class after shadowing for a week or two", Averial continued, "while being paid the same". The organization of work at preschools meant that principals, rather franchise owners, have the liberty to adjust manpower configuration as needed. Many other of her colleagues also cited similar experiences, though these were more prevalent in franchises. During the course of my field observation, I noticed that most schools were operating with bare minimum staff. There were occasions when center owners had to step in to cover classes even though they were not qualified. On other occasions, classes were combined to make do with the shortage of teachers despite exceeding the legality stipulated teacher-student ratio. The management was quick to clarify that it was only for a short period of time, and subsequently rectified. The organization of labor in the preschools often required their staff to work beyond curriculum hours without compensation. Cost of production was often absorbed by the teachers who do so out of care for the children under their charge. As the teachers noted, being a preschool teacher is a time consuming affair. This is particularly true for teachers with their own children. "We are not allowed to teach our own child," Wei Ping said, "they say that there will be a conflict of interest." Indeed, in the four schools that I visited, teachers were not allowed to teach their own children. This was particularly frustrating for teachers who missed out on developing a relationship with their own children. In selling their

domestic care labor, they inevitably lose the capacity to perform the necessary care work. These relationships made it difficult for teachers to hold on to their jobs. As elaborated in the earlier section, mothers are perceived to be the ideal caregiver. However, in situation such as these, teachers were displaced to be less than ideal caregivers and faced much dismay from kin. Many of the preschool teachers were hanging onto their job, while others have either join another establishment or left the industry completely. On the other hand, the social relation of care developed through work had brought the teachers closer together.

3.2.2 Wages and Profit Making

Just before I left for Budapest to commence graduate school, Averial and I were discussing about her work and possible career paths. She had been working for the current employer for about eighteen months and prospects were not ideal. The initial offer made to her was the position of senior teacher with exposure to management roles. This would put her on track to be the vice-principal within the year. Eventually, the plan did not come to fruition and she decided to part way. Averial had been working in the industry for about five years now, and needed two additional certifications to qualify for senior position - a degree in early childhood and a professional advanced diploma in leadership. We decided to pick up a joint loan of S$8,000 to pay for her degree. Our monthly combined income would be enough to cover the loan payments. Preschool teachers carried an uneven cost in reproducing their work, and not necessarily compensated accordingly.

Talking to her other colleagues, and to my interviewees, I noticed that preschool teachers were spending a significant amount of time and money while at work. Wei

Ping said in agreement, "I have to bring my work back home. Class material takes up so much time to prepare, especially the art and craft needed to decorate the walls. My husband helps me. You know what's worse? The school does not refund our cost. They expect beautiful decorations with so little money. We just end up paying for it ourselves. Less trouble and less paperwork." Their comments foreshadowed the extractive practices of preschools on their staff. Most preschool apprentices are paid subsistence wage that could go as low as $800 after taxes. In the recent national labor census, preschool wage rank among the bottom five in Singapore. Vanessa, on why so many teachers are leaving the industry,

> "Initially when I joined that pay was not very high. I was only earning about $1,400 - $1,500 including CPF. I take back about $1,200 a month. Of course, we had 14 days annual leave and 7 days sick leave. Of course when you compared it with other industries, they have more days of leave. We don't have bonuses. It is not a requirement in the preschool industry to give out bonuses. So we lose out on that as well. My expectations was not very high in that sense. But after 6 years, I think we deserve every single cents (like any other professionals who have been working for 6 years) should earn. We are not given that. We are still looked down upon like nannies. We are looked down upon as a teacher. There are many set back in that sense where the salary is concerned as well. I think what the government is doing to help us is not happening fast enough. That is the reason why there are so many people leaving the industry for other jobs."

Wages did not improve significantly after graduation. The average wage of a fresh diploma graduate is ball parked at $1,300. The downward depression of wages could be attributed to a large number of foreign care workers working in the preschools.

Some contracts were a clear breach of labor laws. In 2014, I was approached by Vanessa to assist in a labor dispute involving a Chinese teacher and her employer. The teacher in question was hired under a pseudo contract that guaranteed a higher wage in accordance to the requirement stipulated by the Ministry of Manpower. Categorized as a Q1 (specialist) skilled worker, the minimum salary threshold to qualify for an employment pass was set at S$2,500. Her hiring agent in China promised her an income equivalent to S$2,200, but failed to deliver. The employer in question held back the contract and only gave her a monthly compensation of S$1,850. The employer later then threatened to terminate her employment. Afraid of losing her employment pass, she accepted a compromise to continue working at a lower wage. I had suggested that she report the infraction to the Ministry of Manpower but was duly declined. No doubt this was an extreme case. But it highlighted the wage discrepancy between foreign and local hires. Throughout my field observation, any conversation regarding wages was promptly avoided. "The management insist that wages are confidential and should not be talked about," Vanessa explained. Averial further noted that "pay matters are sensitive, and we do not go about asking how much other teachers earn." In the seven years of working as a preschool teacher, Averial had only made a pay increment of S$1,000 to S$2,800. Her reluctance to talk about pay is understandable. Most of her colleagues are earning significantly less. A quick glance at the job market revealed that the position of a principal would only fetch between $3,000 to S$4,500. The composition of preschool teachers in the early 2008 consisted mainly of Filipino and Chinese nationals, and a number of women returning to work. Foreign care workers were hired at depressed wages. Vanessa and Averial both noted that fellow colleagues were aware of the grasping inequality between the profit seeking practices of the owners and their wage.

This was tolerable when the preschools owners were cooperative and approachable in the day-to-day operations of the establishment. Echoing the tagline of the state, many teachers were quick to point out that the preschool is like a kampung. As my second chapter suggested, the community was conflated with imaginaries of space, time, and relations of days gone by. The sense of community explained by my interviewees also suggested a set of relationship that distinguished themselves from others – the in-and out-groups. Formed by a shared sense of identity and interest, their everyday experience of work served to remind them of the gap between management and staff. In one of my interviews with owner of a franchise, a sample business proposal was used to explain the preschool business model. While the numbers were not indicative of his actual balance sheet, he maintained that it reflected the current market condition.

The growing demand for preschool services, relatively low barrier of entry, and substantial state subsidies gave rise to a new platform for capital accumulation. Business owners have the option of purchasing a franchise license or establish a new preschool. As the attached business plan suggests, the profit margins are lucrative. Wages were artificially kept at a low level despite increments in state subsidizes and profit margins. Narotzky (2014) described that globally the working class were exploited at the point of production, while consumers were expropriated at points of consumption. In the case of Singapore's urban working class, changing practices of childcare also pointed towards the same tendencies. This section highlights how relations of care were reorganized and structured to reproduce the mechanics of appropriation and extraction. Wage relations show, on one hand, the common

problems and interest faced by preschool teachers and parents. On the other hand, it is confronted with the distinct interests of the Singapore state and capital.

3.2.3 Managing parents' expectations

Yet another morning, damp and dull. I accompanied Averial to her workplace for my 2nd week of field observation. The sun had barely risen, rightly so. Yet the streets were bustling with traffic, almost driving the highway to a standstill. 6am. Averial was on morning shift today. Even before the shuttles were lifted, the first kid turned up. Poor child, he was barely awake and still draped in the diapers from the night before. The mother handed the little boy and his tiny bag to Averial. She was not allowed beyond the childproof gate sitting past the first glass door. The gate was barely a metre high, and only barely enough to keep the probing young ones in. Joanna, the assistant teacher, who just arrived, helped settle the boy in. Hugs and cuddles work for most part of the time. Children grow accustomed to affections. In any case, the mother rushed off for work pronto. More children were ushered into the preschool, to be picked up later in the evening around 5pm. By 7.30am, most of the students and staff had been accounted for. Perhaps this was what the state imagined when it centred its social policies on the premise of a *community*. The foreword of the 2008 budget read, *"It takes a village to raise a kid"*. For the unacquainted, the boundaries of the community are clearly demarcated. The windows were heavily tinted, thus making it impossible for an outsider to glance in. Entry into the preschool is restricted and surveyed. Security cameras are peppered around the facility to safeguard the interest of the establishment. Within this walled village, learning occurs amidst frequent laughter, giggles, hugs and cuddles of children.

3.2.4 Documentation

Janice, the form teacher of class N1B, hosted me for the day. Together with nineteen jumpy three year olds, Janice and her assistant Jamil (whom we know affectionately as Ja) started the day off with songs. It was amazing to see how they could manage the entire class without incident. The first activity of the day was the morning routine song to warm the children into class. Plenty of activities filled the days – from reading, to learning numeracy, to gourmet moments, to gymnasium time, to inquiry moments. Each session lasted around 50mins. On other occasions, children have to work on their assessment books. There was hardly any time for a break. Just after midday, when the children were having their nap, Ja and I went out for lunch. This was a treat. "You should see what we eat during lunch," Ja whined only to realise that I am very much aware. She continued lamenting, "Where got time to do so many things? You count for me. 50mins for 9 children to do their activities, how is that possible?" As it turns out, the management had been aggressively promoting their school and had promised a wide range of activities that the child will master. "Can you believe that a parent asked me why her daughter could not complete her times table? Come on, she is only three, what do you expect?" In my earlier section, I showed that education was one of the key motivation factored in sending the child for preschool. Coupled with the monthly fees, most of the teachers I spoke to were uncomfortable with the current work arrangement. Some have even taken the liberty of cutting down the "need to dos" though at their own risk. After having been around four different preschools, teachers overwhelming listed documentation as their greatest pet peeve. For Jasmine and Desmond, weekly updates and quarterly Parents-Teacher Meeting (PTMs) served to update them on the progress of the child. Each weekly update documented the activities completed during the week. Photographs are

key essentials in demonstrating proof. By far, the weeks leading up to the PTMs were the most stressful. Janice would have to prepare nineteen long progress reports (also known as portfolios) detailing their progress on top of the regular day job. These are frustrating moments for many other teachers alike. Janice added, "It is a painful process. What's worse than writing the portfolio? Having to find time to do so in the first place". In this competitive and deregulated space, parents 'adopt the role of consumer and comply with ethics of self-care as responsible, self-regulating subjects' (Deacon, 1994; Wilkins, 2012). Since the implementation of the Preschool Education Review by the Parliamentary Subcommittee in 2008, the relationship between parents and schools has been subject to multiple policy innovations and state interventions. Teachers were increasingly portrayed as 'intentional and flexible promoters of children's development and needs" while parents were encourage to build "strong partnership, collaboration" and to be "involved family" (ECDA, 2011a). An 'involved partner', parents were expected to behave as 'consumers' through careful selection of childcare providers. Parents thus were called upon to 'fulfill certain duties and obligations' in making 'realistic and informed choices' as consumer-citizens (Wilkins, 2011). The weekly reports and portfolios served as their primary source of information in accessing the quality of education. Schools, on the other hand, now appeared to be encased in 'business ontology' (Fisher, 2009). In other words, preschools were increasingly absorbed in product orientation, production processes and selling orientation (Goh, 2011). Perhaps none is more telling than an email that I received that read,

> "MindChamps has once again stamped its mark in the field of education as a premium brand that is strongly associated with quality, trust and distinction. For the third consecutive year since 2014, Superbrands, an internationally

> independent authority and arbiter on branding, accorded MindChamps PreSchool with the Superbrands Mark of Distinction for 2016 under the 'Early Learning and Preschool' category. More significantly, MindChamps PreSchool is the only preschool in Singapore to be accorded this accolade."

Market style mechanism of consumer choice, brand recognition, and advertisement help parents become more sophisticated and demanding consumers-citizens. Preschool teachers and their management relate to parents differently. While the owner sees the client as a fee-paying customer, teachers may not necessarily do the same.

Each of the above sections highlighted an element of tension between different social actors in the urban working class. In examining the historical provision of preschool services, the state had always been adjusting the family as a site of production for the purpose of economic growth. The outsourcing of childcare had resulted in conflictual relations between the nuclear "three-generation" family unit. By framing the family and its care work as a rural imaginary, the efficacy of "Asian value" and "Confucian Value" stand to establish a sense of order and stability. Within the workplace, preschool teachers experience and navigate the idea of community imagined as an urban-industrial. Their conditions of work and wage relationship can be understood as forms of occupational solidarity. As Clarke (2014) articulates,

> "the urban-industrial imaginary contrasted a stable, integrated, and coherent order within the community to an external world of threats and challenges. This juxtaposition tend to ignore or downplay dynamics and tensions within themselves.

The expansion of preschool services has historical precedence. What differ in this cycle of family policies it the disembedding of childcare services into the market. The movement unevenly affected various actors of the urban working class. Underpinning the capitalist relations of care is the subsidy provided by the state. The state in using monetary mechanism to shape familial and labor policies had created perhaps an atmosphere of dependence.

Conclusion

In the text, I have tried to show how the story of state and urban working class family is played out to the shifting demands of capitalist value regime. However, when confronted with reality on the ground, it is clear that the changing practices of childcare which I noted is an essential part of what makes Singapore. Almost all of the young family I spoke to agreed that it is a necessity. On the line is the middle class lifestyle that my informants and myself have gotten so used to. The stark reality of life reminds each of us that we can only limited as an individual. This is the reality that is constantly broadcast each year during out national day rally. We are a community of people and we do what we must to survive. The truth is that Singapore is a tiny island with almost no resources. As much as the resident would like to, they are embedded in broader relations of practices. Childcare is but one of the many others. You only have to look around to notice.

It may not be fitting for an anthropologist or sociologist to speculate about the future. But without doing so, we are not able to think beyond the limitations of today. Especially among the young, especially those who have travelled and lived abroad, they are aware of the comfort of their home and the proverbial price that they pay for such comfort. I can picture myself looking at Elijah and his siblings many years from now. What would their life be? The project took up the challenge going beyond the "primitive reflex" (Kalb, 2016) to examine process and structures that forms out ability to stay alive. These mundane and obscure everyday activities are deeply emeshed in broader stuctures of time, space, and capital movement. Capitalist relations inevitably marked every aspect of our social relations and how we

reproduce. This thesis is but a small tiny attempt in that direction to make sense of this local/global connection at your backyard. More importantly in recognizing the family as a site of production and labor, perhaps we can better tackle questions of citizenship and politics making from the ground. This project goes to show that the sense of solidarity though highly uneven on both horizontal and vertical scale connects everyone in an intimate web of relationship. As such, it only makes sense for the everyday urban working class to look beyond the stability of the household into matters that count. In echoing the works of many local scholars before me, the stability and order of social relationship embodied by this community is deeply connected with the country's economic prowess. Without which, one can only guess if the colonial and rural imaginary that digs back at a set of social relationship can be called upon.

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