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Volume 16, 2015 - [Issue 3](#)

1,768 18

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Raising Successful Children: Children as Accumulation Strategy and the Renegotiation of Parenting Arrangements in Singapore

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Pages 211-226 | Published online: 07 May 2015

Cite this article <https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2015.1028431>



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Abstract

This paper examines how material and emotional investments in childrearing are rendered culturally meaningful in Chinese middle-class families in Singapore, and its consequences for family life. The competitive education system is a major concern for families with young children, and parents often invest substantial resources and energy in their children's upbringing. The 'overburdening' of middle-class schoolchildren appears in most modern societies, as childhood has become a site of accumulation and commodification. But how can we understand the cultural logics of this seemingly global phenomenon? How is the representation of the child as accumulation strategy entangled with a gendered renegotiation of parenting strategies in everyday life? How do states shape and define notions of the value of children in and through existing

policies and ideologies? Based on ethnographic data, I will illustrate how parents with young children perceive and handle childrearing, parenting arrangements and the meaning of educational success.

Keywords:

Parenting Childrearing Education Gender Population Policy Children as Accumulation Strategy
Singapore Middle-Class Families

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and suggestions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

[1] Katz ([2008](#)) outlines three interrelated ‘configurations’ or notions of the child in our contemporary world: as accumulation strategy; ornament; and waste (the latter refers to the moral panic around young people, particularly teenagers, a construction that is fortified by, and fortifies, the other two (see also Aitken [2001](#))). These representations of the value of children are triggered by specific contemporary ‘ontological anxieties’, namely anxieties about political, economic, geopolitical and environmental conditions.

[2] The delegation of housework and caregiving activities to foreign domestic helpers enables Singaporean women to enter the paid labour force, but it is important to recognise that the tasks of housework and caregiving are still very much a female chore, albeit performed by another group of women (foreign domestic helpers) (PuruShotam [1997](#), 555).

[3] Most existing research on social mobility is quantitative (see, for example, Biblarz, Bengtson, & Bucur [1996](#); DiPrete [2002](#); Scherger & Savage [2010](#)), and there are comparably few ethnographic studies of the same phenomenon. Rapid modernisation and upward social mobility across Asia, as well as in other parts of the world, calls for the study of how these broad changes are manifested in people's everyday life.

[4] After one week of intense debate, and in spite of protests from opposition politicians and the public, the Parliament passed an amended motion to endorse the White Paper.

[5] 1SGD=0.732USD (as at 3 March 2015).

[6] There are a limited number of governmental so-called MOE (Ministry of Education) kindergartens, where the monthly fee for Singapore citizen children is only SGD150 for a four-hour teaching session daily. These kindergartens, currently ten in total, cater in particular to low-income families living within one kilometre of these particular kindergartens (MOE Kindergarten [2015](#)). Most Singaporean families are not targets of this scheme.

[7] Excluding employer CPF (pension) contribution.

[8] The term 'curling parent' was coined by the Danish psychologist Bent Hougaard.

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Funding

The field study conducted in Singapore in 2012 was generously supported by The School of Social work at Lund University.

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