The New Strategies of Adjustment: A Singapore Chinese Woman

Janet W. Salaff*

The family’s responses to state development strategies, especially as they bear upon women, form a central theme of this woman’s life. Implied in the concept of family strategies is a corrective to individualistic views of women wage-earners, motivated by personal interest and gaining power as a result of access to wages. Here we see the ways that family roles propel women to work and to take on tasks in the wider family’s interests. Family strategies as a concept has been criticized in turn for assuming that there is a unitary set of family interests. Family strategies, however, may be comprised of three main sets of interests, as shaped by the three structures of the Chinese family: (1) the patrilineal family in which a woman is born and grows up; (2) after marriage, when she is legally transferred from her natal family to that of her husband, the family into which she marries; and (3) the bonds of affection between mother and children, between her mother and herself, and herself and her children.

The new institutions of the Singapore development programme have greatly influenced women’s roles as they develop strategies in response to new needs and goals of the family. We will see these through the experiences of Soo Hiang, a Teochew-speaking Chinese, whom I knew from 1974 when she was 26 through 1981 when she was 33. Soo Hiang draws upon the three family structures and constructs a set of family responsibilities and obligations from these sometimes competing and sometimes complementary needs.

Plump, talkative and jovial, Soo Hiang was born and grew up in Singapore. During her childhood, medical and health care services had greatly improved. Parents like hers bore many children and these mainly survived, giving rise to large families; Soo Hiang’s parents had eleven children, of which she was eldest. Her mother worked in a laundry while she was growing up and later ran a hawker stall. Her father, who played a lesser role in the home, was a night watchman in a warehouse. He earned S$300 a month, most of which, according to Second Sister, “he drinks and gambles away”. Mother was the mainstay of the family.

The overriding demographic phenomenon, a high dependency ratio, was not experienced in this form during earlier historical periods when higher mortality would limit the surviving births. The dependency ratio is measured by the ratio of the wage-earners to non-wage-earners in a family. In working class families, the dependency ratio is key to the ability of families to survive. In many families I met, there was usually only the father as the single earner. Most mothers were burdened with small children, labour-intensive household chores and insufficient help at home, and they lacked education or industrial labour force experience. Such mothers rarely worked for a wage outside the home. So only when a father’s contribution

* Janet W. Salaff is Professor of Sociology, University of Toronto, Ontario, Canada.
diminished — having become ill or passed away, taken two wives, or deserted the family financially — did the mother go to work.

The Singapore state was now pushing the populace out of the subsistence economy and the high dependency ratio made the need to earn money overwhelming. With economic development, families can decreasingly live off the land, grow or make goods themselves. The money economy spreads, forcing them to depend on earnings to survive. Working class families are not just attracted by wage work opportunities, but also have been compelled to send members to work. They must buy food, clothing and furnishings, pay for education and rent housing. Families thus exploit the environment to get cash, and do so within the bounds of social structure.

In the period Soo Hiang grew up, families were forced to find a solution to the high dependency ratio, and the demographic situation also suggested the means to do so — by counting on their children to help.

Women’s contributions to the household division of labour vary by cycle of the family and numbers of family members. Expected household tasks for the younger unmarried women living at home in Singapore during the period under study are shaped by the large family size. The family at the stage we are studying here is sizable enough to require a number of rules, which are generally accepted.

First was early training of children to participate in family tasks. Girls also performed subsistence work, helped in a family hawker enterprise, or did housework for others. Not only were tasks divided by age and social class, but sex roles marked different expectations. Soo Hiang, like other working class daughters, had to help her family soon after completing primary school. As eldest sister, Soo Hiang was thus responsible for the running of a household and was Mother’s backup. She watched her brothers and sisters after school. When Mother fell sick, Soo Hiang had to take her place at the wash basin. She also ironed to earn extra income. Thus her school marks suffered and she left school at age 14, after completing junior high, to work full-time at home. Soo Hiang “took charge of the whole family’s running” and became the driving force that helped the family survive. Soo Hiang continued to help out at home so that her mother could work.

Then in her eighteenth year, Mother arranged a marriage for her to a man ten years her senior. Most of the women I interviewed married people they had come to know personally, but Soo Hiang had to accept an arranged marriage with a total stranger. “I never saw him before, let alone got to know him. My family was growing too rapidly and my parents couldn’t hold it together. What mother intentionally causes her children to suffer? Mother was only trying to marry me off to someone she thought would support me.” Mother had probably chosen Tan To, who patronized her laundry, because he was available, apparently healthy and lived nearby. “I was too afraid of Mother to refuse Tan To. When I hesitated, she’d pinch me until I was black and blue. At eighteen I hadn’t yet learned to think for myself. Mother controlled me then, but you might say I control her now!” she reflected. Thus Soo Hiang more or less willingly completed her duty to her natal family.

Upon marriage, Soo Hiang took her first full-time job, alongside Mother at the laundry. Having gone to work around age 18 in 1967, Soo Hiang could only get a service sector job, since low-wage manufacturing work had not yet opened up, and Mother had already introduced her to the tasks. As a married woman, her wages were now owed to her husband and she could only give a small part to her mother.