

## BOOK REVIEW:

# Families, the state and educational inequality in the Singapore city-state

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**Niranjan Casinader**

Myriad Futures Consulting and Monash University, Australia:  
[myriad.futures.consulting@gmail.com](mailto:myriad.futures.consulting@gmail.com)

Charleen Chiong. (2022). *Families, the state and educational inequality in the Singapore city-state*. Routledge. ISBN 9780367646028. pp. 174.

Research monographs that adopt a different perspective on a research field are always welcome. In that context, Charleen Chiong's book provides an interesting contribution to the literature on Singaporean education. Her wider theme is the structures and processes of national education and if and how they contribute to educational inequality. Her more specific focus is on addressing two gaps in the research as she perceives them: (1) a qualitative (as opposed to quantitative) approach to the views of those who are among the more socially disadvantaged within Singaporean society in which meritocracy is a guiding principle; and (2) the utilisation of a 'studying through' approach, in which the interdependence and relationships between state, school and family form the research core as opposed to macro approaches centred on the state or micro studies centred purely on the family. Underpinning these aims are three policy dilemmas that Chiong identifies: (1) the tension between a meritocratic educational system that promotes possibilities for success and yet structurally works to counter this; (2) a perceived shift from meritocracy to parentocracy, where success increasingly depends upon parents' abilities to invest actively in their children's education; and (3) the tensions resulting from the recent educational reforms that promote more holistic, child-centred approaches compared with the older and high-stake performative approach.

In order to discuss these themes, Chiong adopts a conceptual and analytical framework that utilises Foucault's notion of governmentality, using three tiers of governance (political rationalities, political technologies and technologies). She discusses two key questions: how disadvantaged families conceptualise and work towards 'successful' education for their children; and how these families navigate their relationship to the state in all its facets in the broader educational context.

Given the promise of such a study, it is disappointing that, for two main reasons, the book does not entirely fulfil its potential. The first is a disparate structure, the logic of which is not entirely evident and confuses the reader. The second is a failure to extrapolate from the confines of this empirical research to the wider discourses in play; Chiong rarely addresses the wider relevance of the study in depth.

In the first case, the structure of the monograph tends to be fractured to a degree. For instance, the text is divided into three main sections (Morning, Noon, Night), but the reasons for this are, at best, not evident and, at worst, forced. Discussion of the societal

bases, such as the nature of Singaporean society and education, and the influence that both history and politics have played in their evolution, tends to be spread throughout the monograph, rather than constructed as a whole earlier on. The result is that the narrative does not effectively connect various interdependent socio-political elements associated with the overall analysis of the three tiers of governance. The three analyses are self-contained, but the overall understanding that would be generated by multiple common connections tends to be obscured or omitted. One major example of this is the way in which Singaporean society and education have been influenced by the country's approach to culture and ethnic diversity. This is introduced and addressed in the second half of the analysis, when there are strong arguments that the government's emphasis on civic unity and a national Singaporean identity have been far more influential across all aspects of participants' attitudes towards education than the text, as structured, suggests.

Although not explicitly stated, the data sources throughout the monograph strongly indicate that the book is based on the author's PhD thesis, and it is here that the problems of broader relevance tend to lie. The fact that the empirical study is focused on one demographic group (i.e., the socially disadvantaged), whilst not an issue in that specific research context, creates problems when the author attempts to draw wider conclusions from the study concerning the questions identified and the tiers of governance. To be effective, the analyses needed to include comparisons with families from different socio-economic groups, even if the emphasis remains on the socially disadvantaged. As it is, several conclusions (both comparative and otherwise) are drawn about the attitudes of families from other socio-economic groups in relation to the socially disadvantaged without sufficient empirical evidence and argument beyond the wider literature. In the same vein, firm conclusions about socially disadvantaged families in Singapore and their attitudes to education are made based on only 12 families and yet are expressed as if they are relevant across the cohort. The limitations of the data in making such declarations could have been acknowledged and taken into account more deliberately, or else the range and number of family participants' research could have been expanded for the monograph.

Towards the end of the book, the author states that her findings illustrate that any attempts to achieve greater educational equality in Singapore need to be more nuanced and multi-dimensional in their approach, accounting for 'the diverse material, historical, labour market and socio-political conditions in which families live, as well as the complex ways we cling to institutions that also curtail us' (p. 126). If the book had taken those same considerations into account in its scope and structure, its impact and value would have been greatly enhanced. As it is, the undoubted value of a study focused on the attitudes of the socially disadvantaged towards education in Singapore as part of a wider study of educational inequality has been somewhat diluted by the limitations of the data applied in that analysis.



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