
BOOK REVIEW

Quah, S. R. (2003). *Home and kin: Families in Asia*. Singapore: Eastern Universities Press. 245 pp. Paperback ISBN 9812102140, \$39.00.

Author Stella R. Quah is Professor of Sociology at the National University of Singapore. She has published several book chapters and journal articles on sociology of the family, social policy, and medical sociology.

Quah provides a great deal of information on the similarities and differences of family trends among ten Asian countries. This comparative analysis is based on demographic and survey data, as well as qualitative data taken from case studies and collected by the author. Not only does she cast the information from the perspective of sociological theory, she frames each conceptual aspect in historical context. Furthermore, Quah challenges the reader to consider the implications for the study and formation of social policy.

To begin, Quah establishes an historic foundation for the study of families in Asia to assist readers' understanding of the studies reported in subsequent chapters. Here, she also emphasizes the challenges of defining "family," and includes three relevant concepts – the *ideal* family, the *actual* family, and the *subjective* (or affectual) family. For the most part, the *ideal* Asian family is an extended family of three generations living in the same household, compound or neighborhood. The *actual* family (as it exists), on the other hand, reflects a structural situation resulting from social, economic, and political changes. In addition to three-generation families,

Quah notes that nuclear families and single-parent families exist. Finally, the *subjective* family refers to one's lived experience in the family. These definitions are related to specific trends in family life examined in chapters two through six.

Mate selection and family formation are addressed in chapter two. Quah reports that while the desire for an "old fashioned," arranged marriage is waning, choosing an eligible partner remains an important process most everywhere. Despite changes in values and attitudes that have accompanied socioeconomic development, the importance of marriage endures.

In chapter three, the author delves into various perspectives of the *ideal* family while examining the *actual* family. To do so, she focuses on parenthood with particular attention to the friction between the private and public spheres of parenthood. Indeed, individuals' private decisions and behaviors have consequences for society, and Quah notes stark contrasts from country to country in social policies pertaining to such private experiences. For instance, China is known for its limits on family size in these times of low economic development in that country. Yet Singapore is encouraging better-educated men and women to marry and have children in order to boost the number of talented workers who can bolster the labor force and support an aging population.

Advancing age and experiences of the older generations in the family and society are addressed in chapter four. Quah reports that given the time (after retirement) and desire to care for grandchildren, seniors are prominent figures in their families. However, changes in science, technology, and other aspects of life are likely to give rise to a healthier, better educated, more active and autonomous generation of older citizens in the future. The older generation may choose or be encouraged to remain in the workforce past traditional retirement age. Quah proposes that Asian families and societies must adapt to find meaningful positions for their elder

members. She asserts that development of social capital – positive, inclusive social networks – in the family and society is the challenge to many Asian countries. She proposes that state policies could support flexible work schedules and opportunities for the formation of modified extended families.

The gender divide, particularly the problem of opposing demands on women, is emphasized in chapter five. Asian women encounter three conflicting forces: abiding traditional values emphasizing their subordination to men; demands of a rapidly changing economy leading to their increased labor force participation; and the influence of higher education on their views on gender equality. Quah proposes that in some Asian countries, women attempt to manage the manifestation of these conflicts in the work/family interface in two ways. First, they compartmentalize, or separate the family domain from the employment domain. This appears to happen when women leave their employment to pay full attention to their families when children are young, perhaps to return to employment when the children are older. However, women find that this is not a viable solution for managing a career track. Second, women may manage by separating their liberal attitudes from their more traditional behaviors. This, too, has consequences for their employment and family lives. Quah suggests that such discord is likely to continue in the future.

Marital conflict, divorce, and an institution known as the family court are presented in chapter six. Apparently, contemporary marriages in Asia break down for reasons very similar to those given in studies of divorce in Western societies. Quah indicates that infidelity, destructive habits, personality or value differences, and marriage at a young age are some explanations. There is, of course, variation from country to country concerning religious or cultural constraints, as well as laws dictating behavior for men and women.

Quah relates one particular legal institution impacting marital breakdown – the family court. With jurisdiction over all circumstances of family life, such as divorce, custody disputes and child neglect, family court is an attempt to consolidate and improve the judicial structure while empowering families through mediation. Indeed, bringing together legal and social science experts acknowledges that human behaviors occur in a social context that must be examined to determine appropriate corrective action. An examination of evidence on family court in general is followed by a detailed example of such an institution in Singapore. With the case presented in this manner, the Singaporean family court appears to be an exception in Asian institutions.

Finally, chapter seven goes beyond the complexity of family life in Asia to acknowledge the impact of external factors on family trends in Asia. Despite Asian families' resilience, Quah questions whether families can manage for themselves and ponders whether the state should become involved. Moreover, if the state does intervene through specific family policies, what consequences might there be for long-held family and societal values? Of particular concern to policy makers are the trends toward higher employment among Asian women and the repercussions of female employment for family life in dual-income families, most notably the consequent stress on families.

This book provides a detailed view of family trends in ten Asian countries. Quah notes a specific limitation of comparative data; her study covers only ten countries for which comparable data were available. Any similarities among countries are not necessarily predictive of experiences and circumstances in other Asian countries.

Furthermore, an examination of remarriage and blended families is noticeably absent from this work. It leaves the reader questioning whether there are data pertaining to these experiences in Asia, and if such data exist, why would these contemporary, prominent

experiences have been omitted from this serious perspective on Asian families.

The author has taken great care to provide theoretical and empirical foundations for her presentation of trends as well as cases. Replete with illustrative graphs and tables, the book is clearly appropriate for scholars of sociology, and it may be appropriate for a graduate course in family sociology. While it does not lend itself well as assigned reading in undergraduate interdisciplinary family science courses, an instructor may find it to be a useful resource for highlighting the rich variations and striking similarities in family experiences among several Asian countries.

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