

Futures of Ageing in Singapore

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Abstract

Singapore is one of the most rapidly ageing countries in the world with the proportion of those aged 65 and above projected to more than double from 8% in 2005 to 20% in 2030. This is due to a rapidly declining total fertility rate coupled with an increasing life expectancy as Singapore develops. While population ageing is not a trend unique to Singapore, what is interesting is how it has been represented in the Singapore context in opposing ways. On the one hand, ageing is portrayed as a “silver tsunami” which threatens Singapore’s future economic prospects and societal wellbeing. On the other hand, ageing is seen in a more positive light through discourses of “active” and “successful ageing” with the elderly continuing to make important contributions to society as they age. In this paper, I demonstrate how Four-Quadrant Mapping and Causal Layered Analysis can be used to develop a possible alternative future of ageing by dissecting the ideologies and myths underlying dominant representations of ageing in Singapore. I argue that current representations of ageing reveal instrumental ways of thinking about ageing as “wealth” or “burden”. Such myths about ageing in turn shape policy responses which focus on the outer behavioural and structural aspects of ageing (such as lifelong learning and employment, and financial independence), rather than engage with the changing values and aspirations of individuals. Instead, I propose an alternative myth of ageing as “contentment” and argue for a lifecycle perspective in developing policies on ageing.

Keywords: ageing, lifecycle, Singapore, four-quadrant mapping, causal layered analysis

Introduction

Singapore is one of the most rapidly ageing countries in the world. The proportion of Singaporeans aged 65 and above is projected to more than double from 8% in 2005 to 20% in 2030, and by 2050, 38% of Singaporeans will be aged 60 and above (Kwok, 2006). Moreover, based on Kwok’s (2006) estimates, Singapore’s elderly population (aged 65 and above) is projected to grow by 372% between 2000 and 2030, way faster than Japan (54%), Germany

(63%) and China (170%). This rapid pace of ageing has implications not just for Singapore's policies on ageing, but also its longer-term social, economic and political trends.

The rapid rate of ageing in Singapore is driven by two demographic trends: a rapidly declining Total Fertility Rate (TFR) and an increasing life expectancy (Teo, Mehta, Thang, and Chan, 2006). The TFR in Singapore has declined since the 1970s when the official "Stop at Two" policy was implemented to curtail the high birth rates which had put a strain on the country's limited resources. In the 1980s, there was an about-turn in government policy due to fears of the impact of a rapidly declining TFR on the economic prospects of the country. However, the "Have three or more if you can afford it" policy failed to reverse the decline in the TFR.

In 2010, the TFR has plunged to an all time low of 1.15 before increasing slightly to 1.20 in 2011 (Department of Statistics, DOS, 2012, p. vi). The declining TFR in turn reflects changing attitudes towards marriage and childbearing. The proportion of singles among Singapore residents aged 35-39 years has doubled from 10.5% in 1980 to 20.3% in 2011 for males, and 8.5% to 16.9% for females (DOS, 2012, p. v). Even among those who are married, there is increasing preference for fewer kids due to the increasing cost of living in Singapore.

At the same time, life expectancy at birth is increasing due to declining child mortality, medical advances, better diet, and a better quality of life. This contributes to Singaporeans living longer. Between 1980 and 2011, the average life expectancy at birth of Singaporean males and females has increased by a decade from 69.8 to 79.6 years, and 74.7 to 84.3 years respectively (DOS, 2012, p. vi).

The above trends are not unique to Singapore. The theme of the World Health Day 2012 is designated as "Ageing and Health" by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in recognition of the fact that "in almost every country, the proportion of people aged over 60 years is growing faster than any other age group, as a result of both longer life expectancy and declining fertility rates" (WHO, 2012, no page).

What is interesting however, is how "ageing" has been represented in the Singapore context in opposing ways. On the one hand, Singapore's "shrinking and ageing population" (National Talent and Population Division, NPTD, 2012, p.16) has been used to rationalise its continued pro-immigration policy despite public concerns over the recent high rates of immigration which have put strains on housing supply and transport infrastructure as well as led to greater competition in the labour market. On the other hand, "ageing" has been represented in a more positive light through discourses of "successful ageing" (Ministry of Community Development, MCD, 1999, p. 15) and "active ageing" (Ministry of Community, Youth and Sports, MCYS, 2009, p.38). The opposing representations of ageing in turn reflect changing values with regards to the place of elderly in society amidst a maturing and more volatile economy as well as deeper questions about Singapore's "futures"¹.

In this paper, I first review current literature on ageing within both critical ageing studies, and futures studies, before elucidating their implications for policies on ageing. Next, I examine the underlying normative assumptions of current responses to ageing in Singapore using the Four Quadrant Mapping method (Slaughter, 1998; Wilbur, 1995), followed by a critique of the underlying ideologies and myths of two dominant yet opposing litanies on ageing in Singapore through Causal Layered Analysis (Inayatullah, 1998). Finally, I propose a possible alternative future for ageing in Singapore and outline some policy recommendations.

Theoretical Context

In this paper, I adopt a critical perspective in examining “ageing” as a social construction shaped by underlying structures, power relations, discourses and ideologies.

Critical ageing studies/gerontology

Critical perspectives on ageing emerged in 1980s as a challenge to the predominant biomedical model in ageing studies/gerontology where the elderly is seen as weak and diseased. Scholars have engaged with critical theory to question how ageing is not just a biological and physical experience, but also a political one shaped by power relations, social structures and ideologies (Teo et al., 2006). There are four overlapping strands of critique.

The political economy perspective critiques the wider social, political and economic structures that shape the ageing process, experiences and subjectivities. It examines how the “dependency” of the elderly is socially constructed through class, as well as neoliberal economic practices and government policies that are premised on self-help and individual responsibility (Fine and Glendinning, 2005; Minkler, 1996). In addition, policies that promote “active ageing” through involving the elderly in community and social work, reflect the underlying economistic notion that the elderly must be productive in some way for them to be valued in society. Such policies in turn marginalise those who are unable to do so due to their poor health or low incomes (Minkler and Holstein, 2008).

The post-structural perspective, on the other hand, highlights how ageing is constructed through underlying power relations, cultural ideals and ideologies. For example, Tornstam (1992) reveals how different “myths” of ageing reflect different ideologies and worldviews in different cultures and societies (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. *Different myths of ageing*

Cultural perspective	Myth of ageing	Worldview
West	Ageing as misery	Performance orientation of capitalist societies which focus on productivity, effectiveness and independence
Hebrew	Ageing as resource	Old age equated with wisdom

Source: Tornstam, 1992, p. 319.

While the above critiques focus on social structures and ideologies in shaping ageing subjectivities, the humanistic perspective seeks to recover the agency of elderly subjects through examining their experiences and meanings of ageing which are often “missing” in policy, media or popular discourses. For example, Tornstam (1997, p.143) highlights how the way individuals perceive their world changes as they age, through a process of “gerotranscendence” whereby there is a shift from “a materialistic and pragmatic view of the world to a more cosmic and transcendent one, normally accompanied by an increase in life satisfaction”.

The feminist perspective highlights how ageing is a gendered process where women often experience greater impact from ageing due to their lack of income and resources, as well as their dominant role in care-giving. Feminist scholars emphasise

how “age” is not just a social construction or discourse, but an embodied experience that involves bodily and emotional impacts that are felt both on a personal and inter-subjective level e.g. by caregivers. While caregiving or “care” has dominantly been represented in a negative way in terms of the “burden” on caregivers, recent “ethic of care” literature shows how “care” can also be a positive and empowering experience for the recipient and the caregiver (Fine and Glendinning, 2005).

Feminist scholars also highlight how age intersects with other social categories such as gender, race, sexuality, and (dis)ability in shaping ageing subjectivities and experiences. While the impact of “age” on these different identities has not been fully understood or theorised, there is a need to be reflexive and question whose interests are being served (or not) in using “age” as an analytical starting point even in explicitly critical work (Cruikshank, 2008).

Futures work on ageing

Here, I focus on drawing out the common themes in work on ageing that has been informed by futures studies, whether in terms of theory or methodology. Three key themes emerge from the review.

Firstly, futures work has highlighted the plural futures of ageing due to the diversity of the elderly individuals themselves (Inayatullah, 2003). On the one hand, elderly individuals of different age groups (or who were born in different periods such as the post-war “baby boomers”) have different needs and aspirations. On the other hand, different ethnic and cultural groups experience ageing differently due to their differing access to power and resources within wider social structures (Bartlett, 2003). For example, small indigenous communities in Australia have faced difficulties in accessing elderly support services due to their marginal status in society (Bartlett, 2003).

Secondly, futures work has also dissected the underlying cultural ideologies which have shaped differing experiences of ageing. For example, Daffara (2003) examines the different cultural meanings of ageing within Western, Hindu and Greek conceptions of the lifecycle (see Table 2 below).

Table 2. *Different cultural meanings of ageing*

Cultural perspective	Meaning of ageing
West	Economically unproductive, and time of despair
Hindu	Community service of humanity, and cultural growth
Greek	Reconsideration, reflection, and reconciliation

Source: Daffara, 2003, p.48.

Finally, futures work has critiqued how futures of ageing are constructed based on today’s assumptions and understandings of ageing which may not be relevant in the future. For example, Lindh and Lundberg (2008) argue how discussions on pension reforms in Sweden (and elsewhere) are based on several assumptions about the “future” such as the elderly’s lifestyle preferences, society, politics and the economy.

Implications for policy

The above review of literatures in both critical ageing studies and futures studies shows their common theoretical concerns on ageing. Both highlight the plural experiences of ageing, as well as the how these are intertwined with wider social structures, cultural meanings and ideologies. I argue that both literatures also present important policy implications.

Firstly, given the plural worldviews and experiences of ageing among the elderly, there is a need to involve different elderly groups so that their different needs and aspirations can be taken into consideration in developing policies for them (Inayatullah, 2003). Besides engaging the elderly of today, there is also a need to engage today’s younger generations on their aspirations for the future when they age. Such engagement can take the form of action learning and research where both the elderly and younger participants are involved in a dialogue that not only promotes inter-generational understanding but also empowers the elderly through the questioning of ageist stereotypes (Bartlett, 2003; Browne, 2003; Inayatullah, 2003).

Secondly, there is a need for a “lifecycle” approach in policymaking to examine how different policies combine to affect the elderly even though they may not specifically target the elderly, such as education, housing, and employment (Bartlett, 2003; Daffara, 2003). For example, Bartlett (2003) highlights the importance of education in questioning and changing attitudes towards the elderly.

Thirdly, policymakers should question the validity and relevance of underlying assumptions, worldviews and myths that inform current policies on ageing:

These worldviews and metaphors are significant as they generate our collective cultural memes and values about ageing that drive our actions and policy. Effective policy development and implementation therefore needs to include the transformation of these memes and social values to affect change at the system and litany level (Daffara, 2003, p. 47).

Inayatullah (2003, p.11) further argues that ageing can be seen as “an opportunity to rethink current institutions, to question our basic paradigms of health, life and death”. For example, Moody (1994) considers four future scenarios for ageing and critiques the underlying meanings of ageing and their policy implications (see Table 3 below).

Table 3. *Four scenarios for an ageing society*

Scenario	Description	Meaning of ageing	Policy implications
Prolongation of Morbidity	Increased life expectancy due to medical advances but which means longer periods of disease.	Ageing as prolonged suffering with no purpose	Increased healthcare costs and burden on caregivers. Should euthanasia or assisted suicide be legalised?

Scenario	Description	Meaning of ageing	Policy implications
Compression of Morbidity	Increased life expectancy with disease postponed until just before death	Ageing as successful or productive	Promotion of active and healthy living into the old age
Prolongevity	Significantly increased life expectancy with the ageing process postponed and eventually eliminated	Ageing as a disease to be cured	Increased research into anti-ageing cures
Recovery of the Life World	Acceptance of ageing and death as part of life	Ageing accepted as part of the lifecycle	Focus on end-of-life care e.g. hospices and homecare, instead of expensive life-extending medical technologies

Source: Moody, 1994.

Finally, futures work on ageing highlights how ageing is not a static or timeless phenomenon but one that will continue to evolve into the future. This serves as an important critique of current policies on ageing which are largely based on the assumption that the elderly of tomorrow will be similar to the elderly of today (Lindh, 2003; Lindh and Lundberg, 2008; Shaw, 2002). This also means that the lack of certainty on future sociopolitical trends, and the evolving needs and aspirations of the elderly will be the key challenges in formulating policies on ageing (Lindh and Lundberg, 2008).

Methodology

In this paper, I critique current responses to ageing in Singapore and how these have been shaped by underlying ideologies and myths, through two futures methods: Four Quadrant Mapping and Causal Layered Analysis (CLA).

In Four Quadrant Mapping, I critique the current responses on ageing with regards to their underlying assumptions of the prevailing values and norms both at the individual and societal level. This approach arose from Wilber's (1995) and Slaughter's (1998) critique of how current responses, to the different issues and challenges that we face today, consider only the external world of economics, politics, and science and technology, without engaging the inner world of meanings, beliefs and myths. Instead, it is important that "futures" be considered in an integral and holistic manner (Slaughter, 1998).

CLA is then conducted to critique two dominant yet opposing litanies of ageing that have shaped current responses in Singapore, by dissecting the underlying social causes, ideologies/worldviews and the deeper myths/metaphors of ageing. My objective here is to not to predict a particular future for ageing, but rather to question the dominant ideologies and power relations underlying current discourses on ageing, and then consider how we can imagine alternative futures of ageing in Singapore (Inayatullah, 1998).

Current Responses in Singapore to Ageing

That the ageing issue has been of much concern to the Singapore government is evident from the setting up of several committees since the early 1980s to address ageing specifically (Teo et al., 2006). Here, we focus on the three most recent ones.

The first one – Inter-Ministerial Committee on Ageing (IMC) – was set up in 1999 with the vision of achieving “Successful Ageing for Singapore” (MCD, 1999, p.15). The IMC deliberated over issues pertaining to social integration, healthcare, financial security, employment, housing and land use policies, and inter-generational cohesion and conflict.

Subsequently, in 2004, a Committee on Ageing Issues (CAI) was established to build upon the work of IMC to achieve the vision of “Successful Ageing for Singapore” (MCYS, 2006, p.ii). This time round, the CAI focused on how Singapore could better meet the elderly’s housing, accessibility, healthcare and eldercare, and community and lifestyle needs so as to make Singapore “a society for all ages” (MCYS, 2006, no page).

Most recently, the National Population and Talent Division (NPTD) launched a public consultation in July 2012 to examine population issues, including ageing, in a holistic manner². Whereas ageing was previously framed in a more positive manner, ageing is now framed in a more negative sense as contributing to “a shrinking and ageing population and workforce” (NPTD, 2012, p. 15) which will affect Singapore’s long term economic competitiveness.

Despite the continuous reviews over the past two decades, policies on ageing have remained largely unchanged in terms of their underlying intent. Hence, instead of an extensive discussion on the details of different policies, we focus here on the key policies that have shaped ageing in Singapore today.

Pro-natalist policies

To address the falling birthrate, the government has focused on policies that promote marriage and childbearing since the 1980s. These policies mostly take the form of monetary incentives such as Baby Bonuses and tax rebates, as well as employment benefits such as maternity leave, paternity leave and childcare leave. However, these measures not only have little impact on the declining TFR but also exclude singles or non-heterosexual couples who wish to have children. Nevertheless, the government’s position remains that its pro-natalist policies should be seen within the context of “traditional” family values and norms:

If any of the young couples come to me and say that, ‘Oh, I am doing this [having children] because you are giving me the money’, I’ll be very concerned because that is really not the motivation to have children ... Family values must be the starting point, and I hope the young people here will agree with me ... [Ms Grace Fu, Minister in Prime Minister’s Office, cited in Ng (2012a, no page)].

In Singapore, the norm has been you get married first and you have children afterwards ... And I think there have been some

significant advantages to our society to aim for that norm, because a kid brought up by a single mother or single father, I think, is at a disadvantage in many ways - resources, guidance, stability of background. [Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, cited in Neo (2012, no page)]

Maintenance of Parents Act

That the family “norm” should form the basis for childbearing also extends to the care and support of the elderly. The Maintenance of Parents Act is a significant piece of legislation that reflects the government’s thinking on the primary role of the family in supporting the needs of the elderly in Singapore. Introduced in 1996, it provides for

Singapore residents aged 60 years old and above, who are unable to subsist on their own, to claim maintenance from their children who are capable of supporting them but are not doing so. Parents can sue their children for maintenance, in the form of monthly allowances or a lump-sum payment. The Act also establishes the Tribunal for the Maintenance of Parents to decide on applications made under the Act (Lim, 2009, no page).

Hence, the Act transforms the moral obligation of children to take care of their parents based on the “traditional” family norm into a legal duty that is enforceable through the legal system (Teo et al., 2006).

Lifelong learning and employment

To enhance the self-reliance of the elderly, the government has put in place several skills upgrading programmes to facilitate lifelong learning and employability by the older workers (Teo et al., 2006). In view of the increasing life expectancy of Singaporeans, from January 2012, the statutory minimum retirement age has been raised to 62 and employers are required by law to offer re-employment up to age 65 to employees who turn 62 (Ministry of Manpower, MOM, 2012).

Financial independence

Set up in 1955, the Central Provident Fund (CPF) forms the cornerstone of ageing policies in Singapore. The CPF is essentially a compulsory retirement savings scheme for all working Singaporeans so that they can remain financially independent after they retire. While the primary use of CPF monies is to fund retirement needs, they can also be used for home purchases, children’s education and investments (subject to limits), as well as hospitalisation and medical insurance schemes (Teo et al., 2006). More recently in 2009, in view of the longer life expectancies of Singaporeans, the CPF launched the “CPF Life scheme” which is essentially an annuity scheme where members can receive a monthly stream of income for as long as they live after they retire (CPF, 2012).

Accessibility and infrastructure for the elderly

To meet the needs of an increasing elderly population, the government has built more elderly facilities such as eldercare centres and nursing homes in towns across Singapore as part of the “ageing in place” policy where “older people can live a lifetime in their own homes” (MCD, 1999, p.20). Besides building more elderly facilities to meet the needs of the elderly, the government has also introduced barrier-free access guidelines for all buildings and infrastructure in Singapore to allow for universal access for the less mobile groups including the elderly.

Active ageing

The government has also developed policies and programmes that promote activities that not only enhance the elderly’s independence but also allow their continual contribution to the community, such as through volunteering and social work. For example, the Council of Third Age was set up in 2007 to promote “active ageing” through a wide range of social and community activities (MCYS, 2009, p.38).

Four-quadrant mapping of ageing in Singapore

The current responses to ageing reveal dominant assumptions and understandings of the values and norms held by individuals and groups in Singapore (see Table 4). On the one hand, while the government’s pro-natalist policies assume the continued dominance of the nuclear family norm in Singapore, the Maintenance of Parents Act assume that “Asian values” such as filial piety continue to hold sway among Singaporeans (Reisman, 2009). On the other hand, while the government’s emphasis on lifelong learning and employment, financial independence, and active ageing is premised on self-reliant, healthy and economically productive elderly individuals, the “ageing in place” policy assumes not only the desire of elderly individuals to remain “in place” at home but also the availability of family and community support for the elderly (Wiles, Leibing, Guberman, Reeve, and Allen, 2011).

Hence, not only do the responses to ageing reflect ageist assumptions about the elderly’s needs and aspirations (for example, the desire for lifelong employment), but more importantly, the anti-welfare pragmatic stance of the government whereby the “traditional” family is seen as the primary provider of resources for care and support of its dependent members i.e. children and the elderly (Reisman, 2009). On the other hand, the government’s role is more to provide “indirect” support “from a distance” through: compulsory retirement savings, skills upgrading programs for lifelong learning and employment, the funding of community programmes for active ageing, and the provision of facilities such as eldercare centres and barrier-free access (Teo et al., 2006, p.30).

However, as values and norms, and lifestyle options evolve, current responses on ageing would become less and less relevant to individuals’ needs and aspirations. In fact, as I will demonstrate in the next section, current responses are shaped by very specific yet dominant envisionings of what the futures of ageing in Singapore would be like. Hence, current responses fail to take into consideration other possible futures of ageing.

Table 4. *Four Quadrant Mapping of ageing*

	Inner	Outer
Self	[Meanings/Psychology] <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “Asian values” e.g. filial piety ● Self-reliance ● Independence 	[Behavioural] <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Healthy ● Active in community ● Economically productive
Collective	[Worldview] <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “Traditional” family values ● Communitarian ideology ● Anti-welfarism ● Economic pragmatism 	[Structural] <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Pro-natalist policies ● Maintenance of parents ● Lifelong learning and employment ● Financial independence ● Accessibility and infrastructure ● Active ageing

Source: Author’s compilation.

Dissecting Dominant Futures of Ageing

In this section, I dissect two dominant yet opposing litanies on ageing in Singapore to further elucidate the underlying ideologies and myths which have shaped current policy responses to ageing. [Table 5](#) outlines the CLA of both litanies which are discussed below.

Table 5. *CLA of the Futures of Ageing in Singapore*

Litany	
● Successful Ageing for Singapore	● Silver Tsunami Hits Singapore
Social causes	
<p>Demographic characteristics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Healthier, better educated, richer, more independent ● Mature and experienced workers <p>Growth of silver industry</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Increased demand for innovative products and services for the elderly <p>Strong family values</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Transmission of family values to the next generation <p>Active ageing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Greater participation in community activities 	<p>Demographic characteristics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Less innovative and productive <p>Impact on economic competitiveness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Shrinking workforce ● Lower innovation, productivity and economic growth <p>Increased aged dependency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Increased aged dependency on younger generations for care and financial support <p>Fiscal impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Increased health expenditures <p>Inter-generational conflict</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Political competition for rights and resources
Ideology/Worldview	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Anti-welfarism ● “Traditional” family values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Economic pragmatism ● Communitarian ideology: consensus over conflict
Myth/Metaphor	
● Age as wealth	● Age as burden

Source: Author’s compilation.

(A) Litany 1: Successful Ageing for Singapore

In this litany of “Successful Ageing for Singapore” (MCD, 1999, p.15), the elderly population is represented as “happy, healthy and active seniors” (MCYS, 2009, no page) who will not only lead independent lives but will continue to make significant contributions to the community, society and the economy. In fact, the CAI highlighted that “it would be wrong to view seniors as a burden to society” (MCYS, 2006, p. 69). This is so for the following reasons.

Social causes

Demographic characteristics

The elderly of tomorrow will be “healthier, better educated and richer” compared to today (MCYS, 2006, p.i), and therefore they are envisioned to be as economically productive, if not more, as today. Hence, it will “become increasingly critical for employers to attract and retain mature, experienced workers to maintain a competitive advantage in an evolving economy” (MCYS, 2006, p.i).

Growth of silver industry

An ageing population will provide a “new market opportunity” for Singapore due to their increased demand for innovative products and services targeted at the elderly (MCYS, 2009, p.4). This will help foster the growth of the “silver industry” as a new driver of the economy (MCYS, 2006, p.i).

Strengthen family values

The elderly is also perceived as “a valuable resource for both families and community”(MCD, 1999, p.14) and they will play an important role in strengthening family ties by transmitting “values, wisdom, and family traditions to the next generation” (MCYS, 2009, p.65).

Active ageing

The elderly of tomorrow is also envisioned to lead independent and active lives within the community, hence contributing to “successful ageing”.

Ideology/Worldview

The above factors behind “successful ageing” reflect the underlying ideologies of anti-welfarism and “traditional” family values in Singapore (Teo et al., 2006). The focus on the elderly leading more independent lives reveals the anti-welfare policies of the state where self-reliance whether in economic or social terms is emphasised so as to reduce the burden on the state. Hence, the elderly of the future are not only expected to be more independent and self-reliant in terms of income and healthcare (MCYS, 2009), and “will have to take on more personal responsibility, particularly in living healthy lifestyles, and ensuring their continued employability and financial security” (MCD, 1999, p.14).

Underlying “successful ageing” is also the continued emphasis on the “family”, defined as a married heterosexual couple with children, as the basic unit of society. Consistent with the anti-welfare orientation of the state, the family is seen as the “first line of support” for the elderly when it comes to caregiving, healthcare and other kinds of support (MCD, 1999, p. 15). This anti-welfare pro-family ideology pervades not just Singapore’s ageing policies but also other social, community and healthcare policies where self-reliance and family support are encouraged (Teo et al., 2006).

Myth/Metaphor: Age as Wealth

The underlying myth is that of “Age as Wealth” where the elderly is seen as having achieved wealth and wisdom that they can impart to the younger generations, hence strengthening the “traditional” family ideology. At the same time, given that

“age” is wealth, the elderly of the future are seen to be economically independent, which supports the anti-welfare ideology of the state.

(B) Litany 2: Silver Tsunami Hits Singapore

On the other hand, the opposing litany “Silver Tsunami Hits Singapore” highlights the negative impact of ageing on society and economy:

We are going to have a silver tsunami coming and we need a national effort to plan ahead to be ready for it so that it does not wash us away. (Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, 2011, no page).

The factors for why ageing is viewed as a “silver tsunami” are discussed below.

Social causes

Demographic characteristics

The elderly of the future is expected to be less productive and innovative. Not only are the elderly slower to adopt new technologies but are also more often absent from work due to sickness (Ministry of Trade and Industry, MTI, 2012).

Impact on economic competitiveness

Hence, the ageing population “not only leads to a shrinking workforce but also results in lower innovation, ... productivity and economic growth” (MTI, 2012, p.12). This in turn creates a downward spiral in Singapore’s future economic competitiveness:

A shrinking and ageing population could also mean a less vibrant and innovative economy. There will be a shrinking customer base in Singapore, and companies may not be able to find adequate manpower. Multinational companies may therefore choose not to set up operations in Singapore, and Singapore-based businesses may down-size, close down or relocate. As a result, we could see slower business activity and fewer career options that will match the higher aspirations of Singaporeans. With an increasingly educated and mobile population, more of our young people could choose to leave for other exciting global cities, hollowing out our population and workforce, and worsening our old-age support ratio. (NPTD, 2012, p.16).

Increased dependency

With a declining TFR and increasing life expectancy, the old-age support ratio (defined as the number of working persons aged 20 to 64 years supporting an elderly person aged 65 and above) will decline from 6.3 today to 2.1 by year 2030 (NPTD, 2012, p.15). This will lead to an “increasing tax and economic burden on our working age population” (NPTD, 2012, p.16) as well as a greater caregiving burden on the family and community, especially given the shrinking family size.

Fiscal impact

The ageing population also means a shrinking tax base as well as “higher national healthcare and long-term care expenditure for the elderly” (NPTD, 2012, p.16). This means that the government may need to cut its budget on other areas such as education and infrastructure development, hence compromising Singapore’s future growth prospects.

Inter-generational conflict

Given their growing numbers, the elderly of the future are envisioned to have significant political clout in articulating their specific interests. Hence, there are concerns about potential inter-generational conflict from the elderly wanting more say in shaping policies that cater to their specific needs, such as healthcare and retirement benefits (Phua, 2012).

For example, given that “older Singaporeans could be a significant lobby group” as they would form “25% of the electoral population in 2030” (MCD, 1999, p.14), the IMC considered “proposals to change the electoral system to give the economically active in the population or those with family responsibilities a higher weightage in their votes” (MCD, 1999, p.22). However, these proposals were eventually not supported by IMC as “there is no indication that such a grey lobby is in place” but “it is important to monitor the situation and raise this issue from time to time for public discussion” (MCD, 1999, p. 63).

Worldview/Ideology

The above factors for viewing ageing as a “silver tsunami” reflects the underlying dominant ideology of pragmatism in Singapore where sustained economic growth forms the basis of the developmental state’s political legitimacy (Chua, 1995). Hence, the ageing population is seen as a threat not just to the economic prospects of Singapore but also the government’s legitimacy.

The concern with the increasing political clout of the elderly of the future also reflects the dominant communitarian ideology in Singapore where consensus is valued over conflict, and the civil society’s role is more in terms of provision of welfare and social services, rather than advocacy for the rights of individuals or groups (Chong, 2005).

Myth/Metaphor: Age as Burden

The myth underlying the above ideologies is that of “age as burden” whereby the elderly is seen as both an economic and a political burden which threatens not only the future growth prospects of Singapore but also its political stability.

Towards Alternative Futures of Ageing in Singapore

Based on the four-quadrant mapping of the current responses to ageing in Singapore, and the CLA of the underlying ideologies/worldviews and myths/metaphors, I propose an alternative “future” of ageing in Singapore (see [Table 6](#) below). This is not to say that there are no other possible “futures” of ageing. Rather, my aim here is to open up further thinking about other futures of ageing, apart from the two dominant ones discussed above, by showing how an alternative “future” can be envisioned by going through the different “levels” in the CLA (Inayatullah,

1998).

Table 6. *A possible alternative future for ageing in Singapore*

Litany	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Happy Ageing in Singapore
Social causes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Education system – many pathways to success ● Economic restructuring – “silver industry”, more automation to enhance productivity, remove retirement age ● Increase financial support for the elderly ● Child-centred policies – recognise and support different family structures ● Bring the elderly into the city ● Facilitate growth of civil society, including pro-elderly groups ● Action research for evidence-based policymaking
Ideology/worldview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Equality: Respect for differences ● Equity: Opportunities for all ● Humanist: Support for the disadvantaged ● Pro-family: Recognition of different family structures and living arrangements ● Participatory: Involvement in democratic politics
Myth/metaphor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Age as contentment

Source: Author’s compilation.

Myth/Metaphor: Age as contentment

First, I begin by examining an alternative myth/metaphor. Instead of the instrumental focus on the “outer” dimensions of ageing implicit in the myths of “Age as Wealth” or “Age as Burden”, I suggest thinking of “Age as Contentment”, where the focus is on the “inner” dimension of ageing. In this alternative myth, individuals achieve life satisfaction and contentment in old age as they have attained goals which are aligned with their identities and meaning of life.

Ideology/worldview

The “Age as Contentment” myth underlies ideologies and worldviews that are premised on the idea of “equality” or respect for different life goals among different individuals. There is also the idea of “equity” where opportunities for self-fulfillment are fairly distributed among individuals regardless of their different backgrounds, goals, career options or lifestyles. At the same time, there is support for the disadvantaged (such as the disabled, women, low-income and the elderly) so that everyone can achieve their fullest potential.

This myth also underlies the ideology of “pro-family life” which recognises and supports not just heterosexual families but also alternative ones such as gay and lesbian couples etc. Finally, contentment also means being able to participate in

political decision-making and policies that affect one's life.

Social causes

The kind of policies in this scenario will be shaped by the above ideologies and worldviews that support the myth of "Age as Contentment". Contentment in old age cannot be achieved just by policies that target the elderly. Instead, a "lifecycle" approach has to be taken to review all policies in a holistic manner (Bartlett, 2003; Daffara, 2003). Key policy initiatives will include:

Education system

The education system should be reviewed to allow more pathways for students with different skills, abilities, and interests. At the same time, there should be greater interaction between the youths and the elderly so that the elderly can share their experiences with the youths, and the youths will have a better understanding of their future life choices (Bartlett, 2003).

Economic restructuring

Instead of seeing the "shrinking and ageing workforce" (NPTD, 2012, p.16) as a problem, the government should take the opportunity to raise productivity levels in the economy through greater automation. At the same time, it should grow new economic sectors that target the elderly such as healthcare, mobility aids and other tools and devices that facilitate elderly's everyday activities, as well as services like financial planning. The retirement age should also be removed to allow the elderly to work for as long as they wish, or even to embark on second careers (Reisman, 2009).

Financial support for the elderly

With more and more Singaporeans choosing to remain single, and couples having fewer children or remaining childless, it is increasingly untenable for the family to remain the main source of care and support for the elderly persons in society. There is an increasing need for the government to step in to fund and/or provide healthcare and other support services for the elderly such as through raising taxes (in particular on the higher income groups) or utilising past national reserves which were built up by the older generations themselves (Low and Elias, 2012; Ng, 2012b).

Child-centred policies

Current policies that promote childbearing continue to be framed within the dominant ideology of the heterosexual nuclear family. Consistent with the "pro-family" ideology, the government should instead adopt a "child-centred" policy where the focus is on the child and not the family structure (Wee, 2007). For example, single parents who currently do not receive any support from the government should also enjoy the same level of benefits as married heterosexual couples. Marriage and even childbearing at a later age may also become the norm with further advances in healthcare and reproductive technologies.

Bring the elderly into the city

The government has currently focused on building elderly facilities in the housing towns and estates, rather than in the city centre. This reinforces the ageist assumptions about the right “place” of the elderly in society (Wiles, 2005). However, as the elderly becomes a bigger group in society, such ageist assumptions may have to change. Elderly facilities such as nursing homes may be found right in the city centre, with commercial and retail activities geared to the needs of the elderly. This will also help encourage more interaction between the elderly and the youths, hence promoting mutual understanding and challenging ageist stereotypes.

Facilitate growth of civil society including pro-elderly groups

With the elderly of the future likely to be better educated and politically aware, civil society groups that represent the interests of elderly may emerge. At the same time, with the increasing adoption of alternative lifestyles in the future, there are likely to be a plethora of civil society groups that represent the interests of different communities that are also found within the elderly population i.e. singles, women, LGBT communities, “disease” support groups, as well as different “age” groups such as “young-old” and “old-old” groups. Such interest groups involve not just elderly members but members of different ages. The government should facilitate the formation of such interest groups as they not only provide valuable feedback to the government in finetuning its policies, but also provide a voice for the elderly (Kocka and Brauer, 2010).

Action research for evidence-based policymaking

To develop evidence-based policies on ageing, more research should be conducted into not just the current generation of elderly’s needs but more importantly, the aspirations of youths with regards to ageing (Bartlett, 2003; Inayatullah, 2003). This can take the form of “anticipatory action learning” (Inayatullah, 2003, p.14) where ageing issues, scenarios and policies are discussed as part of a bigger dialogue among different stakeholders such as the government, media, academia, civil society, as well as the general public including elderly groups and youths. Dominant myths about ageing can also be challenged, and the elderly empowered, through this action learning process (Bartlett, 2003; Browne, 2003; Inayatullah, 2003).

Litany: Happy ageing in Singapore

The litany will be that of “Happy Ageing in Singapore” where the elderly lead contented lives. For this to happen, we need to take action now and review our policies to see how we can allow our elderly of the future to be happy and contented.

Conclusions

Through dissecting the underlying ideologies and worldviews which have informed current policies on ageing, I have proposed an alternative future of ageing in Singapore, one that challenges dominant instrumental ways of thinking of ageing as “wealth” or “burden”. Instead, we emphasise ageing as achieving personal “contentment” consistent with one’s life goals and meaning of life.

In so doing, we challenge current policies that focus only on the “outer” dimensions of ageing whether in terms of retirement housing, accessibility,

healthcare, and job creation due to their underlying instrumental myths of ageing. Instead, we argue for a “lifecycle” perspective in policymaking, one which recognises that all policies, whether targeted at the elderly or not, have an impact on ageing at both “outer” and “inner” levels. For example, education can shape the potential of young individuals to achieve their “inner” life goals, which in turn affect their ageing experiences in the future (Bartlett, 2003; Daffara, 2003).

Hence, in dissecting the futures of ageing in Singapore, we are at the same time, questioning the futures of Singapore society, politics and economy. Underlying myths about ageing as “wealth” or “burden”, are deeper questions about Singapore’s futures: will Singapore continue to progress into a global *city*, or will it decline into a sleepy fishing *village*³ respectively? What we propose here, however, is an alternative myth of age as “contentment” which reflects a deeper hope of Singapore as neither a city nor a village but at the end of the day, a *home* for its people.

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Notes

- 1 At the time of writing, a nation-wide public consultation and visioning exercise “Our Singapore Conversation” (<https://www.oursgconversation.sg/>) is being conducted to understand the aspirations and hopes of Singaporeans for the future. This was launched in August 2012 following a significant drop in electoral support for the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) government at the May 2011 General Elections amidst much public flak over housing, transport and immigration policies.
- 2 This has culminated in the release of a White Paper on Population in January 2013 which sets out key policy initiatives with regards to fertility, ageing and immigration issues in Singapore (see <http://population.sg/>).
- 3 I am alluding to the pre-existing settlements at the time of the “founding” of Singapore by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819 (Miksic and Low, 2004).

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