

BUILDING ON SINGAPORE'S EXPERIENCES FOR THE FUTURE OF THAILAND'S VULNERABLE CHILDREN CARE POLICIES

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Singapore, frequently left out of comparative studies

Despite Thailand and Singapore's excellent and multifaceted bilateral ties in economic links, robust defense, technical cooperation, and civil service institutional platform (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), literatures and papers frequently exclude Singapore from comparative studies or analysis. This is due to the country's relatively greater GDP and drastically different political economy than other Southeast Asian countries, particularly those on the mainland (Rogers, Karunan, et al., 2022; UNICEF and ASEAN, 2019). It does,

however, maintain collectivist societies with strong family values and connections, whether close family or relatives, can be found in all Asian countries (Carteret, 2010) which creates a cultural identity and significance of family deep rooted within the Asian society (Madihi and Brubeck (n.d)).

Shifting to Family-based Care is “Necessary”

Thailand and Singapore have endorsed multiple resolution to pursue global reduction of residential care for children as both countries have acknowledged the necessities for a shift from vulnerable children's residential care to family-based care through the negative effects of children separated from their families and placed in orphanages or other residential care facilities. As a result, this policy brief coins the term “vulnerable children” and “residential care” to refer to both countries' terms for the same category of children in care and comparable vulnerable children's facilities. The findings indicate how institutional care often provides minimal physical resources, unfavorable and unstable staffing patterns, and social-emotionally inadequate caregiver-children-child interactions (Van Ijzendoorn et al., 2011). Furthermore, it reflects the negative effects of



institutionalization on children's physical growth, cognitive function, neurodevelopment, and social-psychological health, as well as child psychiatry and developmental delays (Barens, 2015), the risk of harm, trauma, violence and abuse (Johnson et al., 2006; Sherr, et al., 2017), lower level of Intelligence Quotient (IQ) (Van Ijzendoorn, 2008), attachment disorder among institutionalized and post-institutionalized children (Van den Dries, 2009). Additionally, children who leave residential care have a more difficult time transitioning to adulthood (Holm-Hansen, et al., 2003), with many falling into poverty or criminal career or prostitution and needing to place their own children in residential care due to inadequate of support networks and ability to care for them.

Deconstructing The Transition into Four Layers

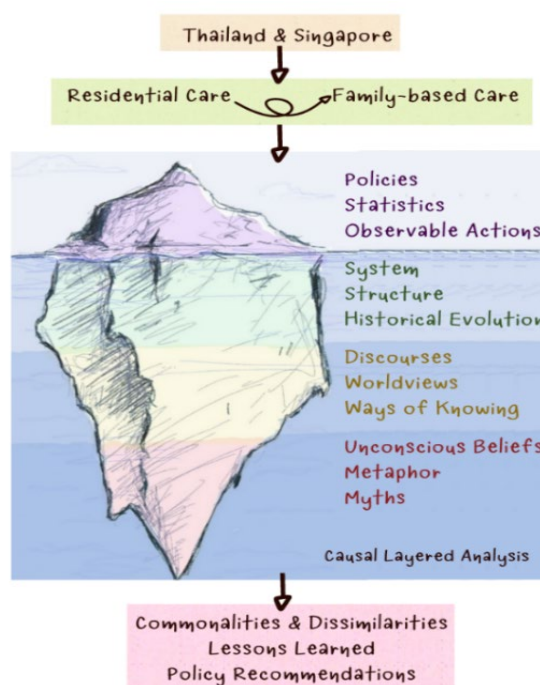


Figure 1: Vulnerable Children's Care Transition in Thailand and Singapore Through CLA

Source: Author's design based on Inayatallah's Causal Layered Analysis (2004)

Policies, Statistics and Observable Actions

In 1976, Thailand began operating a foster care program under the Holt Sahathai Foundation, a non-governmental organization. Thailand's first and foremost National Alternative Care Policy for Children and National Campaign is now being prepared to align with the National Child Protection Strategy's vision (2017-2021). However, Article 33 of the Child Protection Act (2003), which allows for "long-term institutionalization of children up to 24 years of age," is undermining efforts to prioritize

family-based care, and Article 61 of the Child Protection Act (2003), which states that "physical and harsh measurements punishment are forbidden, unless they are reasonably applied for disciplinary measures," can reinforce domestic violence and misconduct against children. According to nationwide foster care program performance data, 5,599 children are in foster families, but according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child Coalition Thailand's (CRCCT) sub-group of Alternative Care (CRCCT AC), approximately 5,500 foster families are "kinship" or relatives, with only 400 "formally" supported foster families. As a result, the foster family budget allocation of 120 million baht was also targeted at 5,000 children and disbursed through the Department of Social Development and Welfare's seven facilities (Child Adoption Centre, 2015). Furthermore, Thailand's current landscape of roughly 260 illegal private institution care has delayed the transition of vulnerable children's care (One Sky Foundation and Alternative Care Thailand, 2017).

Singapore, on the other hand, was the first country in Asia and Southeast Asia to establish foster care as a regulated type of family-based alternative care for vulnerable children in 1956 (Madihi and Brubeck (n.d.), and all residential care is fully or partially funded by the government. As a result, there are no private facilities that provide alternative care, and NGOs are referred to as "Voluntary Welfare Organizations (VWOs)," which are government-run. Singapore began fostering children in 1976, and

between 2013 and 2016, the number of children placed in residential care decreased by 12% while foster care increased by 40%. (Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2017). In 2016, Singapore commemorated 60 years of fostering, during which time it has cared for over 5,500 vulnerable children, with the number of children cared for by foster families increasing from roughly 29% in 2013 to 49% in 2020. (Ministry of Social and Family Development). Furthermore, if a child under the age of 14 or a young person under the age of 18 is abused or neglected, the Children and Young Persons Act (1993) permits competent authorities to act.

System, Structure and Historical Evolution

Residential care in Thailand dates back to 1890, whereas family-based care, such as foster care, dates back to 1976, and adoption dates back to 1935, reflecting Thailand's traditional institutional system and mentality. Thailand's goals are based on a 20-year-old Chinese foster care model developed through a partnership between the Chinese government and a family-based NGO that is now collaborating closely with the Thai government (Saeli, in press). However, both parties' fiscal years are different, often overlapped or delayed, and government officials frequently change positions, resulting in established policies or task force operations being delayed or canceled and having to be reintroduced with a new group with different goals (Saeli, in press; Saini and Vichit-Vadakan, 2015).

Policy Brief

Foster families are given a monthly allowance of 2,000 baht (S\$80) as well as the necessary child necessities (Child Adoption Center, 2015). In Bangkok, Thailand's capital, a single person's monthly costs are estimated to be 21,051 baht (S\$842) (excluding rent), while a family of four's costs are estimated to be 75,843 baht (S\$3,033) (excluding rent) (NUMBEO, 2022). This shows that the foster parents' stipend for helping to care for the child is about ten times less than the estimated amount, despite the fact that supplies are provided. The foster care budget is deemed as insufficient because living expenditures have increased since the monthly stipend was 1,500 baht 15 years ago (Saeli, in press). Furthermore, there were only three social workers in foster care in the Chiang Mai pilot implementation lab for roughly 75 cases in Chiang Mai and the northern parts of Thailand (Saeli, in press), which account for 63 percent of residential care (One Sky Foundation and Alternative Care Thailand, 2017).

Children's Aid Society is one of Singapore's oldest philanthropic organizations, having been founded in 1902 and foster care began in 1956. A fostering emergency hotline was established in 2002, and the Ministry of Education completed a review of Singapore's Child Protection Service and Child Protection System in 2011. Children in Care Service (CIC) brings together four Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) units in 2013 before moving on to develop fostering capabilities in local fostering agencies. Each community agency employs six people who are responsible for 70-75 cases while

receiving training from MSF's Foster Care Officers (FCOs) and the Social Service Institute (SSI) (Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2017). The Ministry has also continuously revised foster parents' allowance since its inception, with the most recent updated amount being S\$936 (23,400 baht) or S\$1,114 (27,850 baht) (for a child with special needs), as well as childcare center subsidies and a Medical Fee Exemption Card (MFEC) to cover all medical expenses (Ministry of Social and Family Development). In Singapore, a single person's monthly costs are estimated to be S\$1,344 (without rent), while a family of four's costs are estimated to be S\$4,893 (excluding rent) (NUMBEO, 2022). This shows that the foster parents' allowance to assist in the care of the kid is slightly less than the estimated amount, but it is sufficient when considering the subsidies and the fact that it is a voluntary act. Foster families, on the other hand, must complete 40 hours of obligatory training (induction and core) through the Social Service Institute (SSI). A Safe and Strong Families pilot program provides an intensive family reunification program, a Trauma Systems Therapy Program (TST) is a trauma-informed care model made suitable for Singapore's local context, and an Enable A Family (EAF) Volunteer Scheme provides respite care for foster parents to take a break.

Discourses, Worldviews and Ways of Knowing

As the Thai government and family-based NGOs collaborate to reduce residential care, the internationally recognized term "De-Institutionalization" for the process was deemed "scary" by private residential care NGOs, so "Transforming Residential Care" was chosen instead. However, due to the "rank culture," private residential care NGOs have yet to be allowed to speak up at the policymaking table (Saeli, in press). Children in institutions are still regarded as charitable and are accepted as a natural part of a child's life, while parents are unaware of the consequences of placing their children in residential care and are unaware of family-based care or foster care due to the lack of publicity (Saeli, in press). However, according to a Chiang Mai pilot project, both placing children in residential care and receiving children into foster care results in social imitate behavior (Saeli, in press). Migrant and hill tribe children frequently enter residential care through "brokers" who promise schooling in exchange for "orphaning" their children or refusing to visit, particularly when donors are present (Rogers, Karunan et al., 2022). The Thai public, inspired by a television (TV) soap opera, displayed an inclination to donate more than simply cash and visits to residential care by extending continuing friendship or mentoring to the children (Rogers, Karunan et al., 2022). Furthermore, while Thai public acknowledges that

physical punishment is counterproductive and is like 'งูกินหาง' or 'the snake that eats their own tail', it is still required as a discipline method (Rogers, Karunan et al., 2022).

MSF realized by the end of the 1990s that continuing publicity efforts for the Fostering Scheme and the recruiting of foster mothers, rather than one-time recruitment drives, were required. As a result, it generated publicity through local newspaper articles, the distribution of "Questions and Answers about Fostering" brochures in four official languages, a radio documentary series about foster children and their foster mothers, and a paid advertisement in a major newspaper (Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2017). Support groups for foster mothers were established in the 1960s to allow foster mothers to share their perspectives and experiences, and MSF organized sharing and training events for prospective foster parents to meet and learn from experienced foster parents in the 2000s. In 2013, the Children in Care Service (CIC) increased its efforts to boost awareness through media partnerships, roadshows, community organizations, religious groups, and employers, as 9 out of 10 people who attended CIC's roadshows had never heard of fostering (Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2017). In all alternative care settings, Singapore emphasizes biological parents and child attachment, as indicated by the Hokkien idiom "chuah yi ke geah boh, chuah yi tung chu boh" or "bring him out for walks, bring him home" (Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2017).

Unconscious Beliefs, Metaphor and Myths

‘เอาลูกเขามาเลี้ยง เอาเมียขเขามาอม’ or ‘Taking other people’s children is like eating other people’s spit,’ a well-known proverbial wisdom in Thailand, demonstrates the beliefs against accepting a non-blood related child into the family, as well as mindsets like “why would you take someone else’s trash?” or “if you encounter a stray dog, you don’t take it home; instead, you feed it,” which look down on vulnerable children in need of care (Royal Institute Dictionary, 2011; Saeli, in press). Another well-known proverbial saying goes, ‘รักวัวให้ผูก รักลูกให้ตี’ or ‘Love a cow, tie it. Love your child, beat them’ was designed to underline the importance of disciplining children so that they do not grow up with bad habits, but it is frequently misused, increasing domestic violence against children (Matichon, 2018). Outsiders are not to become involved in other people’s family businesses, according to reports, and must tolerate the child’s living arrangements, even types of misconduct and abuse (Rogers and Karunan, 2020; Saeli, in press). Some parents selected government residential care over private foundations because they believed it provided higher quality of care and access to education, whereas private foundations would make them “orphan” their children and abandon their rights to contact, according to parent narratives (Rogers, Karunan et al., 2022).

In the 1950s and 1960s, it was common for Singaporean parents with too many children to give their children away to other parents who were more financially stable, and it was also common to advertise or appeal for children to be given away through the newspapers, which was later stopped due to a Ministry announcement, but the impression of fostering is still commonly seen as a “baby-sitting” arrangement (Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2017). Most foster mothers favored older children who could walk and required less attention towards the end of the 1990s, however presently, foster families prefer to take in young children since toddlers are cute and are perceived to be simpler to handle (Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2017). There is also a societal expectation that children should grow up in their families, even if the family poses a danger or risk of harm to the child, which has decreased. However, some people believe that once a child is referred to Child Protection Services, the child will be automatically removed, even though 70% of children are helped with safety plans to stay with their families (Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2017).

Reconstructing Probable Future Solutions into Four Layers

As a result, the following policy recommendations for Thailand could be derived from the lessons learned in Singapore:

Table 1: Desired Future Solutions for Vulnerable Children under the Framework of CLA

Layers of CLA	Layers of Policy Recommendations for Thailand
<p>Policies/Statistics/Observable Actions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Include foster care in the bilateral platform to strengthen institutional ties between the two civil services, and monitors Thailand-Singapore collaboration in the existing Civil Service Exchange Program (CSEP). -Revise Article 33 of the Child Protection Act (2003) to clarify the parameters, including age and duration, under which a child may be institutionalized based on their developmental needs. -Revise the context of Article 61 of the Child Protection Act's (2003) "reasonably applied punishments for disciplinary measures". -Revise the accessibility and quality of rural education to give greater possibilities for children and families, particularly hill tribes and migrants. -Establish relationships and trust with private residential care providers through a local NGOs network so that data on registered/unregistered centers and children in care can be properly accessed for future monitoring and transition to family-based care. -Collaborate with adult education institutes to develop mandated training for foster parents and the social service sector.

Layers of CLA

Layers of Policy Recommendations for Thailand

System/Structure/Historical Evolution

- Revise Ministry of Social Development and Human Security's (MSDHS) and Department of Children and Youth's (DCY) organizational structure by bringing together at the policy table units that work with children and families, as well as residential care representatives and multidiscipline institutes.
- Revise the amount of financial support for foster parents to suit the living expenses of each province, based on an assessment of local government and NGOs' networks.
- Increase the number of social workers trained in family strengthening and reunification, as well as designing suitable matching and care plans for children transitioning out of residential care.
- Create a localized Trauma-Informed Model based on a Relationship Approach to help foster parents understand their children's behavior and minimize meltdowns.
- Recruit, train, and monitor respite care volunteers to let residential and foster care parents have a break while also forming relationships with their children in preparation for their transition out.

Discourses/Worldviews/Ways of Knowing

- Increase positive role models and ongoing publicity to recruit foster parents through local NGOs, online platforms, local radio stations, news, and TV soap operas.
- Offer comprehensive parenting training to all parents, particularly those with traumatized children, on how to love, teach, train, and discipline their children in all circumstances.



Layers of CLA

Layers of Policy Recommendations for Thailand

Unconscious

Beliefs/Metaphor/Myths

-Create platforms that allow foster parents and residential care moving into family-based care to share their experiences and successful methods.

-Create new proverbial wisdom that promotes healthy holistic parenting, decreasing the use of physical discipline and caring for non-blood related vulnerable children.

-Examine the mental health of caregivers in all alternative care settings, as they are the "closest" to the children and their unconscious beliefs may impact how they treat them.

-Dispel falsehoods about caring for non-blood related vulnerable children and alternative care, particularly foster care, via distributing booklets and local media titled "Truth and Lies" or "Questions and Answers."

-Provide secure and anonymous channels/platforms for reporting child abuse and violence.



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