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## **Urban Legend: Wei Ping Contemplates Motherhood**

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Driving through the bustling Orchard Road in the heart of Singapore, Wei Ping stares at the shiny new Prada hoarding. Maybe she should "invest" in a new Prada bag. She must watch out for the next big season sale. Her birthday is a distance away but ever since she and her husband had started talking about the baby, she needed some retail therapy to lift her mood.

As she drives under the ERP (Electronic Road Pricing) barrier at Orchard Road at the heart of Singapore her mind shifts to the balance in her cash card and the fact that she should load it soon. Singapore, like many other cities trying to control car population, levies an entry tax every time you drive into the central business district. Every car comes fitted with a special electronic unit that can be read by the overhead ERP gantry. All that a car driver needs to do, is insert a cash card into the special unit and hope that the cash card has enough money in it to avoid being fined. The electronic gantry allows for manipulation of the ERP amount depending on the traffic. The amount to be deducted is prominently displayed on the gantry but once you are in the queue for entering the city, and realize that the balance in the cash card is lower than the entry tax you budgeted, you are in trouble with the LTA Local Transport Authority anyway in this "fine" city.

The 30 year old prides herself in maintaining a smart yet frugal existence, the famous "kiasu" attitude of Singaporeans, which many outsiders interpret as "stinginess" but to Wei Peng is all about getting the maximum out of a deal, the only way to go.

Coming on top of inflated car and fuel prices as well as road tax, cost of living in one of the most modern cities in Asia tops the concerns for most people in Singapore. Worse, with rising prices, Singaporeans have to think twice before doing what they like best: upgrading housing and clothing to better housing and better clothing. In fact being kiasu, or looking out for the best deals in housing, clothing and food, is really the only smart way to survive in this expensive city. And that was the reason why Wei Peng had driven 45 minutes all the way from the heartlands (normally called suburbs) to the centre of town, braving the Friday evening crowds and struggling for 10 minutes for a parking slot, to check out the year-end deals in the shopping district.

Wei Peng has a friend who had recently landed a job with a property developer. Fuelled by a real

estate boom and resulting commissions, Diane has booked a swanky new condominium close to her current HDB (government provided) unit, significantly upgrading her lifestyle. Wei Peng would love to do the same, for that she would have loved to look for a job paying more than her current one of three years. However she knows it wouldn't be possible, especially since her husband of two years had actively expressed interest in starting a family. The painful afterthought of financial implications of an expanding family was all she could think about lately.

For years now, Singapore has been struggling with a declining birth rate. The government has tried to stem it with cash incentives, extended post-pregnancy leave and open immigration policies with limited success at best.

The Singapore of today is faced with twin problems of slowing birth rate and ageing population. In 2000, 14% of women between age 30-39 chose to remain childless. By 2009, this figure has gone up to 20%. A similar trend was seen in the 40-49 year age group. In a country with a life expectancy of 81 years, the age support ratio or the ratio of working age population (15-64) to the elderly (65+) has declined from 9.9 in the year 2000 to 8.2 in 2009. (Source: Singstat.gov.sg)

In human terms this translates into a no escape from cost of living even after retirement. There is no cheaper "hinterland" they can migrate to. The newspapers are full of stories of ungrateful children and abandoned elderly parents. A recent government campaign talks of family values and of children fulfilling their duties towards their parents. Wei Peng, who is an only child, knows she has to think of taking in her parents in to live with her someday. And for her husband, it means sharing the duties of "filial piety", as the campaign calls it, with his younger siblings.

Most of her friends were not keen to become parents anytime soon. The few who did relied on their retired mothers and fathers but she could not think of imposing on her parents' lifestyle. She saw a close friend go through one child after another in quick succession and finally decided to quit her flourishing career in the private sector. Her friend's life is now consumed with the tension of getting admissions into a reputed school, and hustling the children into "special classes" ranging from music to sports. They don't talk on the topic but for Wei Peng the thought of giving up her own ambitions hurts. Not to mention the small sacrifices like giving up on the comforts of a car for the city's clean, efficient but often very crowded public transport.

After all, starting a family meant having to plan for one less income, at least for some time, and additional expenses indefinitely. For instance, raising a child would mean hiring a full-time nanny. Finding a nanny is easy, thanks to Government policies that allow "domestic workers" to live and work in Singapore. However, keeping a nanny means paying the government two hundred odd dollars as tax, not including the worker's salary and the cost of her upkeep. Having a baby would also drive a more disciplined lifestyle.

Right now, she's cooked in her kitchen precisely two times, once for Chinese New Year and the

other when her husband's parents had come over. It was simply more convenient and maybe even cheaper to eat out at the various hawker centers/food courts conveniently scattered across the city. Of course eating out came with the added attraction of hanging out with like-minded friends, especially over the weekend. She looked forward to scouring the papers for a new restaurant review that could potentially be the weekend outing.

With a baby, the look of her pristine kitchen would definitely change. Was she ready to stop looking after that lovely coffee machine and the induction cooker which looked like it belonged in a show flat even after two years?

No eating-out, no annual holiday, increased expenses, maybe missing that promotion she so wanted...where were the positives to motherhood?

As she drove into the overcrowded car park filled with deal seeking crowd, her glance fell on the road tax sticker stuck to the windshield. The expiry date was within 15 days! Oh well, she sighs, another day, and another expense. Prada will have to wait for a while and the baby, a while longer.

Note: Wei Peng is fictitious but Singapore's baby problems are real.

*Vatsala Pant is a management graduate with several years of business leadership experience and a connoisseur of people, places and cultures. She currently lives in Singapore.*

*Photo of Singapore ERP system by Flickr user [choyaw99](#).*

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