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## <Book Review>

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Herbary Cheung. *Single Mothers in Thailand: Women, Motherhood, and Going It All Alone*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024.

Reviewed by Kai Chen\*

Although social attitudes in Thailand toward single mothers have changed over the past decade, news reports remain focused on the financial pressures and child-rearing issues facing single mothers. In November 2016, a Thai single mother of a six-year-old boy received a death sentence for trafficking drugs in Malaysia (BBC Monitoring: International Reports 2016). On January 28, 2025, a 36-year-old single mother jumped from the 18th floor of Pathum Thani Provincial Hospital just five days after giving birth to twin daughters. According to a hospital official and a friend of the victim, she was deeply stressed over her inability to care for her newborns since she already had another pair of twins to take care of. After the tragic accident the hospital expressed condolences to the victim's children (Tomas 2025).

Prior research on single mothers has shown little concern over the situation in Thailand (Jarrett 1996; Bradley and Millar 2021). From a feminist perspective, *Single Mothers in Thailand* by Herbary Cheung enriches the current literature on single mothers and single motherhood by looking closely at individual experiences of single mothers in Thailand rather than regarding them as a homogenized and unitary group. In this book, intersectionality is not only a theoretical but also an analytical framework to explore the diversity and complexity of single motherhood in contemporary Thailand.

From an intersectional perspective, Cheung believes that single mothers are intersectional subjects of overlapping categories. The first two of the book's seven chapters emphasize how single motherhood has been intersected by overlapping and socioculturally constructed categories, including—but not limited to—socioeconomic class, religious background, hometown neighborhood, and health conditions (p. 17).

Through the research methods of participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, this book aims at answering a series of critical questions such as the following:

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What are the stigmas faced by single mothers at different levels in Thailand? What are the differences in stigma experienced by single mothers in different situations? What should stakeholders (e.g., the Thai government and NGOs) do to reduce single mothers' stigma and enhance their living conditions (pp. 5–6)?

In Chapters 3 to 6, the author investigates the layered stigma experienced by single mothers. Stigma at all levels (i.e., self-stigma and stigma by family, community, and society) is closely related to socioeconomic and cultural norms in Thailand (p. 77), which regard single mothers as losers who fail to fulfill their obligations and duties or to meet others' sociocultural expectations. However, "many of the single mothers believe that bad karma is the main reason they face stigma in Thai society" (p. 73).

In the Thai sociocultural context, the above-mentioned categories intersect to construct layered stigmas against single mothers, such as self-stigma, stigma by family, stigma by community, as well as stigma by society. In Cheung's interviews with single mothers, the interviewees' comments on stigma by other single mothers stood out the most:

Our life is tough, and we have suffered a lot of discrimination from all walks of life. I think the prejudice against women and single mothers is everywhere in Thailand. . . . What makes me most angry is the stigmatization among our single mothers' community. Everyone is a single mother, why do some of them need to distinguish who is a good single mother and who is a bad single mother? Isn't the stigma we suffered enough? (p. 48)

In the case of single mothers with mental illness, the author believes that stigma is "not a uniform or monolithic experience" (p. 101). Therefore, he has developed a threefold typology to analyze stigmatized mothering experiences: attempted mothering experience, absentee mothering experience, and failed mothering experience (p. 152). Based on empirical study (e.g., interviews), the author finds that single mothers with mental illness have been trying to find alternative ways to perform and practice their stigmatized motherhood in Thailand.

In contrast, the case of single mothers living with HIV, whose single motherhood has brought more difficulties than those faced by other single mothers, reveals a positive correlation between the stigma experienced by single mothers and their social distance from other groups in Thailand—that is, the greater the social distance between single mothers and the other groups, the more significant the stigma against them. For instance, according to a single mother living with HIV, there was no stigma among single mothers living with HIV: "Mostly I meet new friends at the hospital, because we are HIV patients, and we share the same identities. It is easy to make friends with those who can understand you, and who have similar experiences" (p. 99).

With respect to suggestions for stakeholders, Cheung proposes the following solutions.

First, the Thai government should provide living and childcare allowances to all single mothers (particularly those who are migrants or belong to ethnic minorities), who are excluded from government support. Second, the government should provide psychological counseling services to single mothers with emotional and psychological problems. Third, the government should provide financial aid and subsidies for single mothers to establish their own careers, such as skills-training programs (e.g., crafting résumés and mastering interview tactics) (pp. 173–174, 177). In addition, the author recommends that the Thai government provide single-mother families with affordable childcare nationwide.

In the eyes of this reviewer, the author should have more confidence in the Thai government, which has promoted the legalization of same-sex marriage. The same-sex marriage bill was passed by a parliamentary vote in June 2024 and came into force on January 23, 2025. This made Thailand the first Southeast Asian country to legalize same-sex marriage, which had been subjected to layered stigma in past decades (*Straits Times* 2025).

Since the author had “limited access to the makers of social welfare policy in Thailand,” it is premature to argue that “(s)ingle mothers are invisible in the Thai government’s policy agenda” and that the Thai government “shows no interest in understanding how single motherhood could become a social problem in the country” (pp. 38, 188). The Thai government has not addressed single mothers as a legitimate category because it is difficult to estimate the number of marriages and divorces, and “many marriages in Thailand are not legally registered” (pp. 7, 164).

With respect to future research on single motherhood in Thailand, Cheung suggests using a larger sample size by covering both single motherhood and single fatherhood. As far as this reviewer recalls, there are fewer news reports on single fathers in Thailand than on single mothers. In an interesting incident, one time in Kamphaeng Phet Province when a school organized a Mother’s Day event, a single father came dressed in a black gingham dress and black hairpiece (Beever 2023). The author also suggests that future research give a greater voice to children from single-parent families and government policymakers.

Overall, *Single Mothers in Thailand* offers a timely, important, and empirically impressive exploration of the stigma experienced by single mothers in different situations. It would be an excellent resource for any scholar or student interested in rethinking single motherhood and single mothers in contemporary Thailand.

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