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DRAFT

'Our Shared Values' in Singapore: A Confucian Perspective

Charlene Tan

Abstract

This paper offers a philosophical analysis of the Singapore state's vision of shared citizenship from a Confucian perspective. The state's vision, known formally as 'Our Shared Values', consists of communitarian values that reflect the official ideology of multiculturalism. This paper points out that underpinning the Shared Values are pejorative interpretations of 'individual rights' and 'individual interests' as ideals that are antithetical to national interests. Rejecting this antithesis, this paper argues that a dominant Confucian perspective recognises the correlative rights of all human beings that are premised on the inherent right to human dignity, worth and equality. Furthermore, Confucianism posits that it is in everyone's interest to attain the Confucian ethical ideal of a noble person in society through self-cultivation. The paper concludes by highlighting two key implications arising from a Confucian perspective of the Shared Values for Singapore: schools in Singapore should place a greater emphasis on individual moral development for their students, and more avenues should be provided for residents to contribute actively towards the vision of shared citizenship.

Introduction

Singapore, a multi-cultural and multi-religious country in Southeast Asia, is one of the most plural societies in the world. Of the residents (Singapore citizens and permanent residents), 74.1% are Chinese, 13.4% are Malay, 9.2% are Indians and 3.3% are 'Others'. Cutting across these different ethnic groupings and nationalities are a variety of cultural and religious beliefs and practices. 83% of its population identify themselves as adherents to a particular religion: 33.3% Buddhists, 18.3% Christians, 14.7% Muslims, 10.9% Taoists, 5.1% Hindus, and 17% others.

While Singapore has always been a plural society, its diversity has been accentuated in recent years by the influx of foreigners (including both permanent residents and non-residents) who now constitute about 36% of Singapore's 4.9-million people. A survey conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies in 2010 reports that 63% of Singaporeans, up from 38% in 1998, agree or strongly agree that foreigners would weaken Singaporeans' feeling as one nation.¹ There are also indications that the populace is also increasingly demanding for active participation in public policy making and welcoming opposition parties to represent them in parliament. A National Youth Council survey in 2010 informs us that half of Singaporeans (48%) are "vocal in expressing their opinion on

¹ S. Ramesh and Joanne Chan, "IPS Survey Shows Increased Demand for Political Participation, Involvement," *ChannelNewsAsia.com*.
<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/1072704/1/.html>

matters of public importance”; this is double the figure in the 2005 survey.² A 2010 survey by the Institute of Policy Studies shows that 97% wanted the government to take the time to listen to citizens, even when quick decisions are needed.³ Clearly, a vision of shared citizenship is urgently needed to bring all people – Singaporeans and foreigners – together.

The pressing need to hold Singapore’s plural society together has prompted a strong and interventionist state to construct and actively promote a vision of shared citizenship for its people. This paper offers a philosophical analysis of the state’s vision in Singapore from a Confucian perspective. At the outset, two preliminary observations should be made about the state’s vision. First, it represents the state’s attempt to unite its people through the vision of a ‘shared fate’ mentioned by Sigal Ben-Porath in this issue. The ideal of a shared fate is expressed by the state developing institutional and conceptual contexts in which different communities can foster ties and shared practices while preserving religious and cultural differences.

Secondly, the state’s vision of shared citizenship reflects the ideology of multiculturalism promoted by the state in Singapore. Multiculturalism is more accurately described as ‘multiracialism’ in Singapore as the government classifies everyone based on four racial identities according to one’s paternal line: Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others (CMIO). The state introduces an ethnic pedagogy of public ‘recognition’ that provides for both the education of national citizenship and the relegation of ethnic identities to the parochial.⁴ It is interesting to note that the model of multiculturalism in Singapore bears striking similarities to the models of Multiculturalism and Interculturalism in Quebec as discussed by Bruce Maxwell and colleagues in this issue. Like Quebec, multiculturalism in Singapore underscores cultural diversity as a social value and upholds cultural egalitarianism. At the same time, the Singapore’s vision mirrors the intercultural project in Quebec in encouraging various communities to codetermine a common societal culture through dialogue, mutual understanding and cross-cultural contact. This endeavour, as well as the accompanying challenges to codetermine a common societal culture, is the topic for our next section.

‘Our Shared Values’

It is helpful to give a brief introduction to the vision of shared citizenship in Singapore. The idea of a vision of shared citizenship, known formally as ‘Our Shared Values’ (henceforth Shared Values) was first mooted by then Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in 1988. As the name implies, the values are intended to be shared by all Singaporeans, regardless of ethnicity, religion and other differences. The Shared Values consist of the following five broad values:

- Nation before community and society before self

² Wayne Chan, “Youths Today Happier & More Vocal than 5 years ago: Survey”, *ChannelNewsAsia.com*.

<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/1106817/1.html>

³ Ramesh and Chan, “IPS Survey Shows Increased Demand for Political Participation, Involvement.”

⁴ For more discussion on multiculturalism in Singapore, see Charlene Tan, “Maximising the Overlapping Area: Multiculturalism and the Muslim Identity for Madrasahs in Singapore,” *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 30, no. 10 (2009), 41-48; Charlene Tan, “Deep culture matters: Multiracialism in Singapore schools,” *International Journal of Educational Reform* 21, no. 1 (2011), 24-38.

- Family as the basic unit of society
- Community support and respect for the individual
- Consensus, not conflict
- Racial and religious harmony

The White Paper for the Shared Values states that the aim is to “evolve and anchor a Singaporean identity, incorporating the relevant parts of our varied cultural heritages, and the attitudes and values which have helped us to survive and succeed as a nation”.⁵ In other words, the values are intended to promote certain common beliefs and attitudes that capture the essence of being a Singaporean; to

identify a few key values which are common to all the major groups in Singapore, and which draw on the essence of each of these heritages. All communities can share these values, although each will interpret and convey the same ideas in terms of their own cultural and religious traditions. The Malays will do so in Malay and Muslim terms, the Christians in terms of Bible stories and Christian traditions, many Chinese by reference to Confucian, Buddhist or Taoist teachings, the Hindus in terms of the Ramayana and Mahabharata, and so forth for other groups. This way, in time, all communities will gradually develop more common, distinctively Singaporean characteristics.⁶

The White Paper points out that the government has consulted and obtained the support of Christian individuals, Muslim and Tamil groups, and Chinese clan associations to ensure that the values are acceptable to them. However, this does not mean that the values are religious in nature; the Shared Values are projected as ‘secular’ in the sense that they do not contain or champion any religious beliefs such as a belief in God.

Let us examine the five Shared Values in turn. It is no coincidence that the first value is ‘Nation before community and society before self’ as this is the foundational value upon which the other four values are built. The value of ‘nation before community’ means that no ethnic or religious group should place its own interests above the others; rather, all sub-groups should seek national interest above all. The value of ‘society before self’ teaches that individuals should pursue the common good and not selfishly seek their own interests and benefits. The Paper cautions that “If Singaporeans had insisted on their individual rights and prerogatives, and refused to compromise these for the greater interests of the nation, they would have restricted the options available for solving these problems”.⁷

The second Shared Value, ‘Family as the basic unit of society’ continues the stress on the society where individuals are seen not as pre-social and atomistic individuals but as members of a family unit. The White Paper avers that “the family is the best way human societies have found to provide children a secure and nurturing environment in which to grow up, to pass on the society’s store of wisdom and experience from generation to generation, and to look after the needs of the elderly”.⁸

⁵*Shared Values* (Singapore: Singapore National Printers, 1991), 1. http://nus.academia.edu/LiannThio/Teaching/24015/White_paper_on_shared_values_1991

⁶ *Shared Values*, 3.

⁷ *Shared Values*, 3.

⁸ *Shared Values*, 3.

The next three Shared Values are intended to follow logically from the priority placed on national and societal interests. The value of ‘Community support and respect for the individual’ does not refer to the general public support and respect for individual interests, rights and prerogatives in society. Rather, it has a specific meaning of expecting the various *ethnic* communities to take care of the *economic* needs of their members. The White Paper points out that the principle of meritocracy entails that every citizen is offered equal opportunities to benefit from economic growth. However, the economy must not only generate wealth but also distribute it fairly and widely and take care of those who are less able and do less well. In this context, the ‘support and respect for the individual’ means assisting the needy by “helping to meet some of their pressing needs, training and equipping them with skills to uplift themselves, and giving their children a better start in life, especially in terms of their education, so that poor families can make good in the next generation, as many have done in the past”.⁹ But the source of assistance should not come mainly from the state; rather it should come largely from the individual’s ethnic communities – the Chinese community, the Malay community, and the Indian community. In other words, the state advocates a model of multiculturalism where various ethnic self-groups look after their own members while pledging their shared allegiance to the state.

The value of ‘Consensus, not conflict’ refers to accommodating different views and seeking compromises for the sake of the common good, instead of clamouring for the interests of the individual or a particular group. The last value, ‘Racial and religious harmony’ reiterates the primacy of the nation before community and society before self by building social cohesion among different (and sometimes competing) ethnic and religious groups.¹⁰

We can observe that the Shared Values are *communitarian* in nature – a point that is acknowledged in the White Paper itself.¹¹ The communitarian slant is evident in the White Paper’s exhortation for Singaporeans to ‘compromise’ their ‘selfish’ individual interests, benefits and rights for the common good, and perform their duties as members of their family and community. Communitarianism highlights the importance of the community for the formation and shaping of the individual’s values, behaviour and identity. Linked to the importance of community is the communitarians’ preference for collectivism to individualism, especially the individual’s freedom and right to choice and justice. A number of writers have noted that an Asian version of communitarianism exists in East and Southeast Asian countries such as China, South Korea, Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore.¹² This is reflected in their political leaders reminding their

⁹ *Shared Values*, 7.

¹⁰ The reference to ‘racial’ rather than ‘ethnic’ is deliberate. All citizens in Singapore are classified into one of the four official ‘races’: Chinese, Indian, Malay, Others. A depoliticised defined notion of ‘race’ is advocated where specific characteristics such as food, attire, religious and ethnic festivals are ascribed to the ‘races’. For more information on the social construction of ‘race’ and ‘multiracialism’ in Singapore, see Tan, “Deep culture matters: Multiracialism in Singapore schools”.

¹¹ *Shared Values*, 6.

¹² For example, see Charlene Tan, “Creating ‘Good Citizens’ and Maintaining Religious Harmony in Singapore,” *British Journal of Religious Education* 30, no. 2 (2008), 133-142; Charlene Tan and Yew Leong Wong, “Moral Education for Young People in Singapore: Philosophy, Policy and Prospects,” *Journal of Youth Studies* 13, no. 2 (2010), 89-102; Beng Huat Chua, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1995); Beng Huat Chua, “The Cost of Membership in Ascribed Community,” in *Multiculturalism in Asia*, eds. Will Kymlicka and Baogang He (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 170-195; Wing On Lee, David L. Grossman,

fellow citizens to sacrifice a personal right or a civil or political liberty so as to fulfil their duties and responsibilities towards their family and community. In return, the governments ensure that appropriate social and economic conditions are in place for their citizens to fulfil their duties and responsibilities as ‘good citizens’. This explains why, for example, it is mandatory by law for children to provide financial support for their elderly parents in China, Japan and Singapore; the states in Korea and Hong Kong also provide tax and housing benefits to make it easier for children to care for their elderly parents at home.¹³

‘Individual Rights’ and ‘Individual Interests’

It is instructive to further analyse the Shared Values by uncovering some key assumptions. Underpinning the Shared Values is a pejorative view of ‘individual rights’ and ‘individual interests’. The presupposition is that ‘individual rights’ are ‘Western values’ and undesirable for Asian societies such as Singapore. It is important to note that the Shared Values were formulated in the late 1980s and 1990s at the height of the ‘Asian values versus Western values’ debate. The concern over the threat of ‘Western values’ and erosion of ‘Asian values’ was expressed by then President of Singapore in 1989: “Traditional Asian ideas of morality, duty and society which have sustained and guided us in the past are giving way to a more Westernised, individualistic, and self-centred outlook on life”.¹⁴ Claiming that “Asian societies emphasise the interests of the community, while Western societies stress the rights of the individual”, the Paper states that Singapore “has always weighted group interest more heavily than individual ones”.¹⁵

The Shared Values also assumes a cautionary view of ‘individual interests’. While the White Paper acknowledges the need to address the people’s needs, the concept of ‘individual interests’ refers primarily to *economic* interest in terms of the potential material benefits one may obtain from schooling, skills and training. Little reference is made to the individual’s other interests, such as one’s moral interest to attain certain ethical ideals, or civic interest to participate in public policy-making. It appears that apart from fulfilling one’s material needs, all citizens should set aside their ‘selfish’ individual interests for the ‘common good’. Overall, the tenor of the White Paper is that ‘individual rights’ and ‘individual interests’ are antithetical to national interests. This antithesis is elaborated in a section of the White Paper tellingly entitled ‘Society vs. Individual Rights’:

Putting the interests of society as a while ahead of individual interests has been a major factor in Singapore’s success. This attitude has enabled the country to overcome difficult challenges, such as the withdrawal of British forces in the early 1970s and the severe economic recession in 1985. If Singaporeans had insisted on their individual rights and prerogatives, and refused

Kerry J. Kennedy, and Gregory P. Fairbrother, eds., *Citizenship Education in Asia and the Pacific: Concepts and Issues* (Hong Kong, Comparative Education Research Centre, The University of Hong Kong, 2004); Daniel Bell, *Beyond Liberal Democracy: Political Thinking for an East Asian Context* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

¹³ Tan and Wong, “Moral Education for Young People in Singapore,” 4. For further readings, see Bell, *Beyond Liberal Democracy*.

¹⁴ *Shared Values*, 1.

¹⁵ *Shared Values*, 5.

to compromise these for the greater interests of the nation, they would have restricted the options available for solving these problems.¹⁶

It is interesting to recall that the White Paper claims the Shared Values are ‘shared’ in the sense that it is supported and endorsed by the major cultural groups in Singapore. The Paper notes that “All communities can share these values, although each will interpret and convey the same ideas in terms of their own cultural and religious traditions”.¹⁷ But it is questionable whether such a negative view of ‘individual rights’ and ‘individual rights’ is supported by the cultural traditions of Singaporeans. For the rest of the paper, I would like to (re)interpret the Shared Values from the viewpoint of one such cultural tradition: Confucianism.

Why Confucianism? First, although the Paper states categorically that the Shared Values are not Confucian values, a number of writers have observed that the Shared Values bear strong semblance to Confucian ideals.¹⁸ Confucianism generally underlines the importance of the society, community, family, consensus, and harmony – values that form the core of the Shared Values. Writers such as Beng Huat Chua and others have commented that the Singapore government privileges Confucianism as it sees it as providing a good foundation for propagating Asian values among the younger generation.¹⁹ It is therefore pertinent to see how ‘Confucian’ the Shared Values are, especially in the White Paper’s interpretation of individual rights and interests vis-à-vis the interests of the society. Secondly, the focus on Confucian values reflects the reality that the majority of Singaporeans (three-quarter) are Chinese who share a Confucian heritage. Here I am not claiming that all or most Chinese Singaporeans are professed or deliberate Confucians. Neither am I implying that the other cultural traditions held by Singaporeans are less important or valued. My point, rather, is that many Chinese (and even non-Chinese) Singaporeans are naturally influenced by Confucian values due to their upbringing, socialisation and education in the country.

Before presenting a Confucian response to the Shared Values and elucidating the implications for Singapore, I would like to clarify that what I am offering is *a* (not the) Confucian perspective. We need to recognise that Confucianism (like all other ‘isms’) is not a monolithic and homogenous ideology and movement; it comprises different and competing schools of thought, each with its origin, evolution, proponents, key teachings and impacts.

¹⁶ *Shared Values*, 3.

¹⁷ *Shared Values*, 3.

¹⁸ Chua, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*; Chua, “The Cost of Membership in Ascribed Community,” 170-195. Also see Eddie C. Y. Kuo, “Confucianism as Political Discourse in Singapore: The Case of an Incomplete Revitalisation Movement,” in *Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity: Moral Education and Economic Culture in Japan and the Four Mini-Dragons*, ed. Wei-Ming Tu (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996), 294-309; Charlene Tan and Intan A. Mokhtar, “Communitarianism, the Muslim Identity, and Islamic Social Studies in Singapore, in *Citizenship, Identity and Education in Muslim Communities: Essays on Attachment and Obligation*, eds. Michael S. Merry, and Jeffrey A. Milligan, J.A (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 147-165.

¹⁹ Chua, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*, 170-195. Besides the Shared Values, the Confucian influence can also be seen in the value of ‘filial responsibility’ listed under “Singapore Family Values” in the Civics syllabus for pre-university students. See Ministry of Education. *Revised Pre-university Civics Syllabus* (Singapore: Ministry of Education, 2006), 9.

A Confucian Perspective of ‘Our Shared Values’

As pointed out earlier, the Shared Values, with their focus on the society, community, family, consensus and harmony, resemble Confucian values. This point is uncontroversial and generally accepted by scholars. What is more debatable is whether the Shared Values’ assumptions of ‘individual rights’ and ‘individual interests’ also reflect Confucian ideals. In what follows, I critique the presuppositions on individual rights and individual interests and offer an alternative interpretation from a Confucian perspective. By doing so, I do not mean to question the value of ‘society before self’; I believe that such a value is necessary to unite Singaporeans of diverse backgrounds and conflicting loyalties around common goals and beliefs at the national level. But what I am questioning is whether the pursuit of national interests is *always* at the expense of individual interests, and vice-versa. In the same vein, I am not rejecting the value of ‘community support and respect for the individual’ by ignoring the contribution of ethnic self-help groups in meeting the economic needs of their members. What I am arguing, rather, is for society and community to go *beyond* narrow material concerns to acknowledge and support individual rights and interests within a Confucian worldview.

Individual Rights

Let us begin with the presupposition that individual rights are ‘Western values’ and undesirable for Asian societies such as Singapore. The concept of ‘individual rights’ needs clarification. Some writers such as Roger Ames and Chad Hansen have argued that there is no concept of rights in traditional Confucian thought.²⁰ However, this is correct in as far as the ‘rights’ refers to the idea that “each individual is free to act in his or her own interest without having to put group interests above individual interests”.²¹ It is true that Confucianism does not recognise civil and political rights on the basis that we are autonomous, pre-social, atomistic, free-floating, and self-sufficient beings.²² Nor does Confucianism champion individual’s rights of dissent, of free speech, and of democratic election of leaders in a multiparty political system – features that are common in Western liberal democracies.²³

²⁰ Craig K. Ihara, “Are Individual Rights Necessary? A Confucian Perspective,” in *Confucian Ethics: A Comparative Study of Self, Autonomy, and Community*, eds. Kwong-loi Sun and David B. Wong (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 15.

²¹ A.T. Nuyen, “Confucianism and the Idea of Citizenship,” *Asian Philosophy* 12, no. 2 (2002): 130.

²² A.T. Nuyen, “Confucianism, Globalisation and the Idea of Universalism,” *Asian Philosophy* 13, no. 2/3 (2003): 78. I am aware that like Confucianism, there is no single discourse on the ideology of ‘Western liberalism’. Rather, there are many Western liberal perspectives, with different and competing views of the essence of individual and the individual’s relationship with the community and society.

²³ Henry Rosemont, Jr., “Whose Democracy? Whose Rights? A Confucian Critique of Modern Western Liberalism,” in *Confucian Ethics: A Comparative Study of Self, Autonomy, and Community*, eds. Kwong-loi Sun and David B. Wong (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 59; David B. Wong, “Rights and Community in Confucianism,” in *Confucian Ethics: A Comparative Study of Self, Autonomy, and Community*, eds. Kwong-loi Shun and David B. Wong (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 34. One needs to be cautious of force-fitting our

However, ‘individual rights’ can be interpreted in other ways. Given the broad, nebulous and often contentious meaning of the term, it is helpful to follow the United Nations Economic and Social Committee (UNESCO)’s definition of a universal right as a “condition of living, without which ... men cannot give the best of themselves as active members of the community because they are deprived of the means to fulfill themselves as human beings.”²⁴ What then are the ‘rights’ or necessary ‘conditions of living’ from a Confucian perspective? Confucianism upholds the cardinal belief that every individual possesses the right to human dignity and equality. Mencius’ teaching that “all people are by nature good” (Mencius 2A:6) entails that everyone is born with the capacity for moral feelings such as compassion, respect and propriety, and for human relationships based on them.²⁵ Noting that human equality, worth and respect are inherent and unaffected by one’s social roles, Craig Williams avers that they are “clearly consistent with human rights” and “bear remarkable resemblances to the views of the Natural Law philosophers who influenced the Western human rights tradition.”²⁶ Craig Ihara adds that

even though Confucianism makes no mention of rights, it has a significant and interesting conception of human equality and human worth. Respect for persons and proper pride might plausibly be thought to arise out of these human capacities and their exercise, even though they are not grounded on being potential makers of claims.²⁷

Confucianism also recognises correlative rights that are premised in the right to human dignity, worth and equality, and attached to individuals in specific social positions. In other words, all individuals have the right to make justified claims against others whose duty it is to fulfil them. The correlative rights are derived from the Confucian concept of propriety (*li*) that governs human relationships based on rules that specify corresponding rights and duties.²⁸ Take for example the correlative rights between the ruler and his ministers. The ruler-minister relationship is not one of loyalty but of principled agreement on the basic values upon which the government is to be

discussion of individual, and by extension, human rights, into a dominant and largely Western paradigm. Pointing out that “human rights appear to many to represent a Western moral ideology, intended to supplant the moral perspectives of diverse cultural, religious, and philosophical traditions”, Twiss maintains that this perception “has become a serious obstacle to progress in both intercultural dialogue and comparative ethics when considering human rights.” See Sumner B. Twiss, “A Constructive Framework for Discussing Confucianism and Human Rights,” *Confucianism and Human Rights*, eds. Wm. Theodore de Bary and Weiming Tu (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 29.

²⁴ Facing History and Ourselves, *UDHR 4: What is a Right?*
http://www.facinghistory.org/resources/lesson_ideas/udhr-4-what-a-right-0

²⁵ Ihara, “Are Individual Rights Necessary?” 23.

²⁶ Craig Williams, “International Human Rights and Confucianism,” *Asia-Pacific Journal on Human Rights and the Law*, 1 (2006): 60.

²⁷ Ihara, “Are Individual Rights Necessary?” 24.

²⁸ Wong, “Rights and Community in Confucianism,” 34. Also see Seung-hwan Lee, “Was There a Concept of Rights in Confucian Virtue-based Morality?” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 19 (1992): 241-261.

conducted. Theodore de Bary points out that “If you do not have that principled basis as a common value between ruler and minister, the minister is free to withdraw, to disconnect from the political process”.²⁹ This implies a right of rebellion against the ruler, as mentioned by Mencius (Mencius, IB:8):

King Xuan of Qi asked, “Is it true that Tang banished Jieh and King Wu marched against Zhou?”

“It is so recorded,” answered Mencius.

“Is regicide permissible?”

A man who mutilates benevolence is a mutilator, while one who cripples rightness is a crippler. He who is both a mutilator and a crippler is an “outcast”. I have indeed heard of the punishment of the “outcast Zhou,” but I have not heard of any regicide.

Roderick MacFarquhar explains that there is “the right of rebellion if the state does not fulfil its role; whenever a dynasty comes to an end, it has always been justified on the grounds that the state was not performing its functions, whether economic or political”.³⁰

Another correlative right is the right to speak frankly when there is a violation of propriety and justice, as illustrated in the following passage from Xunzi (*Zidao*; The Way of the Son):

Zigong said, “If a son follows the order of the father, this is already filial piety. And if a subject follows the order of the ruler, this is already loyalty. But what is the answer of my teacher?”

Confucius said, “What a mean man you are! You do not know that in antiquity, if there were four frank ministers in a state with ten thousand war-chariots, its territory was never diminished. If there were three frank ministers in a state with a thousand war-chariots, that state was never endangered. And if there were two frank subordinates in a clan with one hundred war-chariots, its ancestral temple was never destroyed. If a father has a frank son, he will not do anything unjust. How, then, could a son be filial if he follows the order of his father? And how could a subject be loyal if he follows the order of the ruler? One can only speak of filial piety and loyalty after one has examined the reasons why they follow the order.”³¹

²⁹ The Institute of East Asian Philosophies, *A Forum on “The Role of Culture in Industrial Asia – The Relationship between Confucian Ethics and Modernisation,”* 48-49.

³⁰ This is cited in The Institute of East Asian Philosophies, *A Forum on “The Role of Culture in Industrial Asia – The Relationship between Confucian Ethics and Modernisation,”* Public Lecture Series No. 7 (Singapore: The Institute of East Asian Philosophies, 1988), 13.

³¹ This is cited in Wong, “Rights and Community in Confucianism,” 35. Of course, this right to speak frankly is not unconditional and unlimited. Wong points out that Xunzi might not have extended the right to daughters or non-ministers. But the point here is that such rights do exist in the Confucian traditions.

The upshot from our discussion on correlative rights is that it is too simplistic to view Confucian relationships as simply hierarchical and dyadic; a more accurate description is to see them as governed by reciprocity and mutuality. It follows that ‘individual rights’ are not necessarily ‘Western values’; all individuals possess and exercise rights that are intrinsic in and supported by Confucian philosophy.³²

Individual Interests

How about ‘individual interests’? On the one hand, it is true that some individual interests can be self-centred and detrimental to societal interests. A case in point is the agenda of terrorists, working in groups or on their own, to inflict harm on others to further their religious causes. However, individual interests are not always selfish and contradictory to the larger good. In other words, it is possible for individuals to pursue interests that are aligned with and promote national interests.

Confucianism stresses the centrality of the self and the individual’s interest in attaining the Confucian ethical ideal of a noble person (*junzi*) in society. Rather than seeing the self as a single separate individuality who stands apart from, or over and against the community or society, the individual is socially embedded in relationships. These relationships constitute and contribute to the development of a noble person who learns to observe the “traditional norms that govern people’s behaviour by virtue of the social positions they occupy, such as being a son or an official, or in other kinds of recurring social interactions ... as well as the embodiment of certain attitudes appropriate to such behaviour”.³³ A noble person is one who is virtuous, with humanity or benevolence (*ren*) regarded as the general virtue that encompasses all the other Confucian virtues. The self-realisation of humanity is not just a matter of self-transformation of selfhood in human nature; it requires communion with others, especially through conscientiousness to others (*zhong*) and altruism (*shu*).³⁴

To become a noble person who is virtuous, it is in everyone’s interest to be self-disciplined and overcome the self. Confucius teaches that “Through self-discipline and observing ritual propriety one becomes *ren*” (Analects 6:7). A. T. Nuyen avers that the stress in all the Confucian classics is “always on the development of the individual, on the process of individual learning, and on becoming a gentleman (*junzi*) ... an *individual’s interests* are more likely to be shaped by his or her social relationships, not that they are discouraged nor must they ultimately sacrificed for the

³² It is important to note that I am *not* arguing that the rights in Confucianism are similar to those in a liberal democracy. For example, Confucianism does not talk about the individual right to vote, to establish multi-party government, and to limit state intervention. This, however, does not mean that Confucianism is incompatible with liberal democracy: just witness the democratic political systems in Confucian societies such as Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. My goal in this essay is to argue that contrary to the presuppositions in the White Paper, ‘individual rights’ are recognised and viewed positively in Confucianism. It is beyond the scope of this paper to give a fuller treatment of Confucian rights in the context of Western liberal democracy and universal human rights. Interested readers may refer to the collection of essays in de Bary and Tu, eds., *Confucianism and Human Rights*.

³³ Kwong-loi Shun, “Conception of the Person in Early Confucian Thought,” in *Confucian Ethics: A Comparative Study of Self, Autonomy, and Community*, eds. Kwong-loi Sun and David B. Wong (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 191.

³⁴ Martin Lu, *Confucianism: Its Relevance to Modern Society* (Singapore: Federal Publications, 1983), 7.

sake of community interests.³⁵ It is important to note that overcoming the self does not imply oppression of individuality; it involves a reconciliation of community with individuality so that individual growth and the growth of community mutually enhance each other.³⁶

The impression that Confucianism advocates the suppression of the self for the sake of societal interests may be due to the politicisation of Confucianism. Following Francis Fukuyama and Tu Wei-ming, we need to distinguish between political Confucianism and philosophical Confucianism.³⁷ The former refers to the attempts of various groups to politicise Confucian ethical values for other non-ethical purposes, while the latter refers to the Confucian intent to moralise politics through personal cultivation of the self.³⁸ The Confucian perspective I adopt in this paper is *philosophical Confucianism* where the moral cultivation of individuals is salutary for society as a whole. This position is contrasted with political Confucianism where the self is subjugated by the state, as explained by Tu Wei-Ming:

The self, originally conceived of as a dynamic centre of expanding relatedness, is expected to adjust to its relationships and to the world. Instead of actively developing through creative tension and experiential learning, the self is taught to value submissiveness. The harmonisation of relationships, instead of being the result of reciprocity and mutual stimulation, degenerates into the passive acceptance of authority. Relationships become internally hierarchical, even arbitrary. The self, far from growing in reverence, retreats in self-deprecation without dignity, communal participation no longer means the extension and deepening of one's humanity. Instead, it requires one to become a passive member of a large group and to sacrifice oneself to the politicised ideology.³⁹

It follows from the preceding that individual rights and interests are not necessarily in conflict with societal interests; instead they are compatible and inter-dependent. By beginning with the self, to attachments to a particular family, ethnic group, religion or neighbourhood, individuals are able to develop 'civic virtue' – the requisite dispositions and actions that contribute to the good of the community.⁴⁰ Applying the above Confucian interpretations of individual rights and interests, the value of 'Community support and respect for the individual' should not be limited to ethnic self-help groups rendering economic assistance to their members. Rather, it should be extended to the community supporting and respecting the correlative rights of their individual members on the basis

³⁵ [Nuyen, "Confucianism, Globalisation and the Idea of Universalism," 81, italics mine.](#)

³⁶ Michael Collins, "China's Confucius and Western Democracy," *Contemporary Review* 290 (2008), 164.

³⁷ See Francis Fukuyama, "Confucianism and Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 6 (1995): 20-33; Wei-ming Tu, "Probing the 'Three Bonds' and 'Five Relationships,'" in *Confucian humanism*, in *Confucianism and the Family*, eds. Walter H. Slote and George A. De Vos (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1998), 121-136, both cited in Nuyen, "Confucianism, Globalisation and the Idea of Universalism," 80.

³⁸ Tu, *Confucian Ethics Today*, 4.

³⁹ Wei-Ming Tu, *Confucian Ethics Today: The Singapore Challenge* (Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore and Federal Publications, 1984), 105-106.

⁴⁰ See Michael S. Merry's paper in this issue for a detailed discussion of civic virtue.

of reciprocity and mutuality, and providing the conducive conditions for individual moral development and actualisation.

Implications for Singapore

There are two major implications arising from a Confucian perspective of the Shared Values. The first implication is that schools in Singapore should place a greater emphasis on individual moral development for their students. With the Shared Values highlighting the primacy of societal interests and downplaying individual rights and interests (apart from economic ones), it is a daunting task for educators to focus on developing the students' habits and skills of autonomous moral reasoning and independent decision-making. As a result, students may find it difficult to engage in higher order thinking when asked to consider moral controversies, moral dilemmas and new moral situations.

The values education curriculum in schools should focus more on individual moral development by nurturing the students' moral reasoning abilities. From a Confucian perspective, the process of nurturing the noble person necessarily involves self-directed learning, authentic moral motivation and self-actualisation. This process of engaging students to illuminate their lived experiences is premised on the Confucian belief that human beings are born good, and that human nature develops through practice in life and habit.⁴¹ The means to become a noble person is self-cultivation (*xiuji or xiushen*) which implies self-reflection and self-evaluation. The process of self-cultivation reminds us that the Confucian ideal of a noble person is not a role-carrying individual who simply and unquestioningly acts in the interests of the community. Rather, Confucius talked about cultivating oneself on the basis of self-reflection (Analects 1:4), and learning for oneself and not for others (Analects, 14:25). Chung-ying Cheng explains that "the self has the ever reflective self-conscious capacity of rational thinking, which articulates itself in logical and moral reasoning and develops itself in terms of its interaction with world, culture, history, learning and knowledge".⁴² Self-reflection means that students should be encouraged to reflect on their own moral self. As Zhu Xi points out, "To respect morality requires that one should first find out about one's moral self. When one finds out about one's moral self one will naturally know the reasons for everything, so that one could suddenly be enlightened about everything".⁴³

The second implication is that more avenues should be provided for residents to contribute actively towards the vision of shared citizenship. As mentioned at the start of this paper, Singaporeans are increasingly discontented with what they perceive to be an over-emphasis on the national and societal interests at the expense of their (justified) individual needs, interests and rights. A strong indication comes from the recent national election where the national vote for the ruling party, the People's Action Party (PAP), slides from 66.6% in 2006 to a new historic low of 60.1% in 2011. The relatively low support for the ruling party, coupled with the public outpouring of angst and dissatisfaction towards various public policies and the ruling party, signals a desire by many Singaporeans for their voices to be heard. The strident reactions were aided undoubtedly by the new social media that "opened the gates to vocal, unrestricted discussions among Singaporeans,

⁴¹ Fengyan Wang, "Confucian Thinking in Traditional Moral Education: Key Ideas and Fundamental Features," *Journal of Moral Education* 33, no. 4 (2004), 429-447.

⁴² Chung-ying Cheng, "A Theory of Confucian Selfhood: Self-Cultivation and Free Will in Confucian Philosophy," in *Confucian Ethics: A Comparative Study of Self, Autonomy, and Community*, eds. Kwong-loi Sun and David B. Wong (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 125.

⁴³ This is cited in Wang, "Confucian Thinking in Traditional Moral Education," 438.

and several opposition parties' skilful use of these new tools of communication during the election".⁴⁴ A former Senior Minister of State for Law and Home Affairs observed that "We now clearly have a more discerning and questioning public who want to know all the 'ins and outs' of a policy".⁴⁵ This is contrasted with the general mindset two decades ago when the Shared Values were first launched. As a PAP's leader frankly puts it, "If we were running this election 20 years earlier, even if there were unpopular policies, I think people would still have the same compact with the Government, to trust the Government enough that the policies are good".⁴⁶

In response, the Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has revamped the cabinet, declared that "nothing should be sacrosanct" and promised that all policies are up for review. He also announced his desire to meet the needs of a new electorate by consulting and "co-creating solutions" and building shared ownership.⁴⁷ Against a backdrop of exciting and challenging new social-political realities in Singapore, it is necessary for the state to actively engage the citizens by involving them in public policy making and implementation.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have offered a Confucian perspective on the Shared Values in Singapore and discussed the major implications arising from such a perspective. A possible objection to my Confucian thesis is that I have privileged one ethnic (the Chinese) or religious tradition above the others and have thereby imposed such a view on all residents of Singapore. If this argument holds, then my Confucian interpretation of the Shared Values cannot function as a vision of shared citizenship for all residents.

While it is true that Confucianism originated from China, it is not a 'Chinese' ideology because its core teachings – the ethical ideal of a noble person, the virtue of humanity, and the process of self-cultivation – are universal values that transcend cultural differences. For example, all the people in Singapore should be able to relate to the Confucian ethical ideal of a noble person, although they may express this ideal differently based on their own cultural practices. Furthermore, Singapore has been described as a Confucian heritage society where Confucian ethics feature prominently (the others are Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong). These countries appear to share a number of Confucian values: group identity, duty consciousness, personal discipline, consensus formation, the priority of collective interests, emphasis on education and pragmatism.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Andrea Ong, "The New Normal in Politics," *The Straits Times*, July 30, 2011, A41.

⁴⁵ Ong, "The New Normal in Politics," A40.

⁴⁶ Ong, "The New Normal in Politics," A40.

⁴⁷ Ong, "The New Normal in Politics," A40; Tessa Wong, "PAP Starting Search for New Candidates for Next GE," *The Straits Times*, July 23, 2011, A8.

⁴⁸ Johannes Han-Yin Chang, "Culture, State and Economic Development in Singapore," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 33, no. 1 (2003): 85-105; Tu, *Confucian Ethics Today*, 216-217. It is not a coincidence that the top four scorers in the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) are East Asian societies with a distinct Confucian heritage: Shanghai, South Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore. A main reason for the stellar performance of these countries is the shared Confucian socio-cultural values and practices such as a high regard for academic achievement, success through hard work, and an exam-driven environment.

As for the claim that I have argued for a religious interpretation of the Shared Values, it should be pointed out that Confucianism is not regarded as a religion in the sense of being a faith system that is governed by institutionalised organisations, dogmas, regulations, conversion and membership. In fact, I would counter that my Confucian interpretation of the Shared Values has the advantage of ensuring that the Shared Values remain non-religious; this is important as any religious claim to superiority in public is likely to generate controversies and frictions among the residents. In addition, many key Confucian ideals are compatible with the religious teachings held by Singaporeans. Space does not permit me to go into details on the parallels between Confucian teachings and the major religious faiths such as Christianity and Islam. But I have elsewhere argued that Islamic traditions support the ideal of an educated person who demonstrates strong rationality and strong autonomy – attributes that resonate with those of a Confucian noble person.⁴⁹ However, I am not asserting that all aspects of Confucianism are compatible with religious teachings. For example, Confucianism’s humanistic approach to life and ethics may not sit well with some devout religious adherents who believe that morality is necessarily grounded in divine commandments.⁵⁰ But such a view of morality is problematic in a plural society where religious believers of competing faiths are expected to live harmoniously with one another, as well as with agnostics and atheists. That is where I have presented a Confucian perspective: it offers an interpretation of the Shared Values that is likely to be acceptable to all residents in Singapore regardless of sectarian and parochial ethnic and religious affiliations.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Charlene Tan, *Islamic Education and Indoctrination* (New York: Routledge, 2011). For useful readings on Confucianism and religious faiths, see Julia Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity: A Comparative Study* (Tokyo: Kodansha International and The Institute of Oriental Religions, 1977); Osman Bakar, *Islam and Confucianism: A Civilisational Dialogue* (Malaysia: Centre for Civilisational Dialogue, University of Malaya, 1997).

⁵⁰ This does not mean that religious or spiritual components are absent in Confucianism. For a useful reading, see Shu-hsien Liu, *The Contemporary Significance and Religious Import of Confucianism*. Singapore: Institute of East Asian Philosophies, 1986.

⁵¹ I do not have the space to discuss other aspects of Confucianism that are of contemporary relevance, such as its relationship with democracy, human rights, capitalism and modernity. For useful readings, see Daniel A. Bell and Hahm Chaibong, eds., *Confucianism for the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); de Bary and Tu, eds., *Confucianism and Human Rights*; Wm. Theodore de Bary, *The Trouble with Confucianism* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991); Sor-Hoon Tan, *Confucian Democracy: A Deweyan Reconstruction* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2004); and Charlene Tan, *Confucius* (London: Continuum, forthcoming). On Confucianism as a form of virtue ethics, see Bryan Van Norden, “Virtue Ethics and Confucianism,” in *Comparative Approaches to Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Mou Bo (London: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), 99-121; Eric L. Hutton, “Han Feizi’s Criticism of Confucianism and Its Implications for Virtue Ethics,” *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 5 (2008): 423-453.