CONFUCIANISM IN JUXTAPOSITION WITH MODERNITY IN THE SINGAPORE CLASSROOM

Agnes Chang Shook Cheong

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In the wake of accelerated industrialization urbanisation and global trade expansion, the Singapore government makes conscious effort to prepare its young citizens for survival in the 21st century. It hopes to develop in them the modern attitudes necessary for entrepreneurship like the risk-taking spirit, innovativeness and competitiveness. To minimize the inevitable development of negative qualities like selfishness, ruthlessness and lawlessness which tend to accompany intensive competition and high risks, the Singapore education system attempts to impress upon the school children the need for diligence, collectivism, humility, humanity and harmony. These qualities have been associated with the Confucian philosophy.

It is interesting to note that many people have attributed the economic miracles in the four Newly Industrialized Economics (NIEs) namely, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea and Singapore, to the application of Confucian philosophy to their organisational leadership. Collectively, the NIEs have been called the Confucian
Heritage Cultures together with China. According to Tu Wei-Ming (1989), the Harvard-based Confucian expert, "As a philosophy of life, Confucianism has developed not only an art of living but also a science of managing the world".

For nations to be progressive and prosperous, peace and harmony should be imperative concomitants of their package of national goals. Effort should not be spared to imbue the citizens with values which emphasize on peace and harmony. The basic principles of Confucianism stress on moral understanding, commitment and will motivation, sentiments, justice, truthfulness, equality and liberty. To achieve these qualities, the Confucian philosophy advocates the virtues of character such as wisdom, courage, trust and love (Tan, 1990).

For a small country with no resources like Singapore to survive, a strong sense of individualism will spell disaster. It is collectivism which puts the interests of the state and community above self interest and commits the citizens to the nation for its growth and development. Collectivism is reflected in the very first of the Five National Shared Values for Singapore: Nation before community and society above self. The fourth shared value gives support to the need for collectivism too: Consensus instead of Contention.

The strong stress on collectivism is further enhanced in the emphasis on the family as the cornerstone of the society. According to Zhang (1994), it is the family,
company and community that individuals put their pride into and that is where they find the identity. Collectivism links individual achievement to family-oriented achievement. "Family as the basic unit of society" is the second shared value in Singapore. To further strengthen the commitment to a wholesome family, Five Core Family Values have also been identified. They are:

1) Love, care and concern
2) Mutual respect
3) Filial responsibility
4) Commitment
5) Communication.

Justice, Tolerance and Equality are Confucian qualities which ensure dignity and fairness for the individual. Hence the third and the fifth National values reflect the qualities exhorted.

- **Respect and community support for the individual.**
- **Racial and religious harmony.**

As Confucianism emphasizes on education, Asian children from the Confucian Heritage Cultures usually are socialized at an early age to achieve academically and to be self-accountable for their own success and failure (effort) (Ho, 1994). The Singapore educational system is examination- and certification-oriented. Social mobility can be achieved through education and the lack of money is no stumbling
block to a brilliant and determined scholar. Both government and private scholarships are plentiful. Educational loans could also be arranged easily with banks for students short of funds. It is also not uncommon for relatives from a poor family to pool resources together to send a young scholar overseas for his higher education. Hence education is revered by all strata of society, not only the elite.

Setting out on the mission to ensure that young citizens of Singapore will not forget and forsake their Asian cultural heritage, the bilingual policy in education was introduced in the 60s. Every child of Singapore citizens and permanent residents will have to take up his mother tongue (usually Mandarin, Malay or Tamil) as his second language. In Singapore, English has become the principal medium of instruction in all government and government-aided schools and most private schools.

Compulsory Moral Education is taught in both primary and secondary schools. While English is the most commonly used medium of instruction for Moral Education at the secondary level, the mother tongue is the vehicle for communicating values to the impressionable young pupils at the elementary level. The Five National Shared Values and the Five Commonly Shared Family Values are taught to the school children. Topics covered in texts include the family diligence, respect for elders, cooperation, filial piety, trust, loyalty, justice, love and other values embedded in Confucianism.
In all schools, community service is exhorted. Projects have been arranged for school children to spend at least a day weekly to help out in children’s homes or old folks’ homes. The message "To Care and To Share" is repeatedly stressed in the many projects and programmes carried out at the national level. Talks are given by Community Chest officials in schools. Once a year, Singapore citizens are encouraged to contribute presents generously to the Sharity Box during Christmas for the underprivileged children. In an affluent and competitive society, it is very easy to get carried away with money-chasing and obsessed with power and ownership of symbolic luxurious goods.

East Asians believe in the virtues of saving and frugality. It is no accident that Singapore saving rate of 46 percent of GNP is the highest in the world (Koh, 1993). Young children in Singapore schools are encouraged to have saving accounts. Most parents start an account for their children when they are mere infants. To emphasize thrift and equality and to down play unnecessary display of wealth, all school children wear school uniforms and no jewellery and branded goods are allowed in schools. Parents are discouraged to allow their offspring to wear their Rolex watches and Dr Martens boots to school. Reebok shoes are also on the list of banned goods.

Education is not only revered for its role in the development of an individual but also as a vehicle for progressive changes in a country. In an interview with Nikkei Business, our Prime Minister, Mr Goh Chok Tong, said that Singapore should
strive to have a better educated population (Straits Times, 12 January 1995). In order to compete favourably with all the new and up-coming industrialized countries who can afford cheaper labour, we need to provide alternative services related to high technology. Hence Singapore aims to have more engineers, economists and a better-educational profile. Between 40 to 80 percent of students in many developed countries receive tertiary education, according to the *Economist Book of Vital Statistics* (Koh, 1993). Mr Goh’s views are also echoed in an article contributed by the Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister of Malaysia, Mr Anwar Ibrahim, to the *International Herald Tribune* (Straits Times, 1 February 1994). He noted that Asian countries are still largely dependent on Western science and technology for their industrialization. To remedy the situation, he suggested "We need massive investments in education, scientific research and human resource development. We can do this as individual countries or, more effectively, key strategic collaboration among ourselves". "An industrialized nation must have much more than factories. At the heart of an industrialized society is brainpower - the pool of scientists, technologists, designers, inventors who translate human creativity and scientific ideas into tangible goods. The factories and machines are in fact only the last stage of the total development work that need to be done.

Making acquaintance with high technology has a headstart at pre-school level in Singapore. Many pre-school centres, both private and non-private institutions, have introduced computer-assisted learning. The visual-audio impact on the child is both
motivating and stimulating. It also minimizes the fear children may have in the use of the computer in later years. Funds are made available to schools by the government to start their own computer laboratories. In-service courses are provided by the Ministry to train teachers in the use of computers in their teaching and administrative work. Computing is also offered as a subject at the GCE 'A' level examination. Many families own PCs. All universities lecturers have their own personal computers and e-mail accounts.

To prepare the young citizens cope with problem-solving in the 21st century, the Ministry of Education hopes to expand the existing thinking skills package at secondary level to incorporate thinking more broadly into teaching subjects like science. Recently the Minister for Education, Mr Lee Yock Suan, said that his ministry was looking into incorporating core thinking skills into the learning of subjects. The Edward de Bono's CORT (Cognitive Research Trust) programme has been used in both primary and secondary schools since 1987. This and other packages such as Robert Marzeno's Dimensions of Learning are also used in the Gifted Education Programme and in other schools by their own initiative. Singapore must have innovators and thinkers inorder to keep up its competitive edge. To build up the competitive spirit in the young, the better students are selected to participate in International Olympic Mathematics, Chemistry and Physics Competitions. These chosen secondary participants are usually trained by lecturers from the universities. Secondary schools are also ranked and the results published by the main news dailies.
to spur the schools to better their achievement in public examinations. Special awards are given to value-added schools which are able to develop B or C grade students into A grade students.

Research and development are no longer the prerogatives of the universities and large companies. A Special Research Programme has been started for the better pre-university (Grade 11 and 12) students who will be apprenticed to top scientific researchers in the universities to learn the ropes of scientific research. A special seminar is held every year to encourage these young scientists to present their research findings. For the secondary students, a science fair is held annually to judge students’ scientific inventions. This is an attempt to stimulate creativity and scientific thinking. Asean students are also invited to participate. In Singapore, all students have to take at least one science subject at the secondary level. Every June, the Pre-University seminar will be held for a week whereby selected students from all junior colleges and pre-university centres will participate to discuss social issues and interests with politicians, academics and entrepreneurs. Social and political awareness is stressed in the education of our adolescents. We are fortunate that our mass media give wide and balanced coverage of local, regional and international news. This would definitely help in the moulding of critical and rational minds when the youngsters are given full information of all facts and evidence. Youngsters need to know the truth, accept the truth and act rationally in the face of hard evidence.
In early 1995, the Prime Minister has called on teachers to teach survival skills to their students. In view of the fact that Singapore is a small and vulnerable country, we have to be prepared. We have no national resources and are dependent on regional and friendly neighbours and countries afar for our supply of raw materials. In order to expand our trade globally, we also need to tell our young citizens that they may need to be relocated in their jobs away from Singapore to provide the services needed in other countries. All these require psychological preparedness. This is also the price we pay for progress and advancement in modern times.

In conclusion, we can appreciate the herculean job faced by our leaders in clearing the obstacles and keeping at abeyance the many temptations strewn on the road to affluence and industrialization. Walking the tight hybrid rope of strict moral values and modernity is indeed an unenviable task but it is the only way to uphold our dignity and self-respect as a modern East Asian country.
References


