EDUCATION, CULTURE AND THE SINGAPORE DEVELOPMENTAL STATE

Reflections on Writing the Book

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This is a brief reflective and reflexive paper where I share of my thoughts in the process on writing my book titled *Education, Culture and the Singapore Developmental State: “World-Soul” Lost and Regained?* (Chia, 2015). It will discuss how I came to the topic for my book, the book’s significance, as well as about some of the challenges I faced in the writing of the book.

The genesis of my book dates all the way back to January 2000, when an idea for a course paper came to mind as I was commuting to the National Institute of Education, Singapore, where I was doing my initial teacher training to be a high school History and English language teacher. In short, it was an eureka moment. The paper was on the teaching of Singapore history in middle schools. I subsequently developed this into my Master’s major paper for my Master of Educational Management program with the University of Western Australia (Chia, 2003), which I did as a part-time student in Singapore while being a full-time high school History and Social Studies teacher. My Master’s major paper became the basis for my doctoral dissertation submitted to the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto, of which the book is based.

The final piece that led to my writing the book was my experience as a ‘National Education‘ (NE) officer at the Singapore Ministry of Education (MOE). NE was more than a curricular subject – it was a comprehensive citizenship education framework for the entire educational system in Singapore. I began to see how History, Social Studies, Civics and Moral Education were different facets of citizenship education in the Singapore context, and the aim of citizenship education in Singapore was one of political socialization for state formation and nation building, ostensibly in the form of the state sanctioned ‘Singapore Story’.

Nonetheless, through the courses I took at OISE, and my dissertation research and writing, a shift in the focus on my writing took place. My book examines the role of education in the formation of the Singapore developmental state, through a historical study of education for citizenship in Singapore (covering 1954-2010). I explore the interconnections between the politics of nation-building changes in history, civics and Social Studies curricula. I therefore view citizenship education as the vehicle by which the Singapore developmental state is formed.

The theoretical starting point of my book is the role and relationship between education and state formation (Green, 1990 & 1997). More specifically for Singapore, state formation refers to the evolution of the developmental state. Chalmers Johnson is regarded as the originator of the developmental state concept. Drawing upon the work of Ronald Dore on Japan, and his own research on Japan’s Ministry of International Trade and Industry, Johnson argues that “the state’s role in the economy is shared with the private sector, and both the public and private sectors have perfected means to make the market work for developmental goals” (Johnson, 1982, p. viii). In other words, the economic growth and development is “state-led”, in order to achieve the “strategic goals” (Deyo, 1987, p. 17) of capitalists.

Manuel Castells, an eminent sociologist, develops the developmental state concept a step further. He posits that the developmental state derives its legitimacy from promoting and sustaining economic development, via the generating and solving of

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1 This paper is adapted from my brief remarks during my book launch at the Singapore Management University on 26 August 2015. I’d like to thank Professor Gopinathan and the Head Foundation, as well as Associate Professor Kirpal Singh, Director of the Wee Kim Wee Centre, SMU for their generosity in hosting my book launch.
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crises (Castells, 2000; Heng & Devan, 1995; Huang, 2005; Pye, 1988). The discourse of crises would provide us with an understanding of the culture of the developmental state, while education policies (in the form of changes in civics and history education) play the ‘mediating’ role between crises and the developmental state. Economic development is the means to attaining the end of nation building and the legitimization of state power.²

Thus, building on existing scholarship on education and state formation, my book maps out the cultural and ideological dimensions of the role of education in the developmental state. The narrative is organised around six crisis “moments”, which analyzes how Singapore’s developmental state managed crises (imagined, real or engineered), and how changes in history, civics and Social Studies curricula served to legitimize the state. The first crisis was the merger with Malaysia and its subsequent failure (1955–1965), which saw the beginnings of the civics subject and the influential All Party report on Chinese education. The second crisis was national survival (1965–1980), with policies focused on multiracialism and bilingualism. The third crisis of ‘deculturalisation’ (1980–c.1990s) was met with an official rhetoric of Asian values and the emphasis on moral education as a ‘cultural ballast’ against the destabilising influence of the ‘decadent West’. This overlapped with the fourth crisis, legitimacy and national identity (1987–c.1990s), brought about intense debates in parliament and the public sphere, and an articulation of shared values as an intensification of Asian values. The fifth crisis, historical amnesia (1997), was addressed by the NE initiative that targeted the informal curriculum to reinforce a common historical understanding of modern Singapore. The sixth crisis on national security and social cohesion (1998–2004) saw an extension of NE into the formal curriculum. A key theme is the construction of the “good citizen” and its role in nation building over a half-century. Underpinning these changes has been the state’s use of cultural constructs such as Confucianism and Asian values to shore up its legitimacy.

Since Singapore’s independence, it has been the constant struggle of the state to articulate the Singapore national identity. Different visions were proffered over the years, only to be replaced by new ones. From the rugged society and Singaporean Singapore of the 1960s/1970s, to the Asian values of the 1980s, shared values of the early 1990s, and the NE programme, the state remained driven by a survivalist mindset. Lily Rahim aptly sums it up: “Singapore’s national identity has been strongly shaped by a crisis discourse centred on the struggle for survival and security” (2009, p. 78). Indeed, “the PAP government’s security paradigm has been driven strongly by fear – of communists in the Cold War, communalists in the 1960s and 1970s, radical Islamists in the ‘war on terror’, and a pervasive fear of the national and regional ‘other’ ” (Rahim, 2009, p. 110).

According to Velayutham, “the Singapore government’s survival rhetoric and economic concerns have contributed as much to shaping the construction and reconstruction of national identity as they have dictated national policy priorities” (2007, p. 40). Bryan Turner refers to the consequent form of citizenship in Singapore as a “national security citizenship”, “in which the principle role of the state is not to guarantee social rights … but simply to guard public spaces from political disruption”. He further argues that the case of Singapore “could be taken as the harbinger of the future demise of liberal versions of citizenship” (Turner, 2009).

This culture of crisis management and the consequent “national security citizenship” proposed by Turner, demonstrates the cultural process that education, and in particular citizenship education, serves in the making and formation of the Singapore developmental state. Embedded within this developmental state are the Confucian and Asian values, as well as a culture of crisis management and survivalism that is driven by the need for the economic and political survival of Singapore, and that of the PAP.

During the first decade or so of Singapore’s independence, the Singapore government was chiefly concerned with the survival of the newly independent state. Rapid industrialization and promoting social cohesion via the principle of multiracialism became the chief strategies that the government adopted. The result was accelerated economic growth, which propelled Singapore to a status of one of the Four Little Asian Dragons. In contrast to the decade prior to independence, there was social and political stability and order. Singapore did not merely survive. It thrived; the developmental state arose amidst the crisis of national survival. The ruling PAP gained tremendous political mileage and legitimacy as a consequence, and this helped them to win all Parliamentary seats in successive general elections until 1980.

The industrialization of the economy, and the policy of bilingualism led to English becoming the language of government and business. Mathematics and science subjects were emphasized, and these were taught in the English language. As a consequence, the period witnessed a steady decline in the enrolment of vernacular stream schools vis-à-vis English stream schools. In contrast to math and science, the use of the Mother Tongue to teach history and civics meant that, in practice, these subjects were seen as less important despite the constant mention of civic and moral values in the official rhetoric. History in primary school was a victim of the bilingual policy, as it was merged with civics to become Education for Living (EFL), which was regarded as a subject to teach moral and civic values. Indeed, the state regarded civics/citizenship education and moral education as one and the same. It was no wonder that some saw History as being withdrawn from the primary school curriculum. Eventually, EFL, together with Civics, were scrapped, as they were deemed inadequate for the teaching of moral values. The answer to the inculcation of moral values was to be found and discovered in ‘Asian’ values.

Contrary to popular perception, the idea of Asian values began in the early 1970s, and not by the end of the same decade. The Singapore government – and Lee Kuan Yew in particular – was concerned with the onslaught of what they considered as permissive Western values encroaching on the commendable Eastern/Asian values. With the increasing affluence of Singapore due to its rapid economic growth, the government expressed the fear of Singaporeans losing their cultural roots. This was presented in the form of a crisis, and thus the need for a Moral Education Review, leading to the introduction of a large number of moral education programs, Religious Knowledge classes as well as programs in History and Social Studies.

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3 This was a popular term in the 1980s to refer to the four tiger economies of East Asia – South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore.
4 Of course, the boycott and eventual resignation of the opposition MPs within a year of Singapore’s independence helped to create this one-party Parliament.
Throughout the latter part of the 1980s, the rhetoric of Asian values was intensified by the government, which was concerned with influences from the ‘decadent West’. The government constantly lamented Singaporeans’ general lack of the knowledge of their own culture, which would make them open to the influences of the West. The existing moral education, Social Studies and History syllabi were deemed inadequate to meet these challenges. It was felt that new syllabi had to be designed in order to ground students in their cultural heritage, so as to have a ‘cultural ballast’ against the onslaught of Western individualism. Knowing one’s cultural roots would then make one more appreciative of Singapore’s history. Religious Knowledge, which was initially conceived as the apex of the CME program, proved to be disappointing in attaining this aim, and was scrapped just 5 years after its implementation (Tan, 1997).

Nonetheless, the demise of the Religious Knowledge program did not signal the failure of the promotion of Asian Values and Confucianism by the Singapore government. Instead, the government intensified its efforts around its Asian Values discourse through the introduction of the five Shared Values: 1) Nation before community and society above self, 2) Family as the basic unit of society, 3) Community support and respect for the individual, 4) Consensus not conflict, and 5) Racial and religious harmony. This was an attempt to incorporate Asian Values and Confucianism into Singapore’s nation building project. Critics of Asian Values argued that the underlying reason for the Shared Values was to boost the PAP government’s legitimacy and hegemony in the wake of declining popular support in the General Elections since 1984. The Shared Values was a culmination of a long process of public consultation, a departure from the authoritarian style of governance of the 1970s. The PAP recognised that the public wanted more say in national affairs, and was prepared to liberalize politically as long as they controlled the political discourse and set the boundaries for discussion and debate.

Singapore is an interesting case study of the role and relationship of education and the developmental state. This is because of its highly successful educational system (especially in math and science), as well as it being regarded by Castells as the “the quintessential developmental state” (1988, p. 4). State formation in Singapore is very successful, as evidenced by its economic prosperity and education played a key role in this success. However, the economic success did not result in greater political freedom and openness. While there were regular general elections, politics is heavily proscribed, and the ruling PAP wins almost all the seats each election. The Singapore case thus questions the conventional conception of conflating liberal democracy and economic development.

The possible notion that economic development does not lead to democracy the way the West conceives it has implications beyond the shores of Singapore. China’s economy is developing rapidly, and it is arguably one of the major economic powerhouse in the world today, with no sign of democratizing in the near future. One of the key models that China looks up to, especially in the initial years of its economic restructuring, was Singapore. The late Deng Xiaoping has stated more than once of his desire for China to emulate and surpass Singapore. Thus, my book on the making of the Singapore developmental state, and the role education played, provides a potential understanding on what China aspires to be both economically

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5 Religious Knowledge (RK) was implemented as an O level subject in 1984. The announcement to scrap RK came in 1989, with 1990 as the final RK cohort.
6 Gopinathan (2007) makes a compelling case that Singapore’s use of education instrumentally as human capital enhancement, as well the close linkage of education to planned economic development, render it the ‘quintessential developmental state’.
and politically, making Singapore an important case study of state formation and education. Andy Green’s (2007) article ‘Globalisation and the changing nature of the state in East Asia’ underscores my argument and concern.

I shall move on to discuss on methodological issues, where I will also discuss the challenges I faced. My book has relied on mainly on published primary sources in the form of government documents, speeches and curriculum materials, which are all found in Singapore. I took two 10-month trips to Singapore to collect the sources, first as an exchange student at the National Institute of Education, Singapore in 2007, and subsequently as a Lee Kong Chian Research Fellow at the National Library Singapore in 2009 (I did most of my preliminary drafts during my second stint in Singapore).

A key primary document to elucidate the historical crises legitimation narrative came from the verbatim records of the Singapore Legislative Assembly and Parliament as they pertain to education. I also consulted education reports such as the All Party Report on Chinese Education that was tabled to the Legislative Assembly in 1956, and subsequent reports like the Goh and Ong Reports of 1979. Relevant English and Chinese newspapers provided the media responses to the education issues of the day, particularly before the Singapore government’s restrictions on press freedom since the 1970s. As for curriculum documents, I examined the syllabi for History, Social Studies, religious education, and civic and moral education, and their textbooks.

Ideally, I would like to also examine the classified government documents in MOE and the other government departments as it pertains to education as well. However, Singapore does not have a process of declassification of government documents like that of the UK, USA, Australia and Canada. The unpublished government documents are most likely to remain classified in the foreseeable future. Historians working on the post-1965 history of Singapore are all faced with this limitation, and one way to get around it is to use the published documents that I have discussed earlier.

I would like to end my remarks with reference to the poem, ‘A Chinese Parable’ that I quoted in my dissertation. How I found the poem was serendipitous; it was via Facebook! The poet, who was a friend of mine, mentioned the poem that he wrote 12 years ago, in response to a recent remark by the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew that there should be no retirement age. So I’ve to thank Mr Lee for providing the inspiration for me to insert the “suggestive coda” to my thesis via the poem! I would also like to thank Gwee Li Sui for graciously allowing me to reproduce his poem ‘A Chinese Parable’ and Goh Eck Kheng of Ethos Books for the permission to reproduce the poem in full.

I believe that the poem aptly encapsulates the weltanschauung of the Singapore developmental state, in the phrase “Work is Life” in the musing of the premier. State formation in Singapore was therefore very successful, as evidenced by its economic prosperity and education played a key role in this success. However, the “economic growth at all costs” ethos that “work is life” connotes arguably comes with a price – the potential loss of zeitgeist, or as the Mandarin alludes, the loss of the “World-Soul”. Nation building, and fostering a sense of rootedness and belonging of its citizenry to the country – the “World-Soul” – had to be relegated to the backburner in the relentless pursuit of economic development, in order to sustain and legitimize the developmental state.

During the MOE’s annual “workplan” seminar on 22 September 2011, Mr. Heng Swee Keat, then Minister for Education, announced a new Character and Citizenship
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Education (CCE) framework. NE would be subsumed under this new CCE framework, which would also incorporate the existing CME and co-curricular activities. Nonetheless, the Education Minister emphasised that “NE will remain a cornerstone of the CCE curriculum because our children must know Singapore’s vulnerabilities and constraints as well as what makes Singapore tick” (Heng, 2011). Launched in primary and secondary schools in 2014, the CCE syllabus purportedly builds on previous citizenship education initiatives such as NE and CME (MOE, 2014). It is too early to comment on the impact of CCE, as it is still in its early stages; what is certain is the re-emphasis on moral education, albeit termed as “character” education, which is a legacy of the Ong Teng Cheong Report.

The timing of the CCE announcement was interesting, as this came only a few months after the May 2011 general election, where the ruling party received its worst electoral performance since Singapore’s independence. The PAP lost six parliamentary seats to the opposition, and its share of the popular vote declined to a record low of 60.1 per cent, suggesting a loss of trust, and thereby legitimacy, in the ruling party by the populace. Subsequent defeats by the PAP in by-elections in 2012 and 2013 have borne out this observation (Lim, 2014). While the CCE announcement in September 2011 has no clear causal relationship with the 2011 general elections, the new CCE curriculum is arguably the ruling party’s attempt to shore up its legitimacy via education, just like previous citizenship and History education curricula and initiatives.

Nonetheless, the Singapore state appears to have regained its legitimacy in the 2015 general election, whereby the ruling PAP increased their popular vote by 9 per cent to close to 70 per cent of the popular vote, and wrested a seat back from the main opposition Workers’ Party. The Singapore government retains a developmental state mindset, but it might be too early to say that Singapore’s populace has become “post-developmental” (Baildon, 2009; Low & Vadaketh, 2014). Given the continued dominance of the dominant party state in Singapore, the ultimate goal of education in Singapore would remain unchanged in the foreseeable future – emphasis on duties over democratic rights, which would potentially perpetuate the PAP state. Thus, whether education can continue to engender legitimacy for the Singapore developmental state remains moot. Perhaps the reawakening, or regaining of, the “World-Soul” would have to come not from education or politics, but from the economic impact of the anti-globalisation and anti-trade sentiments. As I concluded in my book, only time will tell.
References

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