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MORAL EDUCATION IN THE PLURAL SOCIETY
OF SINGAPORE: A CRITIQUE FROM A HOLISTIC
PERSPECTIVE

BY

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Islamic
Civilisation

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ABSTRACT

The Moral Education Programme is one subject being taught at all public schools of Singapore. This research describes the changes undergone by the programme since its introduction in 1959 to the present. In order to understand the reasons of the changes made to the programme, the history of the formation of Singapore is reviewed which provides an understanding of how it directs the educational landscape of Singapore in general, and the moral education programme in particular. The reviews and evaluations done on the programme throughout the years are also analysed in detail. Guided by the analyses made, the research goes on to investigate the moral education programme, from the perspective of religions, with special emphasis on the religion of Islam. The research has arrived at a number of conclusions and several recommendations to review the moral education programme are made. The basic conclusion is that the moral education programme should derive lesson and strength from the rich traditions and heritage of the different religions in Singapore.

ملخص البحث

إن التربية الأخلاقية برنامج من البرامج يجري تدريسها في جميع المدارس الحكومية في سنغافورة. يصف هذا البحث التغيرات التي تمر بها البرامج منذ دراستها في عام 1959 إلى اليوم. من أجل فهم أسباب التغيرات التي أدخلت على البرنامج، يعاد النظر في تاريخ تشكيل سنغافورة الذي نص على فهم الكيفية التي تدير المشهد التعليمي في سنغافورة بشكل عام، وبرنامج التربية الأخلاقية على وجه الخصوص. و قد حلت استعراضات وتقييمات البرامج عبر السنين تفصيلاً. و أيضاً بناءً على التحليلات إنه نظر في برامج التعليم الأخلاقي من وجهة الأديان، مع التركيز بشكل خاص على دين الإسلام. قد وصل البحث الى عدد من الاستنتاجات و قدم توصيات عدة لاستعراض برنامج التربية الأخلاقية. والاستنتاج الأساسي هو أن برنامج التربية الأخلاقية ينبغي أن يستمد قوته و عبرته من التقاليد والتراث الغنية من الأديان المختلفة في سنغافورة.

APPROVAL PAGE


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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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**MORAL EDUCATION IN THE PLURAL SOCIETY OF SINGAPORE: A
CRITIQUE FROM A HOLISTIC PERSPECTIVE**

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

One of the most critical aims and objectives of education is to instill and cultivate the morality of the young. Recognising the importance of this objective, the Singapore government had implemented the teaching of moral education programme by instituting a special subject dedicated to moral education in Singapore's public schools since 1959.

Throughout the years, the moral education programmes in Singapore's public schools underwent several changes and transformations due to various reasons. Some would argue that the changes made are reactions against the pressures of modern ideas and the forces of political, economic and social change.

These forces in Singapore do not, however, remain the same and will continue to change. In this modern era, there needs to exist a creative and viable solution to the problems and challenges facing the moral degenerations of the youth of Singapore. A new model of moral education programme anchored in religions may provide that solution and is the focus of this study.

1.1 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Upon reaching the status of a developed country, Singapore, however, could not save herself from being afflicted with diseases common to other developed countries – higher number of victims suffering from depression and depression-related illnesses,

increasing suicide and attempted suicide rates¹, increasing crime rates, teenage promiscuity and pregnancy, marriage breakdown and many other related problems. The increasing materialistic lifestyles and excessive self-centredness had left many souls that are trapped in the concrete urban jungle of Singapore to find meaning in excessive pleasure-seeking behaviour.

These social problems may in fact signal a deeper and a more serious problem, in terms of the internal state of well-being of Singaporeans. We are seeing more and more Singaporeans adopting Western and urban lifestyles which would normally lead to some form of 'identity crises' within themselves. The urban lifestyles come with their own worldview, their own sets of value systems and morals which may seem alien in the beginning. However, left unchecked, they are slowly encroaching the Singaporean's psyche and they eventually became so infused into the identity of the Singaporeans.

The Singapore government, always maintaining a close watch on the lifestyles of her citizens, promptly voiced its concern on this phenomenon. The then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew stated, "It is basic we understand ourselves; what we are, where we came from, what life is or should be about and what we want to do...Only when we first know our traditional values, can we be quite clear that the Western world is a different system, a different voltage, structured for purposes different from ours."²

In counterchecking this phenomenon, the government looked into a multi-pronged approach to address it so as to avoid being entrenched further and permanently into the Singapore society. One key apparatus that is on hand that was

¹ The number of committed suicide reached 371 cases in 1999. The number is growing every year. See <<http://www.singapore-window.org/sw99/91018st.htm>>; Kok. L.P, et. al, *The Wish to Die*, (Singapore: Samaritans of Singapore, 1993).

² Lee Kuan Yew, (1972). *The Traditional Values and National Identity. The Mirror*, 8.

able to minimise the spreading of the disease is the education system. The current mainstream education has and is providing the main source of education for almost all children and young generation of Singapore.

One particular platform in the education that is used to check the phenomenon mentioned above is the creation of a subject called Civics and Moral Education (CME), taught to all students in the mainstream schools of Singapore. The programme went through various name change over the years, but its objective basically remains the same, that of instilling the proper and desirable values in the young people of Singapore.

This study contends, however, that despite the implementation of the CME programme in government's schools in Singapore, the mainstream education has left a huge void in the area of the moral aspect of the youth. Albeit the system has managed to accomplish some success in the area of academic excellence, especially in the field of mathematics and science, the effectiveness of its CME programme in addressing the moral needs of the young warrants a thorough study. The intellectual component, although important in itself, does not make up the whole person. One needs to look into the development of other aspects, such as spiritual, moral, physical, and psychological which would make up the holistic development of a person.

This study aims to review the various phases of the moral education programme implemented in Singapore schools. The philosophy of programme would be identified and scrutinised as it plays a major part in driving the programme and steer its course. Most importantly, the study will analyse and review the reasons and justifications given for the separation of the programme from association to any religions. Except for a limited short span of time, between 1984-1989, when religious programmes were implemented in Singapore schools, the moral education programme

is couched in a secular worldview. This study argues that the ME programme's separation from the religious anchorage, may yet to prove to be instrumental for the ineffectiveness of the moral educational programme in Singapore schools.

This thesis contends that the moral education programme may need to give way to a programme that has anchored within the Asian religions and philosophies. This alternative way of educating the young may provide new ways in coping with the moral degeneration of the young.

Singapore has always prided itself in its being open and receptive to look for the 'best practices' in the field and was known to have sent its personnel abroad to learn from countries known to possess best practices. It is also practicing to bring in experts in the field to Singapore to learn from. In the Report on Moral Education in 1979, the team had studied ME programmes in Taiwan, Japan and Russia.³ Eng Soo Peck, in his search for a model ME programme, reviewed major models implemented in schools in the United States and the United Kingdom⁴. It included models designed by McPhail, Wilson, Kohlberg.⁵ It is evidently clear that these models are reviewed became among the sources that generate ideas for the approached to moral education programme in Singapore schools. However, if one is to seriously scrutinise the many educational philosophies, one would be confronted with much confusion and chaos in the philosophies. Hadi Sharifi in his article, "*The Islamic as Opposed to Modern Philosophy of Education*", states that, "modern philosophies of education are first of all short-lived; secondly, every philosophical view of education, because of its very

³ One Teng Cheong (Chairman), *Report on Moral Education 1979*, (Singapore: Ministry of Education, 1979).

⁴ Eng Soo Peck, *Moral Education for Singapore: In Search of a Model: Occasional Paper no. 18*, (Singapore, Institute of Education, 1984).

⁵ For a fuller listing and explanation, see Peter McPhail, *Moral Education in the Secondary School*, (London: Longmans, 1972); John Wilson, *Introduction to Moral Education*, (London: Penguin, 1968); Lawrence Kohlberg, *In Cognitive Development and Epistemology*, (New York: Academic Press, 1971).

limited and contingent standpoint, can be easily criticised, negated and finally replaced by another; and thirdly, conflicts and never-ending struggles among different philosophical ideas and speculations seem to be a natural phenomenon.⁶

Within the span of several decades, we have in fact seen the transformation of one philosophical foundation to another; from moral socialisation brought forward by the French sociologist Emile Durkheim to moral education as a Rational Utilitarianism espoused by John Wilson, to moral education as Values Clarification, and the Cognitive-Developmental approach to moral education by Lawrence Kohlberg⁷. This transformation does not stop there as we have post-durkheimian and post-kohlbergian philosophies being generated with even newer approaches to moral education.

Another aspect that will be studied for its impact on the moral education programme in Singapore is the historical aspect. The mainstream education of Singapore was shaped and was very much influenced and still is, by its political and economic necessity. Her historical background and economical priorities played a much influential role in determining the vision and aims of Singapore education system. This applies to its moral education programme as well. Its pragmatic approach in education undoubtedly has much to offer, however, this approach may in fact impose limitations to the goals of the moral education programme as it needs to religiously abide to the dictates of the economic and political needs.

As a secular government with a multi-religious population, Singapore has also stayed clear of infusing religions into the school's curriculum. This is also seen as necessary as she needs to stay neutral and be seen as being impartial to any religious leanings. This so called neutral approach may be the biggest obstacle to the success of

⁶ Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, [Ed]. (1979). *Aims and Objectives of Islamic Education*, p.77.

⁷ See footnote no. 5.

the education system of Singapore in terms of instilling values in the students and in producing ethical persons in them. Al-Attas points out that ethics and morality (*akhlaq*) originally come from the religious consciousness and experience of humankind including the so-called philosophic virtues such as wisdom, courage, temperance and justice which if calculated independently of religion, cannot lead to a consciously experienced and permanent happiness. As such, higher and sincere ethics cannot be meaningfully practiced and sustained when they are divorced from religion, and developed merely as a social or personal philosophy or as legal and bureaucratic procedures.⁸

This study claims that the morality programme implemented in Singapore lacks a proper understanding on the holistic nature of man, his needs and development. Such exposition and profound discussion on human nature is abound in many religious writings and sources. For example, in Islam, Al-Quran is the supreme source that discusses the theme of human nature in great detail and depth. Therefore, the subject matter of human nature was given its due attention by Muslim scholars and much rigorous works and writings were devoted on it. The proper understanding of this subject matter, as elucidated by these Islamic scholars would be a rich resource and should be properly utilised for current understanding. This would lead to a more comprehensive CME programme to be implemented in schools.

1.2 SCOPE OF STUDY

The study aims to critically evaluate the effectiveness of moral education programmes in Singapore. The history of the moral education from Singapore's independence till the present will be studied in detail to unearth the philosophy, trends and methods of

⁸ Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud. (2000). Accountability Enhancement: Some Religious, Historical and Educational Considerations. *Al-Shajarah*, (5):2, 195.

its implementation. It intends to examine the reasons and justification of its morality programme being divorced from religions. The evaluation and the critique done on the moral education programme by some educationists would be looked into and its arguments would be studied in greater detail.

Another aspect of the study is to analyse the philosophical foundations of the moral educational programmes executed in Singapore. The many influences that govern the programmes, from the intellectual framework of its leaders, to the western influences would be reviewed so as to understand the impact that it has on the conception, formulation, and execution of the moral education programme.

As Singapore is a multi-racial and multi-religious country, the study would look at the perspective of the core religions and philosophies professed by Singaporeans. These are Islam, Confucianism, Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism. However, due to the limitations of the researcher, the study may have a bias towards an Islamic perspective, as compared to the other religions and philosophies.

In this paper, the research will be concerned only with a rather limited fragment of the whole spectrum of components that contribute to the inculcation of the moral values in a child. It is acknowledged that there exist many other avenues that are required to discharge this overwhelming responsibility of the inculcation of moral values in a society. These avenues include parents and their parenting skills, the home environment of a child, religious consciousness, school ethos and climate, the quality of teachers, peer influence, mass media and many others.

1.3 METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The aim of the present study is to critically evaluate the moral education of programmes implemented in Singapore, and to develop a more comprehensive programme based on a holistic model anchored in the religions and philosophies professed by Singaporeans themselves. To achieve this aim and the objectives of the study, the critical analytical method will be used. The historical data about Singapore, its education system, particularly the moral education programme will be gathered and critically analysed.

In this undertaking, other methods will also be employed depending on the topics of discussion. Historical investigation, textual analysis, and philosophical discussions constitute the main features of the approach adopted throughout the study. This will involve a good measure of critical analysis, interpretation and reformulation so as to bring into prominence the weaknesses and strengths of the moral education programmes and explore the implications of the material studied.

1.4 SOURCES OF THE STUDY

The sources of the present study as listed in the bibliography are of three categories.

First, the publications that were given due emphasis and attention are those documents pertaining to Singapore. The publications cover aspects of its history, the history of education in Singapore and specifically, the moral education programme in Singapore schools. A special focus would be on the reviews and critical evaluations done of the morality programme - by educationists, scholars, researchers, and even government officials – which analysed their successes and inherent limitations. Some examples of these works are by Chew, E.C.T. & Lee, E. (1991) *History of Singapore*; Tan, J. & Gopinathan S. & Ho, W.K. (1997) *Education in Singapore: a Book of*

Readings; Gopinathan, S. et al [eds.] (2001); *Challenges Facing the Singapore Education System Today*, Eng S.P. & Team (1981); *State of Moral Education in Singapore Schools*, and *Report on the Moral Education Programmes: "Good Citizen" and "Being and Becoming"* (1981); Gopinathan (1980) 'Moral Education in a Plural Society: A Singapore Case Study'; Joy Chew (1988) *Moral Education in Singapore Secondary School*; Tan, J. (1997) *The Rise and Fall of Religious Knowledge in Singapore Secondary Schools*; Tan, T.W. (1994) *Moral Education in Singapore: a critical appraisal*. Many of these important documents and internal reports (unpublished) are housed at the National Institute of Education of Singapore's library, the only Institute in-charge of training teachers in the Singapore education system. Several documents pertaining to the moral education in Singapore's secondary schools were obtained from the schools in Singapore. These authentic teaching materials are those that are currently being used in the implementation of moral education programmes in the classrooms of mainstream education in Singapore. The researcher herself has had three years of teaching experience (2001 – 2004) in a secondary school in Singapore and was involved in carrying out moral education classes during her teaching stint.

The second important source of study is the publications describing the western secular moral education, its philosophy, practices and challenges. Some of these works include *Moral Education* by Bull, N.M. (1969), *Moral Education* by Chazan, B.I. & Soltis, J.F. (1973), *Moral Education in a Secular Society* by Hirst, P.H. (1974), Hunter's *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age without Good or Evil* (2000), Kilpatrick's *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong* (1992) and Postman's *The End of Education* (1996), *Contemporary Approaches to Moral Education: Analysing Alternative Theories* by Barry Chazan (1985).

The third and most critical source of study is those publications that deal with morality, its concepts and practices, from the perspectives of the rich traditions of Islam and the other major religions and philosophies in Singapore. Among the Islamic works are Al-Ghazzali's "*Ihya's 'Ulummūddin*" and "*Mizānul 'Amal*," Miskawayh's "*Tadhīb al-Akhlāq*", Ibn Hazm's *al-Akhlāq wa'l-Siyar*, Mohd Nasir Omar's *Christian and Muslim Ethics* (2003); Muhammad Abu Laylah's "*In Pursuit of Virtue: The Moral Theology and Psychology of Ibn Hazm al-Andalusi* (1990). The works of the other religions include Liu-Shu-hsien, *The Contemporary Significance and Religious Impact on Confucianism: Public Lecture Series No. 1 1986*, (1986); Bradley K. Hawkins, *Introduction to Asian Religions* (2004); Master Hsing Yun (transl. by Tom Graham), *Buddhism: Core Ideas*, (2002); John Renard, *Responses to 101 Questions on Hinduism*, (1999); Vasudha Narayanan, *Understanding Hinduism*, (2004).

1.5 PLAN OF THE STUDY

There are six chapters in this thesis. Basically, it is divided into two parts. The first part, which consists of chapter two and chapter three, descriptively provides the history of the formation of Singapore, its education system focusing on the moral education programmes implemented in the public schools, and the reviews and critique by educationists and academics. The second part, which consists of the fourth and fifth chapters, reviews the moral education programmes from the perspective of the different religions and the presentation of recommendations for an alternative moral education programme anchored in religions.

The first chapter is the introductory chapter and chapter six is the conclusion to the thesis. The second chapter provides the historical landscape towards the formation

of Singapore, from a colonised entity to a young independent nation and its evolving into a First World country status. It also documents the educational landscape of Singapore public schools, with special emphasis on the moral education programmes implemented in Singapore's public schools. The third chapter simply relates the different reviews done on the moral education programmes by several people, mainly academics.

The fourth chapter reviews the ME programme from the perspectives of the different religions, with special emphasis on Islam. The researcher turns to different religious morality programmes, in addressing some fundamental issues that are central to an adequate understanding of human nature and what makes one moral.

Guided by the findings and analysis of the previous chapters, the fifth chapter is an attempt to present several recommendations that could be implemented to design a new alternative model of moral education programme for public schools in Singapore, one that is based and anchored in religions.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORIOGRAPHY OF STATE EDUCATION AND MORAL EDUCATION IN SINGAPORE'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we shall present the history of Singapore, which plays a critical role in shaping and directing the educational landscape of Singapore. As a young nation, the main pre-occupation would be geared towards ensuring its survival.

Singapore takes great pride in its success of evolving from a young under-developed nation to its current status as a First World country. Upon reaching this status, she does not sit on her laurel. In fact, a continuous serious concerted effort is spent on ensuring that its education system is kept up-to-date to serve the educational needs of the times. Within a span of several decades, educational programmes after educational programmes were rolled out and implemented for this very purpose. These programmes were frequently evaluated and scrutinised and whenever necessary, amended and fine-tuned to ensure that the education system remains effective and relevant.

Education in Singapore has always been intimately linked to economic aims. Fortunately, there is space provided for other objectives, such as the inculcation of moral values of Singaporean youth. This is manifested in the provision of moral education programmes within the officially-prescribed curriculum of the education system in Singapore.

2.2 HISTORY OF SINGAPORE

Very little is known of Singapore's history before the fourteenth century. From scanty, scattered references in various sources it has been suggested that the island had become a port of call and centre of trade as part of the Srivajayan commercial empire by the eleventh century AD.⁹ It was only in the early fourteenth century that this island-emporium became prominent 'as a major node of the long-distance maritime communication network on the routes between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. By 1330, it had become sufficiently important to appear simultaneously in Chinese, Vietnamese, and Javanese records. It was known in Chinese accounts as Long Ya-Men ('Dragon Teeth Gate') and then in Malay annals as Tumasek ('Place surrounded by the Sea').¹⁰

The Malay annals also recorded that an Indonesian prince, Sang Nila Utama, who was a ruler of Palembang sailed to Tumasik. On landing, Sang Nila Utama and his party saw a strange beast which they took to be a lion. This was considered a good omen and the new settlement was given the name "Singapura", or Lion City.¹¹

From 1400 until the Portuguese capture of Malacca in 1511 Singapura was a vassel state (*negara*) of the Sultan of Malacca. Thereafter when the heirs of the former Malacca Sultanate shifted their capital southwards to Johore, Singapura became part of the Kingdom of Johore and later the Riau-Johore Sultanate.¹²

Alarmed at Dutch attempts to impose a trade monopoly in the Malay archipelago, an English East India Company official named Sir Stamford Raffles,

⁹ Ernest C.T. Chew, "The Singapore National Identity: its Historical Evolution and Emergence" in *A History of Singapore*, edited by Ernest C.T. Chew and Edwin Lee (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991), 358.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Saw See Hock, *The population of Singapore*, (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007), 2.

¹² Ernest C.T. Chew, 358.

decided to establish a British factory or trading settlement on Singapore in February 1819. This event marked the founding of modern Singapore.¹³

Singapore from then onwards, became an attractive land of opportunity for the migrants from China, India and the surrounding land of Malay region. It went on to flourish under the British administration until the Japanese Occupation. It was later in 1968 that it was granted an internal independent State. In 1963, it merged with Malaya as the newly formed Malaysia with Sabah and Sarawak. However, the majority-Chinese Singapore against the Malay majority Malaysia brought much tension and Singapore was ejected from the merger and reluctantly became an independent state in August 1965.

Singapore's reluctant political independence in 1965 and the 1968 unilateral announcement of the British government that it would pull out its military bases in 1971 were two momentous events which pressed the PAP leadership both to industrialise urgently and sell to the world as strategies for the country's survival.¹⁴

2.3 EDUCATION IN SINGAPORE

Given the history of Singapore, the education system underwent many challenges in the different phases of its development. The challenges were in the form of combination of demands from economy, cultural and ethnic sectors. The educational system could be divided into several phases as follows:-

¹³ Ernest C.T. Chew, 359.

¹⁴ Jon S.T. Quah, "National Values and Nation Building: Defining the Problem" in *In Search of Singapore's National Values*, edited by Jon S.T. Quah (Singapore: The Institute of Policy Studies, 1990), 18.