

Asian Values and Confucian Ethics: Malay Singaporeans' Dilemma

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[Abstract: To refute recent claims by the Association of Muslim Professions (AMP) and Malaysian newspapers of Malay Singaporean marginalisation, the Singapore state issued a community progress report. Whilst statistics show that there is little evidence of systemic economic marginalisation, this article argues that the Asian values and Confucian ethics discourses pursued by the state in the nation-building process leaves little room for ethnic Malay discourse.]

The economic boom in the sixties experienced by the Newly Industrialised Economies (NIEs) of Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore and Hong Kong, euphemistically known as the four mini-dragons, engendered a cultural explanation for what was known as the Asian Miracle. By setting the economic precedence in the region Japan further legitimised the notion of an Asian "modernity," which in turn, legitimised surrounding Asian political systems, most typically authoritarianism, in their ability to sustain and even perpetuate economic growth. With this emerged discourses on "Asian values" and Confucianist ethics. Though much has been written on the two discourses flexible applications by politicians, academics, journalists, both Asian and Western, have given them an interchangeable quality. At the most generic level Asian values have been described as an Asian strategy to negotiate a position in Eurocentric notions of modernity. This negotiation reminds of different cultures and societies in different stages of development and thus acts as an Asian, some may argue authoritarian response to the *de rigueur* of liberal democracy. Confucian ethics, on the other hand, is more conventionally espoused as a series of cultural traits responsible for relational organisation between structure and agency. Deployed to (re)contextualise high savings rate, strong work ethic, respect for authority, socialisation over individualisation, maximisation of time etc., a Confucian ethics discourse is not dissimilar from a Weberian-like explanation of capital reproduction. The fundamental role of the overseas Chinese in the region's economic growth provides fecund grounds for correlating certain cultural values to capitalism. Confucian teachings replaces Protestantism, societal morality replaces predestination neuroticism. Though a straightforward comparison is too "facile" for some, since Weber's original thesis on capitalism proposed "generic reasons for the development of capitalism," Confucianism offers a historically specific alternative in response to the different forms of capitalism sampled by varying cultures (Tu, 1996:3-4). For others, whilst translatable values such as

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thrift, self-help and pragmatism between nineteenth Victorian bourgeois culture and twentieth century neo-Confucianism may point to the absorption of the latter by the former as explanation of capitalism, the notion of collectivism and its socio-political discursive resistance against excess of liberal individualism in global capitalism anchors firmly Asian values to a political location (Chua, 1999:573-4). What these scholars agree upon is the socio-political articulation of Asian values and Confucian ethics within a discursive space that is intrinsically tied to economic and political strategies of a particular geo-location.

The impact of Asian values as monolithic concept upon the myriad of cultures in Asia is profound. So too the ethnocentricity of Confucianism in Singapore, an island in the midst of Islamic dominance. Since its expulsion from Malaysia, Singapore has embarked on a trajectory of various ideologies for the primary purpose of nation-building. Asian values, Confucian ethics, "shared values" and most recently S21, have been deployed and framed on a national level in civil-political discourse for two purposes. First, as cultural ballast against the tide of global culture and its concomitant influences to retain some sense of identity and heritage; second, as a series of political strategies to counter liberal ideologies that challenge the status quo. Of the so-called "values" Confucianism occupies the most hegemonic position in the discursive space because of its traditional perpetuation vis-à-vis formal education and morality. Some have questioned the means in which Confucianism's status as formal education in premodern East Asia became touted as societal values for the illiterate masses since such touts ignore distinctions between popular culture and scholarly elite (de Barry, 1996:22). If we think of Asian values and Confucian ethics as a delve into the past to frame the present, we are speaking of replicating a historically specific space, a space overdetermined by a complex network of socio-political, economic, literary, cultural and historiographic specificity, within the contemporary space of post-industrialised Singapore. It is within this deterministic public space that ontology and epistemology are revived to frame political, social and economic affairs. The contemporary public sphere as such undergoes a philosophical, moral and ultimately ideological conditioning. With regards to the public sphere, Habermas makes the important distinction between self-regulation systems, such as capitalism, bureaucracy and ideology, whose imperatives override the consciousness of individuals integrated into them from the "lifeworld" - the world of consciousness and communicative action (1992). This distinction not only refutes ideology as mere inescapable false consciousness but also reveals a picture of society as contestation between individuals and self-regulating systems. The manner that Asian values and Confucian ethics attempt to (re)contextualise is a predominantly top-down exertion in which ministers, journalists, academics and others with means to construct a public space through the media seek to revive ontology and epistemology. As French philosopher Henri Lefebvre observes:

Perhaps it would be true to say that the place of social space as a whole has been usurped by a part of that space endowed with illusory special status - namely, the part which is concerned with writing and imagery, underpinned by the written text (journalism, literature) and broadcast by the media; a part, in short, that amounts to abstraction wielding awesome reductionist force vis-à-vis "lived" experience. (1991:52)

This article explores Asian values and Confucian ethics as dominant discourses in Singapore. Sketching briefly the notion of Pan-Malayanism, this article argues that the Asian values discourse as collective identity to counter liberal ideology is too ambiguo-

ous a concept to be held accountable for the integrity of minority representation. Open to interpretations of various Southeast Asian nation-states the Asian values discourse is annexed by domestic interests, and in Singapore, this isolate Malay Singaporeans from the familial notion of *Nusantara* (Malay World). Following this, the relationship between the Confucian ethics between Asian capitalism will be looked at. Suggestions that the economic success of the overseas Chinese perpetuates this discourse as a middle-class and, in Singapore, a national ethic will be made. This article then proposes that the AMP's status as a middle-class of an ethnic minority presents a domestic challenge to national ethic in Singapore and concludes by suggesting that uneven civil-cultural negotiations between minority and majority groups are part of the discontent manifest in claims of Malay marginalisation.

Pan-Malay Identity: Expulsion of Singapore From the Family

The influx of Chinese and Indian migrants during the nineteenth century into the Malay Peninsula upon British colonialism was a marked increase in relation to pre-colonial migration flows which were then largely restricted to the region. Over time as colonial rule consolidated its reign administrative apparatus were formed to facilitate socio-political rationalisation and segregation of what was, and still is, a highly heterogeneous and polyglot population. Different groups were categorised formally according to ethnicity – i.e. Chinese Malay, Indians etc. – ethnic classification that post-colonial Malaysia and Singapore have retained. Further, in accordance to the British colonial practice of recognising indigenous peoples, Malays were granted special privileges and reserve land whilst migrants were not allowed to own land freely. This classification, it is noted, was the foundation on which “exclusionary nationalism” was based (Hing, 2000:223). Colonial segregation of ethnic groups also rationalised the economic and political spheres. The concentration of ethnic labour in varying niches in the economy, “i.e. Chinese into tin mines and the Indians into plantations” (*ibid.*) served to fragment macro-ethnicity into pockets of ethnocentrism. Hing goes on to argue that though ethnocentrism may have existed before colonialism, the ethnic division of the economic sphere by the British induced further friction between ethnic groups because prior to this the Malays were not “tagged with intense feelings of competitiveness” (*ibid.*). Small-scale agriculture and land rights made the notion of land fundamental to Malay identity as indigenous people and to heritage. “Territory,” according to Isaacs after all, “is, at the least, a critical factor in maintaining group separateness; without it a nationality has difficulty becoming a nation and a nation cannot become a state” (1975:45). Territory provided the political space for the sovereignty, the loyalty and the familial role of the Malay *ethnie* to be enacted. The title “*Bumiputra*,” translating to “son of the soil,” best sums up the primal connection to the land, a land on which the Malay Malayan could claim historical origins. More importantly, Malay Singaporeans were denied this claim and were seen by Kuala Lumpur as a community under a self-governed Singapore. Without special or land rights, Malay Singaporeans were not *de facto Bumiputras* even though Singapore’s constitution guarantees them *de jure* status (Article 152). Disorientation emanating from this loss of land and privileges should not

be underestimated. After all, the concept of the "native" and "land," classical colonial ingredients for progressive nationalism, were important tributaries into the Pan-Malay identity where the concept of a larger family in which "extended kinship" recognised "putative descent," thus not only binding "concepts of mutual obligation" but also serving as "antipathy to outsiders" (Horowitz, 1985:57). In other words, land as discursive space for socialisation, identification, culturalisation and politicisation was lacking from the Malay Singaporean's later discourse on nation-building and nationalism.

The surge of Islamic consciousness at the turn of the twentieth century promoted a rise in national sentiments and serious contemplation of Malay identity-politics in Malaysia. According to Rahim, "culminated in the signing of the Federation of Malaya Agreement in 1948, which for the first time formally recognised Islam as an essential component of Malayness. This set a precedent for the conflation of Malay identity with Islam. Henceforth, to be formally considered a Malay (in Malaysia and Singapore), one must be a Muslim, speak Malay, and observe the traditions of the Malay culture" (1998:17). This signing was in part precipitated by the Sino-Malay polarisation aroused by British proposals for a Malayan Union in 1946. Under this proposed Union, a *jus soli* citizenship would have been granted liberally to all ethnic migrants in Malaya, partly to ease administrative rationalisation of the different Malay states, and partly to recognise the role played by the ethnic Chinese in the economy and fight against the Japanese (Lian & Hill, 1995:41-42). Equal citizenship rights would have neutralised the privileged status enjoyed by the ethnic Malays and protests were inevitable. Fronting the protest was the newly formed United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) which succeeded in rejecting the Union proposal and installing the Federation of Malaya Agreement under which "the sovereignty of the Sultans and the special positions of the Malays would be preserved" (1995:43), excluding Singapore in the process. Invariably as Malay identity conflated with Malaysian nationalism and Islamic surge, it began to exclude more decisively other ethnic groups. "Citizenship was offered to non-Malays but the qualifications for eligibility were restrictive" (*ibid.*). This citizenship was based, according to Lian and Hill, on a *Melayu* nationality, distinguished from a *bangsa Melayu* identity. They explain that "*Melayu* nationality was premised on free will and would be bestowed on all who decided to renounce their ties outside of the Malay Peninsula" while *bangsa Melayu* "was defined in primordial terms, in that cultural traits were inalienably bound to a particular people sharing a single and common origin" (1995:46). The strong links between Islam and the notions of indigeneity compounded this ideal of Pan-Malayanism to link nationalism with the protection of indigenous Malay special rights.

This Malaysian nationalism was both acknowledged and contested by Singapore. Leading up to and during the merger with Malaysia from 1963-65, the presence of a Chinese majority in Singapore put the country in constant political conflict over ethnic-political issues with Kuala Lumpur. Singapore's People's Action Party's (PAP) active campaign for a "Malaysian Malaysia" (euphemism for a pluralist and egalitarian Malaysia) aroused displeasure amongst the Malay Malaysians. Myths over ethnicity, land claims and ethnic privileges were by then already installed in the consciousness of Malaysian nationality, all of which would again come under threat should Lee's campaign have succeeded. Needless to say, PAP fought a losing battle for a place in the Malaysian family. Even kin-

ship and family ties of both ethnic Chinese and Malays spanning the two countries could not overcome the imaginary and primal attachment to Malaysian land.

It is within this historical context of converging and diverging ethnic cultural narratives that this article proceeds with the exploration of Asian values and Confucian ethics in independent Singapore and their implications in Malay marginalisation. Drawing from the breath of years between 1965 and present day, this article argues that public discursive space in which national discourses are espoused, further complicated by global culture, is a better example of Malay marginalisation than claims of economic or educational discrimination.

Asian Values: Problems with Collective Identity

Conceptually speaking, the term "Asian values" in itself arouses scepticism. The idea that the myriad of national and indigenous cultures from Indonesia to Korea to Hong Kong to India share a common set of defining characteristics holds very little water. Conversely however, its prioritisation of communal rights over individual rights, economic welfare over human welfare and adherence to authoritarianism over liberal democracy begins to make more sense as an ideology that privileges the particular interests of the ruling class. The two most vocal advocates of Asian values in Southeast Asia have been Singapore's Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew and Malaysia's Prime Minister M. Mahathir. Their usage of the term is argued to be an Asian alternative to Western modernity whereby a Eurocentric modernity is challenged by "culture" of Asian civilisations, and more pragmatically whereby industrialisation and postindustrialisation may be achieved with authoritarian-styled governments (Khoo, 1999). Where Orientalism constructs knowledge of the East, so too Occidentalism depicts the West in equally essentialist terms, a depiction that stirs up aspirations over the moral integrity of the West through the "many aspects of the 'Asian values' discourse" (Vickers & Fisher, 1999:384).

The ideological strategies of Asian values are slightly different from Confucian ethics although there are many overlapping areas. Asian values emphasise a collective and regional identity as reflexive response to the cultural and ethnic diversity of Southeast Asia. The problematic construction of national image in the face of heterogeneous migrant histories and cultural narratives remains a constant source of political and ethnic instability in the region. By introducing a sense of collectivity, vis-à-vis exclusion of the West, the Asian values discourse is an appeal to participate in the collective self-consciousness of a geographically ambiguous "Asian" society. To overcome this geographical ambiguity the popular *raison d'être* of Asian values discourse, at least within Southeast Asia, lies in the overlap of histories, cultures vis-à-vis migration and the experience of industrialisation. Individuals envisage an image of others in this society not as participants of common ancestry but of common present predicated on the conjunction of experiences such as the colonial heritage of imposed ethnic-identity formations, the confidence from relative economic success throughout the sixties, seventies and eighties in which direct foreign investment grew, and the self-belief encouraged by a postmodern age. Much like Anderson's (1983) "imagined communities" where all members of a society will never meet each other but are still able to function as a collective society

because of an imagined communion, the Asian values discourse relies on the idea of commonality that feeds well into the nation-building process. The construction of nationhood and national identity not singularly based on ethnicity or religion alone but on commonality despite diversity is especially pertinent to post-colonial multi-ethnic nations like Singapore. The Asian values discourse as such represents a political strategy not merely on a local national level but an ideological grid on a regional level to perpetuate a notion of Pan-Asianism. The influential discourse of course varies from country to country. Indonesia, Japan or even Taiwan and Hong Kong are not as staunch advocates of the discourse as Malaysia and Singapore, and this may have to do with the cultural confidence that stems from the relatively homogeneous ethnicity of the former countries – rendering an appeal to collectivity and ambiguity irrelevant.

Nonetheless, in Singapore, a “common present” acts as a foundation from which a common destiny is projected. (Re)constructing the West and reconciling Asian-ness with modernity proceeds to inform political and socio-cultural discursive spaces to reify a fast globalising world. For whilst local politicians often emphasise the impact of globalisation on local economics and industries, they often insert the need to retain a separate identity. It is within these discursive spaces, advanced by political ideology, media and academia, that diverse ethnic narratives are utilised only for symbolic cultural capital to interpellate the “Asian” while the political components of these narratives are subsumed by the need for collectivity. This interpellation of the Asian is however fraught with contradictions. Not only do political leaders who are self-professed advocates of the Asian values discourse continue to ethnically discriminate within their domestic realms, but also new wealth in Southeast Asia has resulted in the sprawl of a new middle-class that seeks to distinguish itself from other Asians, i.e. via the status value of employing domestic maids from Philippines and Indonesia etc. (Pinches, 1999:21).

Singapore’s communal national values are also constructed from these notions of “Asian-ness.” The values such as selflessness, consensus and compliance transform from cultural philosophy into national ideology that, in turn, is buttressed by these notions of “Asian-ness.” The White Paper on Shared Values (1991) institutionalised broad cultural values for ready application to all ethnic and religious groups in the country. This institutional project served to identify common strands of thought, recognise their complicity with economic imperatives and then essentialise them to construct an inclusive but vague national identity with ethics complimentary to capitalism. By replacing the Marxist/communist conceptual baggage of the term “ideology” with “national ethics” (Chua, 1995:32) Asian shared values secure an important foothold in the national discursive space in which alternative ideologies would find themselves in conflict with essentialist but ambiguous ideas of Asian-ness. This essentialist/ambiguous dichotomy has endowed the Asian values discourse with endurance and flexibility. Another way of looking at the essentialist/ambiguous dichotomy is to see the Asian values discourse as an ethnicised/de-ethnicised dichotomy. The discourse’s appeal to culture and tradition are appeals to ethnicity, hence its general relevance, whilst broad assumptions and vague descriptions of cultural tenets for broad application reveal its non-specific de-ethnicised quality.

The Association of Muslim Professional’s (AMP) call for “collective action by Malay leaders” and “political clout to influence national policies” (Straits Times, 26

Oct. 2000) clearly challenged not just the status quo of Singapore but also the homogenised “de-ethnicised” macro-identity promoted by Asian values discourse. Formed a year after the First National Convention of Singapore Malay/Muslim Professionals in October 1991, the AMP emerged as a predominantly middle-class organisation. Its regular calls for “collective leadership” throughout the ten years of its existence are driven by a petition against “systemic defects” of the state’s practice of co-opting Malay/Muslim intellectuals. One such defect, spelled out in their Vision 2010, is the dilemma faced by Malay/Muslim PAP MPs. As one member puts it: “The Malay MPs were caught in the middle. They had to speak up, but they must also toe the Government line. It was a delicate balance” (*Straits Times*, 21 Oct. 2000). “They cannot be seen to be publicly championing Malay/Muslim interests, out of fear of antagonising their own non-Malay constituencies” (AMP website). For the AMP collective leadership entails a “decentralisation of power” to “propose policy stands and options for the (Malay) community” (*ibid.*). Decentralisation of power and collective leadership however makes heterogeneous the homogenous. With ethnic communal leadership comes the politicising of ethnicity. This politicisation teases out ethno-cultural distinctions that have destabilising effects on the “de-ethnicised” macro-identity. Ethnic politicisation, according to Benjamin, revives endogenous cultural narratives within the discursive space of a multicultural Singapore whereby “ethnic labels...are little more than names - labels of a primordial group identity, which derive in the first instance from an imposed, externally derived set of cognitive categories rather than from the cultural “facts” on the ground” (1976:117). Insufficient local studies compound confusion between variations of ethnicity as cultural capital, autonomous discourse and ideological contestation. This brand of trajectory into the discursive space of the Asian values discourse reveals the disparity between “values” as cultural capital and “values” as political aspiration. Doing so, this phenomenon proves Habermas’s earlier point of the public sphere not dominated by self-regulating ideology but one that contains contestation between dominant values and private consciousness and communication. Without any sign of dominant ideology overriding AMP’s plans, the myth of commonality comes under threat, which in turn may challenge the validity of the Asian values discourse.

In this sense, the AMP’s proposal may be argued to be symptomatic of localised identities seeking to dispute both essentialist proposals of what it is to be “Asian” and the strategies of authoritarian systems for inducing acquiescence based on this “Asian-ness.” The crux of the problem lies partly in the confusion of conformity for collectivity. Easily annexed for authoritarian justification, Asian values is prescriptive instead of descriptive when faced with internal conflict. Notions of “multiculturalism,” “harmony,” “consensus” etc., are called into curative action as prescriptions of how Asians *should be* whilst the reality of inter-ethnic ideological conflict does nothing to refute the validity of the discourse as description. The manner in which the AMP has elicited state responses, the responses themselves and how the issue is negotiated by both sides will have impact on the moral authority of Asian values discourse. When a middle-class organisation feels “there is a serious need for both sides to address the mutual distrust” (*Straits Times*, 29 Oct. 2000 (a)), social cohesion comes under scrutiny. The monolithic discourse of Asian values offers neither room for manoeuvre nor interest-led bargaining within its tightly

discursive space. Often in such cases, as with the AMP, pressures from dominant values in this discursive space are activated to repress the endogenous cultural narratives for political harmony. Unfortunately, crude and simplistic appeals for de-politicised conformity are made without addressing the possibility of a heterogeneous and diverse collectivity where differences and bargaining do not undermine institutional structures but legitimises them. As such, the AMP's proposal for better Malay/Muslim representation shows the Asian values discourse's advancement of a cultivated macro-identity to be deficient.

Confucian Ethics as Class Construct

Much has been written about the sinicising effects of Confucian ideology in multiethnic Singapore and there is no need to expound them further here. It must be remembered however that Confucian ideology's formal induction in national discourse in early 1982 when it was included in the local academic religious knowledge curriculum was the result of long held cognitive associations. Interest in neo-Confucianism coincided with the rapid economic growth of the sixties. The discourse was further anchored by Japan, essentialised by the capitalist role of the overseas Chinese, furnished by anthropologists, economic commentators and the like, and finally stuttered with the Asian Crisis of 1997. Although the Asian values discourse too suffered as a result of the crisis, criticisms were mostly levelled at authoritarianism, read: contradiction to Western-styled governance. The Confucian ethics discourse, on the other hand, hinges on the importance of *guanxi* (personal connections) to overseas Chinese businessmen (Hobday, 1995), the economic-cultural lessons America can learn from Japan's modernisation processes (Vogel, 1981), and the Weberian link between Chinese capitalism and culture (Redding, 1990). The relative success of the overseas Chinese, or *Nanyang* diaspora, despite discriminatory policies, past and present, in Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines provides incentive for a cultural explanation of capitalism. Being so, cultural "idiosyncrasies" like high savings rate, strong work ethic, respect for authority, informal business networks, filial piety, sense of order and family loyalties etc. are deployed as normative explanations for this economic phenomenon. With regards to Malaysia, the Philippines and especially Indonesia, Redding juxtaposes the Chinese's economic significance and minority status with those of the indigenous majority (1990:25-31). He observes that "to be considered lazy and selfish, to have made no contribution, produces not only practical sanctions in the non-availability of benefits but also severe psychological sanctions in the non-majority of people would wish to avoid" (1990:39). This psychological conditioning seems to distinguish not only Chinese ethnicity from other ethnicities but also classes within the Chinese community. For if material worth is culturally translated to self-worth by the Chinese (or at least by the Cantonese in Redding's example), then only a certain class strata of economically successful Chinese will be validated as cultural symbols of "Chinese ethnicity" since only they have displayed the ethics for wealth accrue. Over time, this notion, perpetuated both by Chinese and Western commentators alike, become synonymous with the middle or upper-middle class of overseas Chinese. That the Confucian ethic discourse is fundamental to this cultural translation of wealth to self worth makes it a central issue in class formation. This propensity for attributing Confucian ethics to economic development

however not only obscures multifactorial and/or contingent causes such as global and regional opportunities and growth, but also obfuscates these double-edged explanations. As Hozler notes: "For instance, if one advocates the relevance of 'loyalty' to economic development the possible side-effects, such as nepotism, tend to be neglected" (2000:457). The fact that nepotism as a value, in the sociological sense, was not identified as peccadillo attests to the way in which the phenomenon actually benefited capitalism by expediting briefly investments, business dealings and bureaucracy.

The Confucian ethics discourse is helpfully categorised by Liu into three different discourses, i.e. Confucianism as philosophical insight; Confucianism as political ideology; and Confucianism as storehouse of popular values (1996:111). The Chinese majority in Singapore ensures the discourse as philosophical insight and popular values remains relevant, albeit with help from the state. And though not a formal political ideology of Singapore, the Confucian ethics discourse exists as a *de facto* national ethic. As former Minister of Education Dr. Tay Eng Soon warns against abandoning these values;

"Our society is essentially still a conservative one. We still hold such values as thrift, hard work, keeping of one's word, honour in dealing with others, a sense of shame in not looking after our families or our parents... Let us not assume that these values will always remain with us. Many great societies, even in our time, have been built on such values, the Protestant ethic, the Confucian ethic, and so on" (quoted from Large:1985:90).

In view of Singapore's pragmatism, here is little doubt that this brand of national ethic is highly complementary to economic imperatives. Local actors and agents engaged in direct foreign investment, overseas business, government-linked corporations and domestic industrialisation become the highly visible class embodiment of Confucian ethics. Interestingly, very little is said about economics in Confucianist teachings. To be sure, one is more apt to find the teachings warning of seeking profit above all else such as Mencius's lecture to King Hui of Liang at the start of *The Book of Mencius*. Along with this example, Chan provides a brief sketch of how Confucian ethics were continuously (re)interpreted to suit contemporary socio-political contexts of ancient China and suggests that Singapore has deployed teachings in the same way (1996). This appropriation of Confucianism is evident in the conflicting political events and decisions made in Singapore during the Cold War years. Respect for government on one hand, eugenics on the other; respect for society on one hand, internal security act on the other; filial piety on one hand, ready abortion for the less educated on the other. Appropriated Confucianism not only loses moral authority as national ethics, but more importantly, demonstrates that adherence to Confucianist ethics alone did not secure Singapore's economic success. And as Chan concludes: "We readily credit the development of Singapore from war-ravaged colonial outpost to the modern, clean, and tidy city-state to the policies and leadership of Lee (Kuan Yew). But when he was leading his country towards modernisation and prosperity, he had little time for Chinese culture or his Chinese educated compatriots. So, it would be disingenuous to credit Confucianism for the process, or result, of Singapore's development" (1996:39).

Furthermore, appropriated Confucianism, by rationalising economic processes, perpetuates ruling-class interests. Espousing Confucian acquiescence to secure compliance from the populace not only protects these interests but also constructs a Sino-cultural identity to resist the ills of global culture. As such official discourse has it that compli-

ance and hard work have engendered a middle-class (most visible in the Chinese majority) that is reaping the benefits of pragmatically oriented state policies. It may even be argued that appropriated Confucianism in Singapore, because of its ethnocentricity and "economic rationale," protects the culture and interests of this middle-class Chinese majority from which the state garners the most votes. Participation in the Confucian ethics discourse, after all, requires some knowledge of the Other, i.e. the West, and economic self-belief, both of which the poverty stricken aged or lower-income classes in Singapore lack. The Confucian ethics discourse is also conflated with the scholar-class in Singapore. Under various schemes and organisations, government scholarships are offered to academically superior students. These scholarships come with a working bond to the respective government organisations for a total of four to six years. A recent *Straits Times* interview with students awarded these scholarships revealed that a portion did not intend to serve out their bond, sparking a controversy over the nature of scholarships as mere legalistic contracts and the moral obligations to serve the country that came such scholarships. The concept of the mandarin class and imperial scholar of ancient China were evoked in the subtext of the morally outraged section of readers who wrote in while the state itself admitted these scholarships were deployed to renew the civil service. The Confucian concept of *junzhi* (honourable men) as institutionalised by the White Paper on Shared Values was inextricable from this scholar-class primed for government service. This can be explained by the deep permeation, as demanded by Confucianist ideology, of morality, or at least the concept of, into the notions of polity and nationhood. This convergence of the Confucian ethics discourse, selected few and the notion of government resulted in the "high degree of congruence in the relations between institutions, worldviews and persons." This particular discourse as worldview integrates "institutional orders into unities of meaning and at the same time furnish individual biographies with a situation-transcending context of meaning" such that "worldviews are spread over the social structure as a whole and yet are tightly bound up with daily routines" (Habermas, 1992:156). The Confucian ethics discourse bound up with political and economic discourses begins to narrate the philosophy of a specific class. Nonetheless the overall promotion of Confucianism as social reality failed as evidenced by the dwindling enrolment of Confucian knowledge in the school curriculum and the protests from certain quarters against the sinicising of multicultural Singapore. This failure, however, to completely Confucianise the populace, or at least the Chinese section, is not the abandonment of the philosophy as national ethic since it continues to be perpetuated and legitimised by both political leaders and journalists alike (see Chua 2001, Kao Chen 2001).

The AMP's status as a middle or upper-middle class Malay/Muslim minority organisation challenges the validity of Confucian ethics discourse. Ethno-cultural explanations for material success are debunked by the core of Malay/Muslim professionals, i.e. accountants, engineers, who have achieved high local standards of living. AMP's class status a *de facto* alternative to the ethnocentric national ethic for economic survival. Meritocracy, ready education and the presence of self-help groups such as *Mendaki*, have seen the Malay community increase their median monthly income by 44% from 1990 (although not in pace with the overall increase of other ethnic groups). Sharing national resources with the Chinese and Indians, following the same routes to success

via equal schooling opportunities, non-discriminatory exams, the absence of ethnic quotas on business ownership etc., a small but significant Malay middle-class has risen in Singapore purely on merit as opposed to their counterparts under the New Economic Policy in Malaysia. Without overt government aid and benefit of discriminatory policies, the AMP represents a middle-class pregnant with the potential to espouse an alternative ethnocentric ethic discourse that may later challenge the Confucian ethics discourse for a foothold in the national discursive space should more Malays swell into their ranks. Outside Singapore, this potential will be multiplied on a regional scale if a significant number of the Malay/Muslim population of Malaysia and Indonesia, with or without government aid or discriminatory policies, can duplicate the success of AMP members. This scenario depends very much on how the relationship between the Malay/Muslim communities in Southeast East and modernisation prosper. Furthermore, the cultural translation of material to self worth practised by ethnic Chinese (Redding, 1990:71) may not have much relevance to the Malay/Muslim community where religious piety and *Gemeinschaft* relations seem to carry more weight. If the Malay/Muslim community in Singapore manages to oscillate smoothly between the capitalist and its private sphere, if local Malay/Muslims overcome their ethnic insularity in business dealings, if a network of contacts between local and overseas Malay/Muslim businessmen is developed, the same patterns of communication and contacts deployed by the overseas Chinese businessmen may evolve. Dialect groups, family ties, ethnicity etc., once the structure of Confucian ethics discourse may be tested by the Pan-Malayism and Islamic grid of the old *Nusantara*. This is of course a long way off since the success of the local Malay/Muslim community alone cannot achieve the width and depth of a network the Nanyang sojourners took over two hundred years to develop. Nonetheless, given the economic gulf between Singapore and her Southeast Asian neighbours, any foreseeable moral challenge to the Confucian ethic discourse as cultural explanation for capitalism will emerge from a realm where meritocracy and economic success are closely linked.

The AMP's recent proposal for an annual Malay/Muslim Congress is the nascent precipitator of such a discourse challenge. As with most alternative discourses, it begins with the perceived inadequacies of dominant discourse. "The association noted," as reported in the national paper, "that the shortcoming of the PAP Malay MPs was that they could not be seen to champion Malay-Muslim interests publicly without running the risk of antagonising non-Malay constituents" (*Straits Times*, 29 Oct. 2000 (b)). The organisation's goal, "for the community to have, by 2010, a team of people voicing alternative and authoritative views to balance and complement the role of PAP Malay MPs" (*ibid.*), clearly contradicts the Confucianist class hierarchy whereby "charismatic quality radiates from the central class" such that "the periphery can be a recipient but it can never be a point from which charisma emanates" (Shils, 1996:64). This precise source of charisma is an indication of the leadership mandate of the central class. The state has always made clear, in no uncertain terms, that it reserves the right to rule, and whilst consultation has increased under Prime Minister Goh, the ruling party's political grip on national discourses has not relented significantly enough to suggest an alternative ideology will be welcomed. The size of the Malay/Muslim middle-class gives it two

options; to be assimilated into the larger Chinese middle-class within which consumption and voting patterns seem to be homogeneous (Tan & Chua, 1999), or to remain highly visible in the public sphere of media and politics to better press for negotiation.

Conclusion

According to Lefebvre spaces are socially produced. The varying narratives that share a space negotiate with each other to inscribe the space. The multiethnic space is perhaps one of the most complex and fiercely contested of social spaces. Internal hierarchies of class and gender further influence the social, political and civil inscription of this space such that specific meanings are given to institutional systems and relations between structure and agency. The most visible inscribers of these meanings are naturally the dominant class or group within the space. In Singapore, a tightly regulated media ensures a controlled social space for public discourse. This social space is not merely managed by state regulation but also through its perpetuation by the majority of its participants. The ideology of this space is one of "collectivity," "consensus" and sometimes "conservatism," all of which are often essentialised as Asian traits. In this space, public discourse undergoes a political homogenisation. Discourse diversity is only legitimised if they are propelled by a cultural capital that celebrates and prescribes notions of ethnicity, cultures or historical narratives instead of challenging them. A semi-authoritarian state and an ethnic Chinese majority in Singapore make both the Asian values and Confucian ethics discourse very attractive. The AMP, differentiated both by ethnicity and religion from the majority poses an alternative to these discourses. By suggesting Malay marginalisation, the AMP is in fact contesting precepts of collectivity and commonality within the Asian values discourse, and this has repercussions on the conventional nation-building narrative espoused. The discourse's role in the formation of a Pan-Asian identity to negotiate an Asian space in the traditionally Eurocentric project of modernity has been examined by other scholars, but few have looked at the internal fracturing of this discourse caused by protests from indigenous Asian ethnic groups and the resulting exposure of the discourse's ad hoc deployment of "collectivity." With the Confucian ethics discourse on the other hand, the AMP is an anomaly to the conventional cultural precept for capitalism. The association's middle-class status offers an alternative to Confucian ethics for capital reproduction. The economic opening up of China and the flow of Chinese Singaporeans there suggest that Confucian ethics will continue to be bandied around with some conviction. This conviction may be challenged if Malay/Muslim dominated countries like Malaysia and Indonesia ever get their acts together sufficiently to match Singapore's economic strides. At a local level, the infusion of Confucian mantras like *janzhi* and other ethnocultural moralities with the polity and civil behaviour creates a discursive space in which the AMP must negotiate straddling both *a priori* structures and ethnic concerns. The limited room for diversity is as much engendered by the inscription of values of the dominant ethnic group in public discourse as it is by state restriction. The AMP's success in championing Malay/Muslim interests depends much on how it negotiates the state in a tightly controlled discursive public space; a space that is, at present, overwhelming in the latter's favour.

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