

Education, Culture and the Singapore Development State: “World Soul Lost and Regained”?

Yeow-Tong Chia
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Yeow-Tong Chia’s account of civics, social science and history education in Singapore offers a stimulating description of the relationships between education, citizenship and state formation and economic development. Singapore is a fascinating site to explore these connections, which Chia does skilfully. Beginning with British colonisation and ending in the recent past as Singapore, located so close to Muslim states, grapples with the consequences of global terrorist fears after 11 September 2001, this book reveals the nuances of hegemonic alliances between education and political interests.

Chia tackles his subject via a series of six crises; indeed, he identifies a “culture of crisis management” (p. 180) as characteristic of Singaporean Government engagement with education throughout its history.

The first crisis Chia describes arose out of colonisation and decolonisation, as Singapore was compelled to wrestle with the inheritance of conflicting educational traditions. Unlike in settler colonies like Australia, the British in Singapore did not seek to use education to inculcate British values, allowing a Chinese educational tradition to flourish. With Merdeka – Malay for independence, marking the period of self-government from c.1955 – education was used to reconcile these educational traditions with the Malaysian culture to forge a new, developing identity.

The next crisis occurred in 1965 when Singapore gained independence from Malaysia, following a period of race-based violence. Building the new multi-racial nation on the basis of bilingualism required urgent consideration of education and curriculum and the rapid development of discourses about civics and citizenship that influenced Singaporean schooling.

A third crisis was grounded in fears of the corrupting influence of western decadence as Singapore’s developing economy engaged with changing global political economics. “Asian values” infused curricula, offering a moral framework for civic and economic development. These values, in a fourth crisis over religion, were adjusted in hegemonic “shared values”, which bolstered Confucian principles as core to Singaporean society and economy. At this point a discussion of Weber’s contention that Asian values were inimical to capitalism, gestured to in Chia’s Introduction, would have been welcome, though Chia’s project is rather to detail the relationship between political discourse and curriculum, rather than to elucidate relationships between culture and economic structure.

History teaching joins this educational history of morality at a fifth crisis, in which the Singaporean Government fears that without a strong and coherent national narrative, Singaporean children will fail to identify with the nation. Critical thinking, an intrinsic part of this educational schema, Chia argues, was undermined when the Singaporean state encountered a final crisis, wrought by the combination of an Asian financial crisis and terrorist attacks in the USA. Fear permeated the curriculum, inhibiting ideas that the

government might find dangerous in the perceived crisis of national security, and in the process undermining crucial aspects of the educational apparatus.

Drawing on an impressive archive and selection of secondary literature, Chia connects each of these crises with a critical examination of the relevant curricula, usefully outlined for his readers. Palgrave Macmillan has, in turn, allowed Chia good space for notes and bibliography, so often curtailed in today's publication scene. His analysis is paired with clear, well-written and concise accounts of Singapore's political and economic history helping the reader (though with far too many acronyms) unfamiliar with Singaporean history to keep up throughout the narrative.

The wide scope of the historical narrative that included state formation and economic development, however, was only partially matched by Chia's discussion of political discourse. In this sense, civics education – even with social science and history – was too narrow to really explore the nature of the relationship between education and the Singapore “developmental state”. His focus on culture was interesting, but it was unable to offer a causal or structural relation to the state or economy.

As far as culture goes, race dominates Chia's narrative, as politicians and educators seek to use curricula to forge unity. Chia has deftly outlined the racial tensions that informed debates over Singaporean curricula, though this left me curious about some other important, related issues. Political discourses veiled the sources and nature of inequality that sat under some of the concerns it expressed, leaving me unsure about the ways that race might interact with class or gender in allowing or inhibiting opportunity for social mobility through education as the “developmental state” grew.

For Australian educational historians *Education, Culture and the Singapore Developmental State* ought to be a welcome intervention. In a historiography where our shared knowledge of education in Asia is principally related to Australia's Cold War “Colombo Plan”, a better understanding of the history of neighbouring educational systems is long overdue. Furthermore, Chia's book also raises a range of issues that are relevant today. Contemporary Australian debates about civics education are in some respects forged by crises that echo those Chia has detailed: youthful ambivalence that political leaders fear might undermine national stability or even democracy itself, and who may seek to bolster political interests with specific curricula and hegemonic historical narratives.

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Empire of Scholars: Universities, Networks and the British Academic World 1850-1939

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The *End of Empire* should have been fatal to imperial studies. Instead, as the remarkable Manchester University Series edited by Emeritus Professor John Mackenzie attests – and of which this current book by Dr Tamson Pietsch is a stellar example – the reverse has