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To cite this article: Jasmine B.-Y. Sim & Lee Tat Chow (2019) Confucian thinking in Singapore's citizenship education, *Journal of Moral Education*, 48:4, 465-482, DOI: [10.1080/03057240.2018.1556155](https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2018.1556155)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2018.1556155>



Published online: 11 Feb 2019.




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ARTICLE



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ABSTRACT

Teachers in Asia are often perceived to occupy passive roles as citizens, subject to collectivist goals which take precedence over the interests of the individual. This assessment typically stems from a liberal-democratic perspective, which prioritises the individual as autonomous and self-responsible. While many endeavours have been undertaken by scholars outside education research to debunk the simplistic understanding of Asian thinking as passive, there remains a lack of attention to the distinctive features of Asian cultures and thought within the field of citizenship education. This article aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of citizenship education in Singapore, and challenge the perceived passivity of teachers in Asia by exploring—particularly from a Confucian perspective—how a group of social studies teachers made sense of citizenship. We identify three emergent themes from the interview samples: Relationality, Harmony and Criticality and discuss them accordingly.

KEYWORDS

Citizenship; citizenship education; Confucianism; Singapore

Introduction

Citizenship education in Asian countries have been noted for their collectivistic orientations, 'providing a guide for behaviour in daily life', 'encouraging civic consciousness', 'strengthening national identity' and 'fostering family values' (Cummings, 2001, p. 279). These typically aim to cultivate a good citizen, one who is hardworking, loyal, compliant and law-abiding (e.g., Boontinand & Petcharamesree, 2017; Han, 2007; Zhao, 2015). From the liberal-democratic perspective, this vision of good citizenship, as Westheimer (2015) claimed, 'is not enough' (p. 44). Rightly or wrongly, citizenship in Asia has been described as passive, and its citizenship educators are often 'mythologized' as 'simple ideological "dupes" of national governments' (Nozaki, Openshaw, & Luke, 2005, p. 2).

For instance, Han (2007) contended that children in Singapore were subjected through a process of socialization 'into accepting a rather passive conception of citizenship' (p. 395). 'Active citizenship', so conceived by the Singapore authorities, emphasized grassroots voluntarism over participation in political processes at the national level (Han, 2000, p. 70). Such claims are justifiably tenable especially from a liberal-democratic perspective.

However, educational researchers may be partial in their analysis, drawing upon limited approaches in the available literature on the Asia-Pacific, which 'has tended to

present views of “Asia” from the standpoint and perspective of Western and Northern epistemologies and disciplines’ (Nozaki et al., 2005, p. 1). For instance, while citizenship for the Western tradition is fundamentally political, characterized by the state–individual relationship and primarily concerned with rights and responsibilities, citizenship in the Asian context tends to foreground morality over politics, prioritizing harmonious relationships between oneself and others (Cogan, Morris, & Print, 2002; Lee, 2012). Indeed, further attention to underlying assumptions is required if a more comprehensive understanding of the apparently passive values of citizenship in Asia is to be attained (Kennedy, Kuang, & Chow, 2013).

This article aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of citizenship education through the Singapore context, and challenge the apparent passivity attributed to teachers in Asia. We will explore how a group of social studies teachers made sense of citizenship in Singapore using a Confucian perspective, through which we identify three emergent themes found in these teachers’ discourses—Relationality, Harmony and Criticality—and discuss them accordingly. It is important to note that this article utilizes a Confucian lens, fully aware that Confucianism is far from a monolithic and homogenous tradition comprising of various and sometimes competing schools of thought. It is not this article’s intention to normatively argue for any single interpretation of Confucianism, but rather to constructively present some broad themes commonly found in Confucian thought for the purposes of engaging citizenship education research in addition to analyzing policies and practices.

Related literature

The Western liberal self and the confucian relational self

The Western liberal tradition is premised upon a notion of the inherent individual, one who is autonomous, free and self-responsible (Kim, 2010b). Accordingly, the ethical ideal of civil society in the Western liberal tradition is propelled by an ‘innerworldly individualism’, privately ‘realized within the hearts, minds and acts of exchange of individual social actors’ (Kim, 2010a, pp. 478–479). In this context, rights are attributed to individuals to ensure their autonomy, allowing them the space to develop without external interference (Faulk, 2000; Fouts & Lee, 2005). The inherent, rights-bearing individual thus defines the basic political unit for the Western liberal tradition, with the protection of individuality and individual rights emphasized over obligations and responsibilities (Nuyen, 2002).

In contrast, no comprehensive conception of the ‘self’ in Confucianism can be reached without recourse to one’s relational roles and responsibilities, it is simultaneously a *relational self* (Ames, 2011; Cheng, 2006; Ke, 2015; Thompson, 2017). Put differently, there is no inherent individual in Confucianism that ‘transcend[s] the ordinary human social relationships or [is] unencumbered by them’ (Kim, 2010b, p. 440). In this context, relations provide for the relational self a ‘critical epistemological and moral backdrop against which to claim [one’s] own individuality and personhood’ (Kim, 2010a, p. 486). Naturally, familial relations—our most intimate set of relations—denote a central heuristic in Confucianism, providing important metaphors and basic units of references for broader political culture (Nuyen, 2002; Tu, 1996).

In lieu of the importance ascribed to familial relations, critics such as Liu (2003) have astutely pointed out the nepotistic tendencies of the Confucian tradition, involving ‘consanguineous affection’ where the primacy of family-ties, or blood relatives, are prioritized at the expense of greater public good. Other scholars have attempted to address these criticisms by highlighting the emotional and ethical basis of familial relations which serve to condition one’s relations with the broader community beyond one’s family (Guo, 2007; Roetz, 2008). That is, the needs of others are inferred from one’s own familial relations and familial affection is extended towards the wider public (Chan, 2013; Kim, 2010a).

Underlying the Confucian discourse is then an intimate continuity between the family and the community. The boundaries between ‘private’ and ‘public’, intimated between the private individual and public realm, are ambiguous and fluid within the Confucian relational framework (Fouts & Lee, 2005; Kim, 2010b; Li, 2006; Shun, 2004). The assumption here is that ‘the nonfamilial . . . is *in continuum* with the familial’ (Kim, 2010a, p. 477). It is in this sense that *The Great Learning*, one of the four Confucian classics, traces the ordering of the family to precede the establishment of proper governance and peace in a state.

Harmony, not conformity

Stability, conformity and homogeneity are often advocated under the rhetoric of preserving ‘harmony’. Historically, the imperial Chinese regime maintained social order by emphasizing conformity in its citizens, ‘stressing the moral, rather than cognitive or affective, development of individuals with similar ethical qualities’, much at the expense of nurturing rational and independent citizens (Law, 2015, p. 36). More recently, concerns for harmony among Chinese authorities saw the implementation of an education system that educates for passive and obedient citizens, inhibiting differences and diversity in discourses (Ke, 2015; Zhao, 2015). These examples of harmony paraded under the banner of institutionalised Confucianism are oppressive and questionable, and arguably depart from a Confucian understanding of harmony from its classical roots.

Importantly, harmony (*he*) is explicitly divorced from sameness (*tong*) in the Confucian classics (*Analects* 13.23). Scholars have variously analysed the significance of *he* through its etymological proximity to analogies of the culinary and musical arts; Confucian harmony, it is argued, consists in harmonizing contradictions and oppositions into coherence without demanding homogeneity, in the same way that good soup or good music resides in a balancing of different and contradictory tastes or tones (Li, 2006). In this regard, Confucian harmony does not involve the ‘mutual accommodation of difference that attenuates discord’, but requires a creative coordination of discord into ‘optimum effect’ (Ames, 2011, p. 169).

Harmony in Confucianism strives to balance opposition in diversity, rather than blind conformity, obedience and total identity (Kennedy et al., 2013; Yao, 2013). As Ames (1998) put it, returning to the culinary reference of well-prepared soup:

Signatory of this harmony is the endurance of the particular ingredients and the cosmetic nature of the harmony in an order that emerges out of the collaboration of intrinsically related details to embellish the contribution of each one. (Ames, 1998, p. 56)

In this sense, the moral vision encapsulated in the Confucian perspective does not seek for ‘social control’ according to fixed principles, but rather ‘aim[s] for the kind of spontaneous harmonious order’ which eschews a top-down imposition (Tan, 2009, p. 546). Li (2006) noted that Confucian harmony precludes an exhaustive and absolute postulation of ‘what kind of balance of [moral] values is the best’, without at the same time resorting to moral relativism which effaces existing moral values (p. 599). Likewise, Cheng (2006) emphasized a distinction between ‘moral education’ and ‘education for morality’ in the Confucian context. While moral education more narrowly educates for specific moral values, demanding adherence to static principles, education for morality seeks to develop ‘a human being capable of sustaining and fulfilling his humanity and creating a social context of interhuman relationships of trust and respect’ on a broader level, implicitly allowing for a plurality of moral values (Cheng, 2006, p. 560). This understanding of harmony that preserves opposition as part of inter-human relationality, is especially significant in foregrounding a discussion on Singapore’s practice of consensual politics in the name of social harmony. As we shall explore in the next section, a departure from existing consensus through critically challenging norms, does not necessarily constitute a breach of Confucian harmony, and if anything, is necessitated by it.

Criticality

Lee (2004) contended that the overriding concern for harmony explains why many Asians are willing to endure ‘soft authoritarianism and soft democracy ... because to them maintaining harmonious human relationships is more meaningful than reconstructing an ideal house’ (Lee, 2004, pp. 29–30). The desire to sustain harmony, conceived as an absence of conflict, ‘implicitly precludes all forms of challenges to structural or systemic inequities and suggests that oppositional viewpoints should not be expressed’ (Ho, 2017, p. 489).

However, as previously discussed, scholars have contended against the conception of harmony as conformity in Confucianism. Building upon the aforementioned notion of harmony, being critical of pre-existing status quos is included in the Confucian notion of harmony, while simultaneously remaining sensitive to inter-human relationality. Kim (2011) noted that ‘Confucian incivility’, ‘a set of social practices that temporarily “upset” the existing social relations’, are often mistakenly eschewed amidst concerns to sustain harmonious relationships (p. 27). Yet, far from being taboo, ‘... Confucius (and Confucians) embraced as part of filial and fraternal responsibility ... [actions] such as gentle remonstrance and admonition’ towards authority figures (p. 38). Actions which disrupt existing social/political patterns or moral values are essential to ensure the well-being of the state; an entourage of uncritical conformists facilitates the state’s decline (*Analects* 13.15, 14.22).

The imperative to remonstrate with authority figures pertains on a familial level as well. Despite how important harmonious familial relations are, ‘Even parental authority, if exercised in an immoral way, should be respectfully disobeyed’ in the Confucian context (Chan, 2013, p. 142). What is emphasized in the Confucian exercise of critical action in attempting to change existing practices is that doing so does not lead to ‘a complete disruption’ or estrangement of the relationship; in the context of the relational

self, relationships are ‘indispensable to each party’s moral growth’ (Kim, 2011, p. 39). Exercising criticality in a part of one’s relational duties thus undergirds a harmonious relationship, where failure to remonstrate with one’s parents ‘is to feel insufficient concern’ in the relationship (p. 40).

The capacity to critically voice opposition within the boundaries of keeping harmony with parental or political authorities is especially important in the context of Singapore’s paternalistic approach to governance. As we shall discuss, the social studies teachers in this study negotiate this very tension, presenting nuanced ways in which critical self-expression can be balanced with concerns for cohesion.

‘Asian values’ in Singapore

A small nation state in Southeast Asia, Singapore gained its abrupt independence in 1965; without natural resources and an ethnically fragmented society, its prospects were dire. The ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) secured the nation’s progress by relying on a political discourse of survival and vulnerability of the nation, themes which have provided strong ideological constructs, justifying policies and unifying Singapore’s diverse communities until today (Chia, 2011; Chua, 1995).

The Singapore government has single-mindedly pursued citizenship education aimed at nation-building (Chia, 2011; Hill & Lian, 1995). Moral education and citizenship education are closely integrated, reflected in how mandatory school subjects Civics and Moral Education, and Character and Citizenship Education are organized. Similarly, social studies, a key vehicle for citizenship education, seeks primarily ‘to inculcate in students a deeper understanding of the values that define Singapore society ...’ (MoE & UCLES, 2017, p.3). While moral values and ‘right conduct’ are regarded as essential to being a good citizen (Chew, 1998), morality has been treated instrumentally to hold Singapore’s pluralistic society together, and to provide cultural ballast to the perceived erosion of ‘Asian values’ (Tan, 1994).

Rapid industrialization in the 1970s and 1980s led to concerns over the erosion of ‘Asian values’, expressed by the then President of Singapore in 1989: ‘Traditional Asian ideas of morality, duty and society which have sustained and guided us in the past are giving way to a more Westernised, individualistic, and self-centred outlook on life’ (Shared Values, 1991, p. 1). ‘Westernized’ values were perceived as threats that would deculturize Singapore and destabilize the societal common good (Hill & Lian, 1995). Consequently, political leaders called for the return to ‘Asian values’, embodied in a vision of shared citizenship, known as ‘Our Shared Values’ (Tan, 2012; Teik, 1999).

The Shared Values (1991) consists of five broad values:

- Nation before community and society before self
- Family as the basic unit of society
- Community support and respect for the individual
- Consensus, not conflict
- Racial and religious harmony

The Shared Values harked back to a communitarian ethic, stressing discipline, family, consensus, respect for authority and sacrifice for the collective good (Jacobsen & Brunn, 2000; Hill & Lian, 1995; Kennedy, 2004; Tan, 2012; Teik, 1999). Although not explicitly Confucian, the Shared Values bore strong resemblances to Confucian ideals. Chua (1995) noted the apparent privilege that Singapore's authorities attributed to Confucianism in the latter's function in providing a robust foundation for the propagation of 'Asian values' to the younger generation (see also, Chia, 2011, p. 394). Hill and Lian (1995) similarly remarked on the 'collective orientation' of Confucianism which provided a 'generalized social discipline', facilitating 'the effective mobilization of the population' amidst Singapore's pragmatic ideology (pp. 202–203). It is noteworthy the circumstances under which Confucian Ethics was introduced, through the Religious Knowledge initiative in 1982 which included Buddhist-, Hindu-, Islamic-Studies, Bible Knowledge and World religions. Under this initiative, Confucian Ethics received a 'disproportionate share of the resources devoted to the moral education programme' (p. 200). Religious Knowledge was subsequently dropped when 'the divisive potential of religion became evident' (p. 9).

In adopting a code of Confucianist ethics, Singapore's leaders see themselves as 'honourable men' (*junzi*), governing with the best interests of Singaporeans in mind (Chua, 1995). Eschewing 'the Western idea that a government should be given as limited powers as possible, and should always be treated with suspicion' (Cmd 1 of 1991, p. 8, cited in Chia, 2011, pp. 396–397), the leaders believe that an elite group of highly educated, dedicated, and honest leaders should govern. The discourse that surrounds Singapore's elites emphasizes responsibility, where 'being the best carries with it the responsibility for being the most able and virtuous, and for leading by example' (Mauzy & Milne, 2002, p. 54).

Methodology

Participant and school selection

This study used the multiple case study design, a multi-site qualitative approach (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). The teacher is the unit of analysis and each teacher constitutes a case. Multiple case study provides a rich contextualized understanding of citizenship through the intensive study of specific teachers, and the differences and similarities between them. It involved over a year of intensive participation in the field, interviewing, observing and recording field notes. Seven social studies teachers from six schools (Table 1) were selected based on ethnicity, gender and especially for their experience, with at least six years, within the maturity phase of teacher development (Katz, 1972).

These teachers were also selected based on the national ethnic profile and distribution to capture a range of viewpoints; they comprised three teachers identified as Chinese, one as Malay, one as Indian, one as Arabic and one as Eurasian (of mixed European and Asian parentage). Five of the seven teachers were female, approximating the statistics released by the Ministry of Education (MoE; 2015) where 35% of secondary school teachers are male. The six schools are government schools funded by the government, attended by the majority of children in Singapore, and strictly follow the guidelines provided by the MoE.

Table 1. Participant information.

Name	Gender	Ethnicity	Years of experience	Type of school
Adila	F	Arabic	8	Government, Boys
Maria	F	Eurasian	28	Government, Co-ed
Suhaila	F	Malay	7	Government, Co-ed
Thomas	M	Chinese	17	Government, Co-ed
May	F	Chinese	21	Government, Co-ed
Yanli	F	Chinese	8	Government, Boys
Nair	M	Indian	20	Government, Co-ed

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected from semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Each teacher was interviewed four times for 60–90 minutes, answering four sets of questions, including teachers' background and philosophy; teachers' understandings of citizenship and their pedagogical practices in social studies; and how teachers related curricular policy to citizenship. The final round of interviews were conducted a year later to tie loose ends.

Each teacher was observed five times on what the teacher did and said in the lesson, with reference to citizenship. Detailed field notes of the lesson observations were written. With the permission of the participants, interviews and observations were audio-recorded and transcribed. All the interviews and lessons were conducted in English, the language of instruction in Singapore schools. Data analysis was inductive and shaped by the notion of grounded theory and its attendant constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1999).

Four forms of data analysis and interpretation were used, including direct interpretation, categorical aggregation, establishing of patterns and a description of the case (Creswell, 1998; Stake, 1995). During the data analysis process, the raw data, including interview and observation transcripts, were first read multiple times for different possible interpretations. Thereafter, they were hand coded. During multiple readings of the text, these codes were then refined and modified to minimize inconsistency and redundancy, and aggregated into categories. We searched for patterns among these aggregated codes and then generated themes. Interesting patterns and apparent contradictions were also noted (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Examples of codes were 'relations' and 'harmony' or the tendency of a teacher to make reference to her relational roles and responsibilities. The themes were then developed into three main typologies: relationality, harmony and criticality.

To ensure the credibility of the findings, member checking, that included confirmation interviews with selected teachers, and having the two authors separately come to their own conclusions on the themes, together with methodological triangulation of the data across the sources, was performed (Stake, 1995). The qualitative data elicited from these teachers are contextual, and they help us explain the teachers' everyday lives and understand why they have certain sets of preferences in their discourse on citizenship.

The identities of all seven participants in this study have been suitably anonymized and attributed pseudonyms.

Findings

Relational citizenship

Two key features were identified in the teachers' discourses on relational citizenship. First, explicit references were made to relations in tangible contexts, with attention paid to the familial. Second, extending from the familial conceptions of citizenship, an implicit continuum was conceived between the 'private' and 'public' spheres.

Relations in tangible, familial contexts

Relations formed a significant core in the teachers' conceptions of 'good citizenship'. Accordingly, good citizenship went beyond the legal duties of a 'law-abiding citizen', and emphasized commitment at an affective level in family and community (Rosemont, 2015, p. 129). Instead of describing good citizenship ideologically, these teachers grounded good citizenship through the tangible relations of family and community. For instance, Suhaila conceived 'knowing where you come from' as important for a good citizen, but stressed that this investment must be tangible, 'grounded not only in your country ... but your community and family, the idea of where you *really* come from'.

It was among the female teachers that references to familial relations were the most pronounced; Suhaila, Maria and Yanli, all likened their roles as citizenship educators to mothers who were concerned for the character and moral growth of their students. Most telling was Maria's emphatic remark that her 'love for the community and country' are 'not the same as [loving] the government of the day'. She continues explaining her conflict, 'torn between being a mother ... and being a teacher [of the state]', lamenting that 'like a mother, the teacher needs a closer, one-to-one interaction with students to mold them well'. But she is unable to do so under a structured programme that demands a mass propagation of state values. This distinction underlines the teachers' keen sense of their status as civil servants, and suggests that teachers perceived their role in apolitical terms, and did not see themselves as conduits of state ideology for their students. The emphasis on moral and character development, in the context of familial ties, depicts apolitical roles for teachers in nurturing their students to become moral persons.

'Moral persons' here emphasized the cultivation of human-to-human interactions over the promotion of ideological affiliations. As Adila remarked, her goal was to cultivate students as 'good human beings', stressing 'the human element ... it is about relating to each other at a very personal level'. Similar tones were struck when the other teachers variously resounded the need to be 'more forgiving and understanding', to strive for a 'compassionate society' through 'empathy', to 'consider all perspectives', and to be 'more aware of interactions with different groups of people'. These teachers stressed the need to be inclusive and sensitive in the face of a diverse demography.

Relations as continuum

The continuum between 'private' and 'public' was apparent in the way that teachers conceived their familial roles, the fulfilment of which is indispensable to the well-being

of the wider community. 'You cannot divorce the country from your nuclear existence ... your parents, your family', Adila noted, contending that raising her family properly was 'the biggest social service' she needed to fulfill. Similarly, Suhaila conceived that ensuring 'your family is good ... [by] raising your children right' defined the responsibility of a good citizen. May contended that 'what kind of citizen the student turns out to be is very much a product of the influence from home'. These references suggest a tacit recognition that one's 'private' life is inextricably linked with 'public' life, extending into the wider community (Tu, 1996, p. 26).

Harmony and multiple perspectives

The conception of harmony held by the teachers largely discouraged conformity, instead, encouraging difference and even opposition through adopting multiple perspectives. Two approaches to harmony were identified among the teachers: the first adopted a multiplicity of perspectives as an end goal, focusing on its dialogical nature, emphasizing negotiation among different perspectives. The second adopted multiple perspectives instrumentally, as an unavoidable reality of the globalized world that needed to be mitigated.

An example of the former approach, Thomas treated the engagement of multiple perspectives as an end, where 'it is the ability to take on multiple perspectives ... to have that more holistic view of things in life' that he hoped students would retain if nothing else. He reduced the official narrative mandated by the MoE as one perspective among others, imperatively stressing that alternate perspectives be given due consideration 'whether it is from the opposing parties [or the authorities]'. Thomas contended that 'if you only choose to present the authorities' version at the expense of all other perspectives, it becomes propagandistic'.

Inherent in this first approach of taking multiple perspectives is recognizing the nature of conflicts in different perspectives, and the willingness to engage these differences in dialogue. Likewise, Suhaila presented her understanding of harmony as going beyond a static order, involving ongoing interaction that gradually enhances awareness for oneself and those around. She explained, 'Harmony is not an outcome but a process. It is about the things we do to maintain balance, as what we do has an impact on others'. Similarly, Adila imperatively stressed the need to recognize differences and cultivate the skills to negotiate conflicts without effacing opposition:

The Singapore society is *not* so sanitized, we are very diverse and have many aspirations that can conflict. So harmony is about having the psychological, emotional, and social strengths, and educational, economic resources...to negotiate the tensions from these conflicts ... in the process we understand one another better, and can agree to disagree.

Where Suhaila is ethnically Malay-Muslim, a native minority in Singapore, Adila represents an example of a minoritized-minority as an Arabic-Muslim (easily mistaken for Singapore's native Malay-Muslim group). Adila's call for preserving opposing perspectives in a 'non-sanitized' manner points to the Singapore society's pursuit of

consensus over conflict, where an overemphasis on social cohesion discourages the expression of different and especially opposing viewpoints.

Teachers who adopted the second approach saw engaging in multiple perspectives in instrumental terms. For instance, Yanli, who declared herself a ‘firm believer’ of the official narrative, affirmed the importance of multiple perspectives for the purpose of ‘gearing [the students] towards the one MoE is driving at’. She elaborated, ‘There’s no way you can get them to appreciate the national message if you just tell them, “This is the only version”’. The perceived ‘fragility’ of the nation, a reminder constantly articulated by Singapore’s leaders, occupied a perpetual concern for these teachers, and potential divisiveness resulting from diverse perspectives gave occasion for such concern. This was apparent with the level of care Yanli exercised when she cautioned her students that, ‘Diversity may not be the best way ... when we have too much diverse opinions ... who should be least reinforced and who should be respected’, concluding that ‘diversity can be something good, and something bad’.

In contrast, Nair eschewed perspectives that deviated from the national curriculum, pragmatically justifying his practice with confidence: ‘We can’t tell students everything ... they’re not mature enough ... teachers need to be selective, reinforcing the official messages and values. It’s alright, we’re doing what is right to maintain peace and harmony’. Nair’s understanding of harmony placed an overwhelming emphasis on ‘keeping the peace’, contending that ‘we don’t have to go into controversies’ which might ‘open a can of worms’. Nair viewed the sharing of opposing perspectives as overextending his conceived role as an ‘executor’ of the official narrative, stating that teachers should keep their views to themselves, where ‘even if you don’t agree, do not tell the young minds’. While it is tempting to cast Nair in a negative light, it is crucial to consider Nair’s experience in law-enforcement prior to becoming a teacher. Nair’s decision to shield his students from controversies demonstrates a calculated move, derived through his personal encounters with radicalized personalities in his previous job. To protect and ensure Nair’s anonymity, we cannot provide further details, but he felt that students ‘will not be able to handle conflicting views in an appropriate way’, causing ‘misunderstandings that risk social stability’.

Criticality and graciousness

Critical thinking was also emphasized in the teachers’ citizenship discourses. By critical thinking, teachers referred to two things, to ‘cultivate greater awareness of the community’ (its diverse constitution and needs) and to ‘take action in questioning and challenging established norms’. Unsurprisingly, cultivating awareness was prioritized by the teachers over advocating for action due to fear of jeopardizing harmony in society. Teachers who advocated action, however, also stressed the importance of being a ‘gracious citizen,’ and the need for sensitivity and restraint in dialogue.

Consistent with his wariness of teaching students multiple perspectives, Nair was disinclined to challenge norms and authority, rejecting it as detrimental to social stability. As ‘government servants’, Nair felt that teachers had ‘to toe the government line’ and ‘carry out the curriculum for nation-building’. He opined: ‘How can you build

a nation when you encourage dissonance?’ For Nair, ‘critical thinking’ in students involved being cognizant of ‘only the facts’ that inform and justify government policies.

Unlike Nair, Suhaila wanted her students to be ‘more questioning’ but shied away from advocating action, finding the latter to be ‘very extreme’. Hence, ‘questioning’ took on a less confrontational tone, as ‘knowing what is going on in the community’. She described questioning as ‘a positive tool for the common good’, because ‘through your questions, you make others aware of the issues’.

In contrast, challenging norms and authority was more strident in Maria’s and Adila’s discourses. They encouraged students to be vocal and not be afraid to critique official knowledge. Maria stressed to her students that, ‘if you, in your heart, have the evidence and think that they are not a good government, then you should hold the government accountable and try to change them’. Similarly, Adila stated that ‘you should be critical of things which are not in place, according to the ideals and principles that have guided our society’, adding that doing so indicates ‘you care enough for the country’.

It is noteworthy that all seven teachers were not actively involved in any form of public participation—political or social—at the time of the study. While we may attribute the teachers’ lack of participation to a lack of time, what is more significant is the cautious attitude inhibiting their participation, where advocating for change in the public sphere is perceived to potentially endanger the community’s stability in irreparable ways. For instance, this can be glimpsed from Maria’s worry despite her strident calls to challenge norms: ‘What if students come up with activities that really disrupt the harmony in Singapore . . . then I worry’. As we noted earlier, these teachers were often predisposed to think of participation as properly caring for their own families, contributing to the collective health of the community.

Consequently, the notion of being ‘a gracious citizen’ surfaced as a paramount responsibility when critically advancing conflicting viewpoints. For the teachers, ‘gracious citizenship’ emphasized flexibility and openness for dialogical exchanges. It involves, in Adila’s words, ‘human-to-human’ interaction in a ‘socially respectful and civil society’. She explained, ‘In dialogue, it is *how* people do it rather than what they say that is crucial’. She elaborated:

People are afraid to raise questions because they think they are being insensitive. But there are ways to do it. You need to be conscious not to make the other party feel threatened, it’s not a competition. When you are not in an adversarial position but well-meaning to understand the issues, like, ‘This is my perspective, what is yours, can we see if we can meet? Can you help me understand the issue better?’

The emphasis is to be reciprocal in dialogue, mutually sensitive and constructive in relationships over the ideological right of way.

Discussion

This section discusses several issues observed in the findings with the view of providing a more nuanced understanding of citizenship, including: (1) participation and the fluidity between private and public; (2) non-political nature of citizenship; (3) implications of relational familial ties; and (4) limits of criticality.

Participation and the fluidity between private and public

In Western discourses on citizenship, the ideal, active citizen is a ‘public actor’, leading an engaged life and caring for ‘the public household, the common good’ (Parker, 2003, p. 11). He/she deliberates together with others in policy decisions to solve public issues. Opposite to the active citizen, the ‘idiot’, a term of reproach in Ancient Greece for a ‘private, separate, self-centred—selfish’ individual, is one who does not participate in public life (Parker, 2003, pp. 2–3). The idiot remains ignorant of the interdependence between the individual and community; as Aristotle wrote, ‘Not being self-sufficient when they are isolated, individuals are so many parts all equally depending on the whole which alone can bring self-sufficiency’ (1958, p. 6).

The teachers appear to hold a passive and inactive conception of citizenship: all seven teachers fell short of the Aristotelean ideal of the ‘public actor’. When asked to reflect whether they were participative citizens, Suhaila’s response was typical, ‘Must [one] overtly join certain groups, or volunteer her services to show participation? Must participation be external? ... Then no’. Further, most teachers were predisposed to talk about citizenship broadly within the private realm of the family.

The private and public dichotomously conceived in the West revolves around resolving ‘the tension between unbothered philosophical individuality and active political citizenship, or between private moral agency and public political life’ (Kim, 2010b, p. 438; see also Lee, 2012; Rosemont, 2015). However, from a Confucian perspective, the teachers in this study conceptualized citizenship on a different basis; a fluidity between private and public forms of participation was maintained, where the fulfilment of family obligations in the private sphere was to them no less significant than participation in public. As Maria described it, the family and the broader community consists ‘in an expanding environment, from the core [one’s own family] to the extended family’. Similarly, Suhaila, argued that caring for the family and bringing up children as useful adults must be recognized as ‘a citizenship activity and responsibility. You don’t have to show overtly ... because the family is the basis of our society’.

Strikingly, these teachers articulated ‘public’ participation differently, describing it as ‘external’ and ‘overtly’. Suhaila’s reflection further emphasizes this point: ‘My mother doesn’t do these external things. She brought us up well ... cares about her relationship with others, cultivates good relations with the family, neighbours ... that is being participative’.

Non-political nature of citizenship

Seen through a Confucian lens, the teachers did not conceive citizenship in political terms characterized by state–individual concerns (Lee, 2012). The teachers’ main concern was not about rights and responsibilities, but with the cultivation of the individual in their ‘moral and character development’ as the foundation for a harmonious society. They often referred to citizens as ‘persons’ or prefaced citizens with ‘good’, where the good is concerned with the moral over the political dimension. May’s statement best illustrates this: ‘My compelling mission is to make sure my students excel in character. Remember the source ... be filial to parents, express gratitude to teachers’. This view, according to Lee (2012), can be understood from the perspective of moral self-

cultivation in the Asian tradition, where being a good person is requisite to being a good citizen.

An additional nuance to the teachers' emphasis on moral development, is the focus on relations at a more personal level, which dilutes—or makes less singular—the propagation of communitarian relational ethics. The focus on interhuman relationships by teachers allows greater space to nurture multiple and opposing voices in students. As observed in the findings, most teachers in this study saw as more important *how* students engaged others, over the positions the latter adopted. The emphasis on the familial thus places greater attention on the ways students develop as unique persons rather than a homogenous citizenry.

Implications of relational familial ties

It was evident that the family served as the starting point in the teachers' citizenship discourses, variously expressed as the 'root', 'anchor' or 'grounding' for good personhood in society. Propriety and responsibilities within the family constituted a dominant focus in the teachers' discourses. Yanli's statement illustrates this: 'As a parent, I want to ensure my child learns to appreciate the family, the responsibilities that anchor him . . . able to perform them and move on confidently'. Similarly, Suhaila reflected: 'My identity is shaped by the ties and responsibilities to my family'. This marks a departure from the Western narrative of intrinsic selfhood as antecedent to one's relations, to a notion of a 'relational self' constituted by and who also constitutes one's relations (Rosemont, 2006).

The reference to family was more dominant in the female teachers' discourses, which also saw a correlation between their roles as teachers and their familial roles as mothers. These teachers saw themselves more as mother-figures than citizenship teachers, the former bearing a distinctly affective tone. Congruent with this emphasis on affection were the teachers' understanding of participatory citizenship as volunteerism, such as that of 'helping the less privileged', underscoring an ethic of care towards the broader community. This is qualitatively different from the volunteerism in Westheimer's (2015) personally responsible citizenship, that is conceived as a character trait and a function of personal responsibility detached from the broader social context.

Volunteerism in the present case, by contrast, is rooted in familial affection, aimed at cultivating dispositions to relate to others in relationally sensitive and reciprocal ways. As the first school of humanity, family ties serve to initiate a process of 'familializing' the relations outside of one's personal scope as 'the family writ large' (Chan, 2013, p. 160; Nuyen, 2002; Tu, 1996). The Confucian assumption here is that relationality in family, properly consummated, moves towards the forging of humane relationships with the broader community (Guo, 2007; Roetz, 2008). As Thompson (2017) noted:

The admonition . . . is to appreciate relationality as the natural default state of human life, and to view the self-centered orientation as immature, small-minded, and, indeed, 'idiotic' in the old Athenian sense of not being involved in one's community. (p. 891)

Thus, familial relations (and by extension volunteerism) sets the basis for an ethical project that extends to increasing layers of the community.

The limits of criticality

The notion that action exercised critically towards established authority would threaten social harmony dominated the teachers' citizenship discourses. This inhibited their willingness to actively challenge authority, opting instead to emphasize 'awareness' over action. The implicit rationalization here was that awareness acted as a safeguard for social harmony should any action, if at all, be undertaken. However, problems arise when concerns for harmony become dogmatic and turn into guises for docility, prompting uncritical adaptation to pre-existing social patterns (Kim, 2011). This could be seen in the example of Nair. Conceivably, the excessive concern for harmony prevents the proper execution of checks and balances towards political powers and established norms, and therefore has ramifications for embedded structural injustices (Ho, 2017).

From a Confucian perspective what remains missing for these teachers is to see that challenging their familial and political relationships, with genuine intentions to revise existing social patterns, can be undertaken within the moral boundaries of harmonious relationships. The act of remonstrance in the Confucian framework is driven by affectionate concern from remonstrator to the remonstrated; to critique a state of affairs with corrective intentions shows that, as Adila put it, 'you care enough'. In this context, the relationship between government and the governed is 'more concerned with the moral quality of the relationship', rather than keeping a rigid hierarchy (Kim, 2011, p. 41). Thus, one should always maintain a 'reflective moral attitude', examining the 'ethical reason' behind one's relational engagements, critically determining if one's actions are appropriate (Chan, 2013, p. 139). The Confucian exemplar is not one who heedlessly '[goes] through the motions' blindly following trends (Rosemont, 2006, p. 13).

In this regard, harmony in relations, as Kim (2011) noted, involves a process of harmonization requiring 'incivilities such as (gentle) remonstrance and admonition—the Confucian equivalents to civil dialogue' (p. 40). The concern to maintain harmony need not, and should not preclude the adoption of action, especially in keeping critical checks and taking action against unjust practices.

Conclusion

This article set out to challenge the perception of passive citizenship in Singapore and argue for a more nuanced understanding of citizenship. We began by scrutinizing the underlying assumptions that premise the Western and Confucian traditions, and their respective derivations of citizenship. The roles that relationality, harmony and criticality play in Confucianism serve to demarcate a different set of rules in which citizenship in Singapore unfolds. We explored teachers' discourses on citizenship and noted their apparent passivity when scrutinized under the Western ideal of active citizenship. This approach, however, fails to capture the nuanced role that relationality plays in Singapore's citizenship, and we have attempted to remedy that by tracing the relational and familial overtones running through the teachers' discourses. We further explored the way that harmony and criticality unfold in Singapore citizenship, and have made

suggestions from a Confucian perspective to initiate a richer and more productive heuristics in engaging them.

It is noteworthy that this study is also limited by the use of only a Confucian lens in analysing the teachers' discourse, when the Singapore society constitutes a diverse and multi-ethnic population. Despite the influence of Confucianism in Singapore's politics, the Singapore society is undoubtedly a synergistic result of numerous cultural influences working together—such as the Malay, Indian, Chinese and their respective dialect groups—which we were unable to cover here. Although the teachers in this study were of Arabic, Eurasian, Malay and Indian ethnicities, they resonated strongly with Confucian ideals. It is however unclear the extent to which their own ethnic backgrounds came into play. It is possible that the communitarian and instrumental Confucianism that the Singapore government pursues has been successfully saturated into society. These ideas warrant further study. While focused on Singapore, the study has unearthed findings that are sufficiently general for consideration when researching citizenship in the Asian context, to better understand the different conceptions that citizenship can take in different contexts.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Education Research Funding Programme, National Institute of Education (NIE), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore, project no. OER 10/14JS. The views expressed in this article are the authors' and do not necessarily represent the view of NIE.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the Education Research Funding Programme, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University [OER 10/14JS];

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