Historic Evolution and Characteristics of Singaporean Core Values

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Abstract. It is a huge challenge in Singaporean modernization that its core values are based on countries’ acceptance extracted from various ethnic groups and multiple beliefs. Under the guidance of national equality and respect for diversity, Singapore government actively promote the formation of core values based on countries’ acceptance by coexistence of multicultural values, integration of values and cultural fusion. Singaporean core values put emphases on patriotism featured with loyalty and dedication, harmonious and forgiving national policies, and moral codes of kindheartedness and comity. The core values derived from the integration of cultures are the spiritual sources for Singaporean ethnic harmony and cultural prosperity, making the cultural wasteland in the old days into today’s cultural oasis.

Introduction

According to historical experiences, values as the core of culture are forces which create hate and divide, and forces which unite. Any society’s harmonious development needs a system of values which depends on core values and multicultural values. Singapore is an immigrant country which has many beliefs. Not only does it have traditional values from five thousand years like China, but it does not have humanity foundation of two hundred years’ cultural integration like America. Therefore, these are the realistic and harsh problem facing Singapore society, for example how to extract core values based on countries’ acceptance in the value system of multicultural beliefs and how to cope with the challenges posed by western values by local values in the process of opening up and development.

Historic Evolution: Co-existence, Integration and Fusion

Singapore is a naturally formed immigrant country. Chinese, Malayan and Hindu traveled across the oceans and were compelled to leave home due to financial reasons. And then they settled in lion city adjacent to the Strait of Malacca. Except Malayan geographical features and strong awareness of ownership, early Chinese and Hindu merely regarded Singapore as a place for making a living rather than a place for propagation. Their mothers, fathers and relative even sons and daughters remained in their motherlands. In such circumstances, their concerns about Singapore are far less than homelands. Even those second generation of immigrants born and raised in Singapore are immersed in their fathers’ culture since childhood so they could not form national acceptance and belonging towards Singapore. Immigrants with different languages and skin colors labor in the same economy, live under the same government but they form culturally separate and divided islands. Even in the formative years of Singapore, immigrants conformed to their very own beliefs and living method. And strong awareness of protection left different groups on the alert of each other and rarely speaking. The founding fathers of Singapore have a clear awareness that a loose and divided society could not form cohesion, let alone prosperity. So Singapore government decides to use forcible ways to bridge the cultural gulf, making the formation of core values begin with “co-existence”.

Fighting Becoming the Base of Value Co-existence

Singapore government believes that “co-existence” of diverse cultures and multicultural values
begins with communicating and living with each other so they vigorously promote English popularity policies and quota policies relating to ethnic home renting. They regard English as the common language and expect ethnic integration and cultural exchanges by promoting common language. English popularity policies pose huge impact on Chinese who are a vast majority. Although at the cost of a generation of Chinese future, the exchanges and communication between ethnic groups are increasingly frequent. In the meantime, world known home renting system has played an indispensable role in ethnic integration in Singapore. Home renting must conform to the quota of Chinese, Malayan and Hindu. These homes are without walls, open and well equipped. They also are convenient for neighbors to communicate. In addition, they are near high end commercial residents, which is favorable for communication between different nationalities and classes.

Under the background of dire economy, cultural acceptance was temperately cast aside, and making a living and achieving development has become common desire. Since the People’s Action Party in power, they are motivated by the sense of urgency, namely time and tide wait for no man and sense of responsibility, namely constantly striving to become stronger. Guangyao Li once clearly said:” no one owes Singaporean a living”, encouraging all the people in Singapore to work diligently and work hand in hand to build the country. Ever since precaution about the vulnerabilities of an island country and call for striving to achieve prosperity have become the mainstream theme for Singapore’ cultural promotion. They take self-improvement and self-reliance as the core values and “fighting” value with the purpose of unity and cooperation has become the ties of different ethnic groups’ value acceptance in Singapore. And this bridges the ethnic gulf caused by multicultural values and provide spiritual impetus to economic and society development. Longing for beautiful lives and common awareness of struggle has made different ethnic groups to unite around People’s Action Party and respond to government’s calls. They really have one heart and are united to strive, further promoting the system of home renting quota and bilingual education policy. This seemingly forced and ruthless policy could be implemented smoothly with thinking long term.

Confucian Rejuvenation Becoming the Premise of “Value Integration”

There are two Confucian rejuvenation in Singaporean history. The first occurred in the end of 19th century and its aim was the root-seeking revolution which conformed to Singapore’s Chinese needs to reform society. During this public leading revolution, open-minded gentlemen contributed generously, vigorously built Confucian classes, founded cultural groups and established Chinese language press. In the meantime, complying with Chinese historical trends in the end of 19th century and the start of 20th century, various ideologies of saving the nation and ensuring its survival have converged in Singapore. From king preserving idea of constitutional monarchy to revolutionary ideas of promoting democracy and republic, they all have exerted sweeping impact on society in Singapore. Although Confucian ideologies once regarded as conservative and decayed has lose its dominant place in Singapore, challenged by Western culture and influenced by domestic cultural revolution, the traditional values like being faithful and loyal to the public, and gratitude, have already been deeply rooted in the minds of Singaporean Chinese.

The second Confucian rejuvenation occurred in the second half of 20th century, which was a revolution caused by the government intentionally. In the lives of economic prosperity, corrupted by Western values due to society opening up, Singaporean “fighting” values have changed silently. The collective struggle has become competition by hook or by crook. The devotion to work has become a habit of intentionally choosing. What’s more worrying is that the promotion of individualism and obsession with material comforts have become more popular among the youngsters. This means that the quality of diligence and devotion to work which Singapore depends on have gradually vanished. In this unprecedented value crisis, Singaporean government have strengthened the resolve to promote Confucian values. In the lunar Spring Festival of 1982, Premier Guangyao Li had advocated “eight virtues” of Confucian core values in the New Year greetings, namely loyalty, filial piety, benevolence and love, sense of property, justice and honor. He further expounded that “eight
“National Ideology” Being Put forward has Become the Bridge for Value Integration

Although the Confucian rejuvenation has stopped smoothly, the strive for multicultural values and constructing core values have never ceased. In 1988, then vice Premier Zuodong Wu had put forward “national ideology” for the first time. It was further interpreted as four kinds of core values, namely “community over individuals, families being the foundation of society, solving problems based on common views rather than fight, emphasize on tolerance and harmony between ethnic groups and religions.”[2] The four core values derived from national ideology not only promotes economic and social harmonious development in Singapore, but more importantly they conform to basic values of Chinese, Malayan and Hindu. They could be interpreted and understood by Confucian values, Muslim and Hinduism. “National ideology” has bridged ethnic difference and get over religious boundaries, making possible commonly accepted values formed from various values.

Historic Characteristics: Unity, Diversity and Inclusiveness

Former chief editor of Union Morning Paper Mr. Ren Jun once exactly pointed out the features of Singaporean culture, due to the cultural diversity and various ethnic groups, we are fortunate to inherit the four great civilization of the world, namely the Chinese civilization, Malay Islamic civilization, Hindu civilization and western civilization. However, the inter influence in this island has not led to conflicts and not destroyed our unity. In turn, they brought about good results. Thus we could draw strength from these rich cultural resources and reaped great benefits.[3] So comprehensive values of Singaporean society are respect the special traits of various cultures under the core values and seek positive integration under the fusion of multicultural values. Based on that, in 1991 Singaporean government has published Common Values White Paper, and put forward five core values, namely national superiority, society first, families as foundation, caring and support, pulling together in times of difficulty, seeking differences while preserving common grounds, negotiation, ethnic harmony and religious tolerance. [2] This is the choice by the great power of Singapore and spiritual force for social prosperity of Singapore.

Unity: Emphasize on National Values’ Devotion and Loyalty

Singapore is a modernized society with high level of opening up and has promoted modernization and industrialization by constantly learning and introducing western technology, equipment, funds and managerial experiences. Modern society’s chronic ills such as selfishness derived from industrialist civilization and contractual relationships from commercial society have also rooted in Singapore. In addition, the differences between various cultures and values must lead to distances among people and chasm between ethnic groups. People’s Action Party always keeps alert about
Singaporean vulnerabilities. Guangyao Li once said, “Can our ethnic groups co-exist for better or for worse? Are we willing to sacrifice? This is a question. If they don’t develop collective national awareness, it would be very sad and troubling.[1] Given that Singaporean government defines core values in national level as “national superiority and society first”. Different from western society’s emphasize on individual rights, Singapore adheres to oriental values like “devotion to country and contribution to society”. “National superiority and society first” specifically covers: first national acceptance which unite all as one, whether locals or immigrants are all Singaporean. Singapore is not a Chinese, Malayan or Hindu nation. Singapore is Singaporean country. Each and every one of Singaporean all have the sense of responsibility to rejuvenate Singapore and sense of mission to preserve various ethnic groups’ harmony. Second, national superiority means that national interests take precedence over individual interests. When necessary, individual interests should be sacrificed in order to preserve national interests. Every Singapore has the obligation to defend the country and be loyal to the country. They should all have the fighting spirit to make contributions to society and citizen awareness to abide by the law. Third, from national prosperity to individual results are all the results from teamwork. Individuals could not separate from the group while the group needs everyone’s talents. They are inseparable.

Diversity: Putting Focus to Society’s Values Like Harmony and Tolerance

Singapore is a special South Asian country which is a naturally formed immigrant society with diverse cultures, languages and religions. Since the early days of self-governance, there are more conflicts between ethnic groups and more collisions between Buddhism and Muslim. There are increasingly more tension between Singapore and neighboring countries. In order to avoid conflicts between ethnic groups, Singaporean government gradually drew up many items of policies promoting national equality and harmony. It tries hard to use national awareness to dilute ethnic differences and socially promote core values like ethnic harmony and tolerance, seeking common grounds while preserving differences, and negotiation. Since the beginning of founding the nation, Singaporean government established that Chinese, Malayan, Tamil and English equally as the formal official languages. In the annual New Year speech, Singaporean leaders need to use these four languages to greet all the citizens’ happy New Year. English as neutral language are generally used in executive and commercial areas, and national languages which embody national cultures are constantly spread. According to government policies, all English schools must use English to teach all subjects, and meanwhile open classes for mother tongue as second language. All Chinese, Malayan and Tamil schools must use mother tongue to teach and regard English as second language. English and mother tongues are all the compulsory subjects in the entrance exam for college. Only those who pass the mother tongue text could they be admitted to colleges. In 1988, Singaporean government had set up the system of group representation constituency with an eye to accommodate political interests of ethnic minority groups like Malayan and Hindu. This system ensures that congressmen of ethnic minority groups accounts for certain percentage in Congress and encourages them to actively participate in political affairs. In 1990, Singapore promulgated Act of Preserving Religious Harmony. On the one hand, it specifies the relationship between nation and religion on legal level. On the other hand, different religious representatives participates in trust circle of ethnic groups and religions in practices. It periodically organizes religious leaders to have talks and conduct charitable works. Under the lead and effort of government, mutual trust and tolerance, and harmony are gradually formed among different ethnic groups.

Inclusiveness: Championing Individual Values of Benevolence, Love and Comity

Singaporean government has a clear awareness that the nation is people’s nation. So when it promotes values like “national superiority and society first”, it does not ignore people’s rights and significantly promotes individual values like “caring and support, and pulling together in times of difficulty”. These core values need balancing society interests and individual interests, accommodating the advantaged and the disadvantaged groups, and realizing equal opportunities and
Government put great emphasis on development enjoyed collectively by all citizens, for example when the communications company of Singapore went public, they sold the stock half the price to Singaporeans. Government encourages equality among ethnic groups, seek common development and provide the disadvantaged support and caring. For example, government provides special housing subsidies for Malayans, educational subsidies till college, and life-long on-job subsidies to stimulate Malayans to improve and change backward status. Government praises interpersonal comity, and promotes social morals like kindness, abiding by laws, paying attention to hygiene, and caring for public properties. It punishes severely those immoral behaviors, for example, smoking in the parks would be fined 2000 Singapore dollars; Durian taken onto the buses would be fined 500 Singapore dollars. Government encourages to bridge the inter-generational gap. The older generation need help and promote younger generation, and the younger generation should humbly learn from the older generation. The older generation should understand the social stress of younger generation, and the younger generation should respect the older generation’s struggle and sacrifice. All in all, the prospect of Singapore is that people are all learned and refined gentlemen and the society is refined.

Future Development: from Cultural Desert to Cultural Oasis

Singapore is a country whose culture is naturally deficient, without historical traditions derived from time and bright civilization essences. Singaporean economic boom was once deemed as “cultural desert” due to the pursuing of prosperity. However, Singaporean government did not focus on the economic achievement and ignored the backwardness of culture. From Confucian rejuvenation to common values, and refined society, government is dedicated to establishing a culturally powerful country supported by core values and multicultural values. Today, theaters, galleries, libraries and cultural centers of various scales could be seen everywhere, from commercial centers in Jinsha or Wujie Road, ethnic themed road of Chinatown and Little India to rentals. Various charitable, community and festivity activities are booming, making cultural wasteland into cultural oasis. Core values formed from the integration of various cultures have become the spiritual sources for Singaporean ethnic harmony and prosperity.

Looking into the construction of Singaporean core values, we could conclude three successful lessons: First, education is regarded as Singaporean bloodline, which is substantially supported by government. The focus of educational reforms has always been collectively planned by government from basic education to higher education, especially citizen education and morality education. In the meanwhile, government actively constructs basic cultural infrastructure for communities, to make all communities equipped with libraries and fitness centers. And it calls for the public to conduct community cultural activities. In addition, government severely censors cultural media’s values and never allows any works characterized by discrimination, violence and decadence to become mainstream. Second, the strategy of using culture attracting talents. The talents are the most precious treasures. Singapore not only has all kinds of talent training programs, but also attracts talents from all over the world by highly efficient executive environment, open and just legal environment, harmonious and peacefully social environment and beautiful and clean natural environment. Third, cultural guidelines of respecting variety and seeking integration. Singaporean core values are from positive results of basing on the actual national conditions, integrating various cultures and seeking common grounds. They could be accepted and understood by various cultures, and direct them to develop and inherit. They could represent Confucian utility and unity and Western culture’s independence and reason. Thus, stable system of core values led by various cultures could be formed in Singapore. Today, Singaporean economy could develop robustly and the cultural development is still booming. Although Singapore has used mere decades to transform wasteland into oasis, mentality of making money and seeking success and distancing from people is still a big gulf in the constructing of cultural and ideological development. So there is a long road before Singapore becomes a cultural garden and refined society with benevolence, kindness and love.
References

