ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the education of multicultural citizens in Singapore by drawing upon the teachings from Confucianism, which is a major cultural heritage of Singaporeans. A key challenge for multicultural citizenship is a superficial understanding of and limited interaction between cultural groups in a political unit. Based on two key passages from the Confucian classic Analects as expounded by Ivanhoe, this chapter suggests a Confucian notion of multicultural citizenship. This conception comprises two essential components: first, a multicultural citizen is one who subscribes to and evinces an openness to other cultures. Such a person is guided by shu (empathy) which is displayed through cross-cultural humility, interest and engagement. Second, a multicultural citizen demonstrates and promotes a shared universal family which is rooted in ren (humanity). To illustrate the application of the Confucian model to the education of multicultural citizenship in Southeast Asia, examples that foster inter-religious harmony are provided.

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INTRODUCTION

Globalisation has not diminished identity but has instead enhanced its importance as citizens assume and navigate multidimensional identities (Cogan & Derricott, 2012). Beyond stipulating the specific rights and responsibilities granted to citizens under the law, the term ‘citizenship’ also broadly refers to a practice through which humans actively engage within their communities and coming into relationship with a range of identities (Peterson & Brock, 2017). In other words, citizenship not only grants membership status to individuals within a political unit but also outlines a set of values that guides the individuals to work towards the common good (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006). Active citizenship presupposes ‘civic literacy’ – participating effectively in civic life by understanding governmental processes; exercising the rights and obligations of citizenship at a local, state, national and global level; and being informed of the local and global implications of civic decisions (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009). Education in civic literacy is essential for the young and old to contribute proactively and meaningfully in public policies, both locally and internationally, for the good of humankind. The specific expression of civic literacy, of course, depends on the localised social, political and cultural conditions.

Closely related to citizenship is multiculturalism that acknowledges and celebrates differences in a community (Noor & Leong, 2013). Multicultural citizenship is particularly pertinent to Asia as the region is distinguished by its cultural plurality. Four out of 12 countries that are the most religiously diverse in the world are in Asia, namely Singapore, Vietnam, South Korea and China (Pew Research Centre, 2018), with its “different mixtures of Confucian, Buddhist, Western, and other values” (Bell, 2000, p. 10). Indonesia and Malaysia as well as the south of Thailand, the Philippines and Western China reflect historical and cultural Islamic influences while “other philosophies such as Taoism and Buddhism have been interwoven” into the traditions and lifestyles of other parts of Southeast Asia (Dalton & Ong, 2010, p. 4; also see Reyes & Tan, 2015).

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter explores the education of multicultural citizens in Singapore by drawing upon the teachings from Confucianism which is a major cultural heritage of Singaporeans. Although the education of multicultural citizenship in Singapore is not explicitly based on Confucianism, researchers have maintained that the ‘Asian values’ propagated by the authorities in Singapore are aligned with Confucianism (Chua, 1995; Barr, 2000; Chia, 2011). Confucian virtues such as society before self, uphold the family as the basic unit of society, and seek consensus and societal harmony are promoted to all Singaporeans as part of citizenship education (Tan & Tan, 2014). Singapore, as a Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) society, therefore, serves as an illustrative case study of the relevance of heritage to citizenship education. This chapter explores the education of multicultural citizens through drawing upon the East Asian heritage of Confucianism. The first part of the chapter briefly introduces the concept of multicultural citizenship and an associated challenge. This is followed by an exposition of a Confucian approach to the education of multicultural citizenship. The second half of the chapter illustrates the Confucian orientation to multicultural education by exploring and critiquing the model of intercultural education in Singapore.