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Confucianism and Singapore

Dr. Paul Lim

Introduction

There has been an attempt to explain the success of the East Asian Newly Industrialized Countries (NICs) to their confucian culture. Confucianism is the cultural heritage of Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong. Japan too has this cultural heritage. It is left to be seen if Confucianism will help to push China into the league of the NICs? It is right to ask whether this confucian culture has anything to do with the success of the NICs rather than to reduce the NICs’ success to purely economic policies.

Now, Singapore is put into this same package of NICs in which some accent is put on confucian culture to explain its economic success. This paper questions the weight put on confucian culture to explain the economic success of Singapore. Has confucian culture anything to do with its economic success? How confucian is Singapore? Is Singapore a confucian State? Is its system of industrial relations confucian? What place has Confucianism in Singapore? It is always possible to hypothesize the contrary that its success as an NICs has nothing to do with Confucianism. It has rather to do with an authoritarian State adopting repressive measures against Labour and measures favouring the foreign investor. A non-cultural explanation in the Singapore case is made possible by the recent emergence of Thailand as
another NIC where it cannot be said that Confucian culture has anything to do with its economic success.

The writer’s hypothesis is that the People’s Action Party (PAP), the party in power, wishes its rule to be seen with confucian eyes and, towards this end, it wants to inculcate a confucian culture which would favour acceptance of its rule and a system of values good for the factory, investment and for the economy. But Confucianism’s contribution to the economic success of Singapore is an open question. On the other hand, an authoritarian State adopting repressive measures against labour and measures favouring the foreign investor takes an institutionalized form whose concrete application bears testimony to its contribution to Singapore’s economic success. The non-conflictual approach to industrial relations is not in a black and white envelope in confucian harmony. The paper will evaluate this hypothesis.

Confucian talk

1. First of all, one has the words of the one-time former Finance Minister of Singapore, an architect of the Singapore economy and now economic adviser to the Chinese Government, Dr. Goh Keng Swee. He stated that according to the Japanese much of their modern achievement was derived from certain values which they drew from Confucian ethics.¹ So, the PAP was going to copy the Japanese which was logical since 78% of Singapore’s population is Chinese. Such Confucian cultural values were to be cultivated.

The result was the decision to teach Confucianism in schools as an antidote against decadent elements of western culture manifested in pre-marital sex, long hair, short skirts, loose behaviour, promiscuity, self-indulgence… which were undermining the so-called confucian work ethic, values of diligence, achievement, social and personal discipline, endurance, thrift, self-cultivation, collective solidarity etc. Western technology was emphasized but not decadent western culture. The PAP

¹. Straits Times, 29 December 1982.
government was the moral conscience of the people. Clearly these so-called confucian values are connected to work, investment, and the economy.

Granted that there are certain undesirable elements of western culture, the intention to teach Confucianism raises the question as to whether confucian culture was ever an influence on Chinese Singaporeans or it had waned under the onslaught of western culture so that a systematic study of it was now required. Until the implementation of Confucian studies in schools in 1979, the Chinese person’s acquisition of confucian values came through family education and apparently the family as an educating institution was seen as inadequate to meet the challenge of today’s western cultural dominance.

Now, the teaching of Confucianism saw resistance. Singapore has two substantial ethnic minorities. 15% of the population consists of the autochtonous Malays and 8% of Indians. Are they to imbibe Chinese confucian culture? They were not going to be dominated or absorbed by the Chinese majority and rightly so. This substantial minority presence of the Malays and Indians living side by side in a small space makes it different from the more homogeneous East Asian NICs. Thus, how confucian can Singapore be? The Malays voted against the PAP in the 1988 general election.

Malay and Indian pupils had their Islamic and Hindu courses with the same legitimation to combat bad western influence. The writer, however, suspects that the PAP, while satisfying the Malays and Indians, didn’t think much of Islam and Hinduism as bearers of economically useful values. For it, only confucian culture had the system of values desired. If it had its way, it would want the Malays and Indians to be ‘confucianized’. This could have been done by inculcating a set of values through civic classes, and not raise the passions surrounding the fear of losing one’s culture on the part of the substantial minorities by promoting the use fo mandarin and the teaching of Confucianism in schools. Why? The values described as confucian are in fact somewhat universal. The write thinks of the calvinist work ethic. Despite whatever
has developed, the latest is that Confucianism is no longer in the school curriculum but this does not of course mean that these so-called confucian values are no longer preached.

The past teaching of Confucianism is the concretization of the intent to promote it for its economic usefulness, but the PAP denies that it wants to be viewed as confucian rulers and wants a Confucian State.

2. It claims that confucian rule was not possible for otherwise it would mean abandoning elections, disenfranchising everybody, and speaking of a mandate from heaven.2 Note that for the PAP, democracy is reduced to elections. The mandate now is the elections. But apart from this, what prevents a confucian perception of ruling? By this is meant that the PAP leadership is to be treated as the confucian ruler who knows best in the genre of Plato’s philosopher-king and which is in power indefinitely setting the moral example. Elections can always be arranged to keep the PAP in power which is actually happening. Observers speak of the Lee dynasty i.e. Premier Lee Kuan Yew being replaced by his son, the Reservist Brigadier-General Lee Hsien Loong though this possibility has been put aside by the announcement that Mr. Goh Chok Tong will replace Premier Lee. Nevertheless some observers think that Mr. Goh’s premiership is transitional for before long it is the younger Lee who will take over.

The PAP has been in power since 1959 and will not give it up easily. It has taken so long for the Eastern European Communist Parties to come to the readiness to give up their hold on power so would it be the case of the PAP. And one is speaking here of the maintenance of an unending stratified ruler-ruled relationship. The legitimation for the continuation of such a ruler-ruled, stratified relationship was that such an order will bring about social and political stability which was necessary for the success of the economics strategy the PAP adopted based upon foreign investments. The ideology reinforces the political but towards an economic end, in as much as a confucian ethic is for an economic end. Economics is determining.

To cultivate the acceptance of an unending stratified ruler-ruled order, a long way is gone with the cultivation of filial piety, respect and obedience to elders, to authority, and the acceptance of hierarchy. Premier Lee talked of parents wanting their children to retain traditional Chinese values in filial piety, loyalty, benevolence, and love. These values would be transposed from home to school, to the factory, and to the PAP State-civil society relationship. This transposition also took place in the matter of propagating the family before the individual, the company before the worker, the community before the individual which is not far from the State before the citizen in preaching collective solidarity. These values complement those good for work, the factory, investment and the economy.

3. Singapore is to be a confucianist State à la PAP even if it denies it and to be perceived as such. Is this possible in any way at least among the Chinese? A young soldier subjected to interviews and psychological testing by a Defence Ministry’s psychologist bored out his confucian mind which facilitates the acceptance of a dynastic confucian State or confucian relationship between rulers and ruled, State and civil society. The armed forces with its yearly induction of young Singaporeans to do compulsory military service is a laboratory to find out the attitudes of these young people towards the PAP and at the same time cultivate the confucian system of values and attitudes.

He was ready to live without opposition parties. Singapore is a one-party dominant State with small ineffective opposition political parties, but there has been an expressed desire for an opposition in Parliament especially in the 1980s. If the present government did good things, giving power to the opposition only creates confusion. Another interviewee spoke of chaos and trouble with an opposition. This must be his belief in the benevolent confucian ruler who delivers the goods to his subjects.

But how confucian is the delivery of goods? He stated that one or two strong leaders in a country is better than all laws and talk. This facilitates acceptance of dynastic succession and confucian ruler-ruled relationship. Does this also mean that he is prepared to accept a PAP doing the unlawful in putting preference on strong leaders? Weber’s traditional leadership is here. On the other hand, he saw opposition parties as desirable only if they had the power permitting them to criticise for otherwise they would just be clapped up in jail. This is his political awareness. This reveals his ambivalence. Further, if, with this power, they did not do the right thing, then do not give them power. The right thing is associated with the benevolent ruler who delivers the goods without need of any opposition in which there is doubt an opposition can deliver if in power. Here he is back to square one in his readiness to live without any opposition political party. Here he is confucian. He stated clearly that if government was doing the right thing, it need not listen to criticisms but he did state also that government should listen to criticisms if it did not do the right thing. Confucian in a PAP that knows what is best and delivers but he acknowledged the fallibility of government. If he is any example of the Chinese confucian mind, the PAP will not have any problem in reinforcing it.

The ‘should’ of government to listen to criticisms is perhaps due to his direct experience of a PAP which didn’t listen. Direct experience contradicted his conception of the benevolent confucian ruler. He gave the example of the increase in the bus fare. He brought this example in a question posed to him about changing the situation like protesting. He replied that the government wouldn’t listen and what can one do? The voice of the government is louder than one’s. It is with this that the psychologist concluded on the readiness of his subjects to be moulded by an superordinate body which they could in no way influence. This fatalism of this young soldier is that of a lot of Singaporeans. Hence, the

5. ibid., pages 32 and 41.
6. ibid., page 42.
status quo to be casted as confucian is easier to accept. Any fatalism in the mind of Chinese Singaporeans will facilitate the acceptance of confucian values.

Another example of his ambivalent view of government is his definitiveness that it did not care for the people while acknowledging the housing it gave the people. But between housing and curbing the cost of living, the latter was more important for the government to do. He made reference to food and to parking fees. On the concrete which hit him directly, he was no obedient and respectful Confucian practitioner who did not grumble yet he expected the PAP to behave like a caring confucian leader.7

Now, the writer asks again to what extent the delivery of goods characterizes the caring of a confucian ruler? One could interpret the provision of housing, which is a great achievement of the PAP government, as reflecting a caring, paternalistic, and benevolent confucian leadership providing for the needs of those under their care. There is here the father, the provider for the family. If this is how the PAP was perceived by the general Chinese population, it was not evident. It would be the unspoken in the deep recesses of the mind. Support for the PAP based upon its delivery of goods has never been cloaked in Confucianism but the PAP has built its support through goods delivered. It is probably because the PAP realises that support cannot be based purely on the never-ending delivery of 'material' goods that it is going back to traditional cultures, to form some kind of anchor that it could associate with to remain in power indefinitely. The support for the PAP in power will come now from its role as the enduring defender of the traditions and cultures of the different ethnic communities. The reason why it had made the delivery of goods in the past as the basis of support was because until the 1950s the different ethnic communities except for the Malays saw Singapore only as a transient place owing no loyalty to it. Loyalty to

7. ibid..
the State and the State’s raison d’être had to be built on the State’s success in delivering the goods from the 1960s onwards. The PAP was trying to create a nation-state out of different ethnic communities based on the delivery of goods which will give them a stake in Singapore.

Now, the confucianist mind of this young soldier brings back the question of the confucian State in Singapore. Strictly speaking there is no question of a confucian State with a mandate from heaven. Dynastic succession is desired and can be arranged but what is more crucial is the confucian world-view to be imbibed by Chinese Singaporeans so that they will see the PAP as confucian leaders without forgetting also the confucian work ethic to be imbibed. What is behind the confucian State is this confucian world-view to govern State-civil society relations, the stratified ruler-ruled relationship.

Now, this young soldier’s willingness to live without opposition parties is possibly explained by his whole upbringing enveloped in authoritarianism. The preference for one or two strong leaders was associated with his authoritarian upbringing by the psychologist.8 This upbringing consisted of strict discipline for bringing up children, no question of children talking back at parents otherwise parents would lose their children’s respect, wives obeying their husbands....9 From other interviewees, they obeyed and respected authority, and accepted the hierarchy. The confucian mind pre-existed the PAP’s confucian campaign. There is to be a transposition from authoritarian family training to authoritarian State-civil society relationship. This authoritarian family education should facilitate the acceptance of an authoritarian confucian State. And if a confucian authoritarian State is acceptable then the PAP has an arm to combat western attacks on its undemocratic practice. It will be able to retort that Singapore is a confucian State which puts the society before the individual in the face of accusations that it violates human rights.

8. ibid., page 32.
9. ibid., pages 32-33.
However, this bridging of family authoritarian education to authoritarian State-civil society relationship has not always occurred. M. Lu\textsuperscript{10} stated that much emphasis upon the family in confucianism has watered down a person's devotion to his society and country as a whole. He was speaking of the place of the family unit in confucianism as the training ground for morality and filial piety as the root of morality. Goh Keng Swee\textsuperscript{11} spoke of the lip-service paid to filial piety among Hua-chiao without understanding its deeper sociological implications and its role in underpinning the Confucian political system. Here is the clearest correlation made and desired between moral values and politicals. The PAP wants its authoritarian rule to be enveloped in Confucianism but the jump from the family to the State has not been automatic.

Now, PAP authoritarianism logically develops from the one-party dominant State. This authoritarianism is defined as one where the one-party dominant authoritarian State absorbs completely civil society restraining its citizens and organisations from acting freely particularly when at odds with it. It penetrates into the lives of its citizens and from a confucian perspective this penetration is a right and an obligation of the all-knowing and all-wise confucian leadership if it wants to improve the people's condition. There is an ethical-moral legitimacy. This penetration of civil society is through its network of grassroots organisations: the Resident Committees (RCs), the Community Centres (CCs), the Citizens' Consultative Committees (CCCs) and now the Town Councils (TCs) and through the trade unions (TUs). The working lives and the social and neighbourhood lives of the people are completely penetrated by the State. These organisations are the eyes and ears of government taking the pulse of society to keep things under control with the legitimization that this is the way to improve the people's condition. This penetration in all spheres of life is for an economic end from a political


\textsuperscript{11} Report on Moral Education, 1 June 1979, iii.
perspective ie. non-economic penetration to establish all the necessary conditions for the economic strategy to work.

The writer has chosen this definition of an authoritarian State because the West identifies authoritarianism with violations of human rights, indefinite detention without trial, disappearances....all that is seen in Latin America. The approach of the State's absorption of civil society has only been applied to Eastern Europe by the West as revealed in the changes going there.

What place is there for opposition political parties in such an absorbing State? Does not such an absorbing State contribute more to a reduced role for an opposition or the disappearance of an opposition? A confucian State does not require any opposition political parties. The confucian leadership knows what is good for Singapore and all that is required of Singaporeans is to do what they are told. If the PAP allows opposition political parties, it is because there is a thirst for an opposition among voters which voters it did not want to alienate but the PAP wants to fashion out an opposition which is not against its worldview and not a challenge to it. Cooptation is the game.

Interesting to note is also this young soldier's notion of what is right and what is wrong in which the law of the land is the arbiter. Legality is right and illegality is wrong. Moral right and wrong are equated with legal right and wrong. Punishment under the law for doing something bad is a judgement of what is wrong. The psychologist stated that, for this young soldier, he drew heavily on the law as a guide to his judgement. Therefore, unjust laws are unthinkable. Justice and morality are equated with the law. Hence the PAP State will have through its law the enforced obedience and loyalty of people under pain of punishment, and thus becoming the legalized moral conscience of the people. Persons with moral consciences independent of the State with a general sense of right and wrong are non-existent. The psychologist stated that

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12. Leong Choon Cheong, op. cit., page 38.
the soldier had no internalized sense of right and wrong. If this is the kind of morality the PAP want, no wonder the PAP is so keen to promote a confucianist education in this mould. Fortunately, not every Singaporean is like this young soldier. The PAP State is not far away from the individual's moral conscience. The PAP State controls it.

Interest in the writer in reading this book, "Youth in the Army", from where the above are taken, stemmed from Dr. Goh Keng Swee's interview on moral education in the Straits Times of 30 December 1982 when he made reference to it.

Goh spoke of these soldiers knowing what was right and what was wrong imparted by their parents and stated that this was markedly Confucian. He spoke also of these young soldiers' view of chastity, of their belief in hard work and thrift and on family members supporting each other. He said all these were very clear in the book. But what is clear?

Hard work and achievement orientation are economically desired. They are not unrelated to the PAP State as mere individual and personal values. In the same breath that Goh Keng Swee denied the Confucian State for Singapore, he is for Confucianist education with an economic end.

4. Even if the PAP denies that it wants a confucian State, it has its apologists. An example is philosopher Martin Lu's book, CONFUCIANISM: its Relevance to Modern Society. Philosopher Lu may be in good conscience and as an objective academic trying to relate Confucianism to today's world but in the process his work becomes an apology for the PAP.

This philosopher gave a treatment on confucianism and political leadership. He stated that confucian political philosophy's relevance to Singapore merited carefully examination. He spoke of Confucius's

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13, pages 100-101.
political recipe for good government: the ruler must first of all set a good moral example. He went on to speak of people in all walks of life fulfilling their respective social duties. He quoted Confucius on letting the ruler be the ruler, the minister be the minister, the father be the father, and the son be the son. The philosopher was quick to state that this statement of Confucius was not aimed at maintaining the status quo in the interest of the ruler, although he would be pleased with the social and political stability that might result from such a moral order. Isn’t this what the PAP is after and can use Confucianism to legitimize itself in power? Isn’t this the stratified relationship between the ruler and the ruled, each having his own place in a society, one the ruler, the other the follower? Confucianist ideology is used to reinforce an elitist class structure articulated with the capitalist mode of production.

The philosopher went on to Plato’s Republic dealing with Plato’s philosopher king and the ideal State. The moral he drew from Plato was that only the best people should be installed as leaders.

From Confucius and Plato, he then drew two conclusions: firstly, that the leader should serve as the moral example and that he should be selected from among the best talents in the country. How well can these two ancient philosophers be used to legitimize the PAP’s search for a successor leadership in a top-down model where the PAP is seen to be in power indefinitely? He stated that these two qualities were highlighted by Premier Lee and went on to quote him on the PAP scouring all sectors of Singapore for talent and integrity .... for only the most capable, honest, committed can keep up the standards achieved in clean and effective administration.... He gave Premier Lee’s six basic principles for a leader to follow which is not put down here. He identified Lee Kuan Yew with the philosopher king and that he knows what is best for the people for he and his colleagues have seen the ‘upper world’ of Plato as a result of their past experience.

This legitimation of the PAP searching for the best talent is tied to the promotion of meritocracy which fits well with Confucian hierarchism. However, meritocracy has never been enveloped with Confucian
legitimation. In Singapore, clientelism, nepotism and the like are abhorred though the writer does not believe that they are completely eradicated. This abhorrence is demonstrated by the Prime Minister in not granting any special privileges to his parents, brothers and sisters. A second indicator is the fact that many new Members of Parliament had no previous connection with the party. Political connections therefore do not seem to count. The values are competition, performance, and achievement. If one is able to climb up the ladder it is because one has performed well. And one area of performance is educational achievement. Singapore’s leaders all have degrees. They are the talented technocratic class privileged to rule, the elite. The Singaporean Confucian philosopher-king must come from this class. They are assumed to be the wise and honest men. But tied to the first, the other area of performance is achievement in the area of work. Talented ones only will survive the competitive work environment. The talented ones have the right to rule, the others are followers. This promotion of Meritocracy is also to be explained by the need to demonstrate that the PAP does not favour any ethnic community; it is above ethnicity.

Now, philosopher Lu concluded that the Lee group’s style of politics follows basically the Anglo-American system of democracy but in actual practice leans not only towards Platonic elitism but also towards the Confucian exemplary model of virtuous rulers.\(^{14}\) The PAP has an apologist in this philosopher. The writer prefers rather to put in this way. Democracy is restricted to elections in a one-party dominant authoritarian State which legitimizes the PAP in power replacing the mandate to heaven and continuing to rule like the elitist philosopher-king indefinitely who knows what is best for the people with the backing of confucian exemplary virtues as legitimation for a ruler-ruled stratified relationship outside of elections.

5. The alarm over the confucian PAP State came from a Chinese-educated leader of the PAP, Mr. Ong Pang Boon, in 1984, then Minister

\(^{14}\) pages 101-104.
for the Environment. He knocked down some Confucian precepts, especially those that perpetuated the stratified relationship between the ruler and ruled. He spoke of this in connection to the issue of arbitrary appointment of political successors. Political observers according to a Singapore Monitor press report from where this paragraph is based upon saw his reference to Confucian-supported hereditary rule in China’s past history as indicating that he favoured an open contest for leadership. The background to such statements is clearly the succession of Premier Lee by his son in a confucian fashion. And a view like this coming from a Chinese-educated Minister is significant.  

15 It appears that there were differences at the top echelons of the party then.

Two Principal Conclusions from The Above

1. From the above, the place of Confucianism in Singapore in the first instance is in as far as cultivating and reinforcing a Confucian system of values and attitudes which will facilitate acceptance of continued PAP rule, a guarantor for political and social stability, and be productive for work, the firm, investment, and the economy in this stable setting. Secondly, a Confucian State-form is as far as a possible Lee dynasty in the future in the interest of maintaining a stratified ruler-ruled relationship. Thirdly, establishing that Singapore’s State-society is confucian is a defence against any accusation that it is authoritarian or in other words, legitimates its authoritarianism. What the West sees as authoritarianism is Confucianism. This is Singapore’s political culture. The West cannot judge us by their standards in seeing authoritarianism as bad and wrong in our Confucianism. Singapore is not a Western democracy. Singapore is a Confucian State. Democracy has to be à la Singapourienne. Fourthly, a concession given is the permission to have a political opposition but on PAP’s terms.

2. The presence of substantial minorities like the Malays and Indians raises the question of how Confucian can Singapore be? Do they

not count for something? Malays and Indians will never tolerate living under a confucian State. For this reason of other ethnic minorities, the PAP is right to deny that it wants a Confucian State but when it denies wanting such a State its audience is the Chinese Singaporeans. The writer feels that all this talk of Confucianism, apart from dynastic succession to ensure continued PAP rule, has much more to do with cultivating Confucian values and attitudes, values and attitudes which are not necessarily Confucian. The only specificity is that, in the Chinese world, Confucius was the one who brought out these values which could be said to be universal. Confucianism is also at the root of the Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese cultures. Values with respect to authority and hierarchy are in the ethos of the other ethnic minorities. Catholicism also has these values which permeates Western culture. The work ethic may not be as strong in Indian and Malay cultures but, as stated, it is found in Calvinism. All these are to indicate that, as stated before, they could be taught, be cultivated without any reference to any religion, philosophy or race as a secular universal ethos for Singaporeans. The work ethic is already propagated through the yearly national productivity campaigns. The writer may be an unwitting apologist but makes this point to say that in some ways the PAP is playing with racial politics in bringing up Confucianism in as much as it accuses others of it and states that it is against it. The PAP is caught in racial politics but its politics is also opportunistic.

An Evaluation

1. A disapproval of the PAP authoritarian State as Confucian is that traditionally Confucianism seems to be against the market place, against economic progress/development which the delivery of consumer goods is the result. Confucianism scorned the merchant class and materialistic accomplishments.\(^ {16} \) The PAP authoritarian State should be

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seen more as a neo-Confucian State if any traits of Confucianism is observed.

One such trait is this crusade against corruption which one can view as Confucian. The upright Confucian philosopher-king cannot be corrupt. He is as seen, the moral exemplar to be emulated. A few of the Singapore leaders have fallen because of corruption. The last was the Minister of National Development, Mr. Teh Cheang Wan, whose honorable exit was by committing suicide. Corruption here is the gaining of favours on the part of the corrupters by payments in money or in kind to Ministers or civil servants. Corruption is also not tolerated in the State's trade union apparatus. Charges of corruption were brought out against a former President of the NTUC, Mr. Phey Yew Kok.

2. How successful the PAP will be in promoting the Confucian world-view to accept PAP rule, dynastic or not, is an open question? This is in view of a greater and greater demand for more democratic space especially since the 1980s. The writer does not see this demand as foreign to Confucianism. In the Confucian works of Mencius, rebellion against an oppressive ruler who lost the goodwill of his subjects is legitimate which, of course, is not propagated by the PAP. Singaporean voters are not taking up arms in rebellion but surely they can ask for more freedom, more democratic space and be able to vote out the PAP in free and fair elections with Confucian legitimacy. Of course, elections are not cloaked with Confucianism. Now, Mencius's rebellion tenet was based upon the belief that ultimate sovereignty laid with the people. Heaven granted the throne but still the people had the right to accept/reject a ruler. This sovereignty extended to the reflection of popular opinion in the major policies of government. Continuity was guaranteed only through the ruler's adherence to traditional values. democracy is evident in Mencius. Therefore authoritarianism is opposed

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to Confucianism. The PAP cannot tell off the West from criticizing its undemocratic practices and its violations of human rights. Opposition to PAP authoritarianism is legitimate. Allowing for opposition political parties and encouraging their growth is a right not a concession.

This claim of democracy in Confucianism above is disputed by Professor McMorran.\(^\text{18}\) While acknowledging democratic sentiments in Confucius and Mencius, it was fundamentally misguided to seek for 'buds of democracy' in Confucian philosophical tradition..... In Confucianism, the people had no say in the government even though Confucius recognised the importance of the people and how vital their confidence in their ruler was. Confucius was primarily concerned with the ruler. Mencius, whom Professor McMorran considered more democratic, did not suggest that the people had a right to rule despite his emphasis on their political significance.

3. How successful the Confucian work ethic has been on the economic success of Singapore is not easily quantifiable. The only thing that could be said is that a work ethic which is internalised is better than all the material incentives to get workers to work. And then, there are the institutional measures which govern industrial relations. These institutional measures oblige workers to work under certain conditions so that the question is what lies behind the productivity of the workers which goes to contribute to the economic success of Singapore as an NIC? Work ethic or conditions of work? The writer tends to put more weight on these institutional measures than on the cultural, or the so-called Confucian work ethic without denying it a place. This will be borne out by looking at the labour laws which govern industrial relations.

Labour was subdued through changes in the labour laws which favoured the investor or the employer. The 44-hour week was introduced

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instead of the 39-hour week. Public holidays were reduced from 15 to 11.\textsuperscript{19} Overtime pay fixed at one and a half times on a week day while it was double on a rest day. Triple pay for work on public holidays, double on rest days were common previously. These are just a few examples. The aim of such employment conditions was more working hours and cheaper labour. If workers have the Confucian work ethic they need not be restricted by law. They would work longer hours and more days even for less pay since it is in their interest to keep their jobs and progress in their standard of living. Legislating such employment conditions through Parliament rather than leaving them to collective bargaining reduced the incidence of strikes. One would not imagine Confucian-inspired workers to go on strikes so as to require legislation to prevent them. Parliamentary legislation was also used to remove from the scope of collective bargaining hire and fire, promotion and demotion, and transfer from a post to another. These were now employers’ prerogatives and rights. Again legislation will not be required if both employers and workers sharing in the same Confucian paternalism, consensus and harmony. This paragraph draws its content from the Employment Act of 1968 described by the Prime Minister as the second of four factors which the World Bank stated were instrumental in Singapore’s drive towards industrialization and the Industrial Relations Act of 1967.\textsuperscript{20} The Confucian-influenced hardworking, disciplined Singaporean worker is not cited anywhere as a factor.

Strikes were to all intents outlawed because of the restrictions imposed. In fact, workers in essential services like water, gas, electricity were denied the right to strike by an amendment to the Criminal (Temporary Provisions) Act in 1967 and a 14 days’ notice of strike for other workers in other essential services. Note that it is an amendment to the criminal law and not labour law. A 1968 amendment to the 1960

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\textsuperscript{19} Lim, Paul: L'Etat autoritaire à Singapour, Institut des Sciences du Travail, Universite Catholique de Louvain, Cahier no. 32, page 6.\\
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.\
\end{flushright}
Trade Disputes Act ruled out sympathy strikes and, a more recent amendment ruled out go-slow, work-to-rule, and other forms of industrial action. But the one amendment under the same Act which reduced strikes was when the Industrial Arbitration Court (IAC) recognized a trade dispute, for it meant an end to on-going strikes and all further strikes became illegal. Another means to prevent strikes or other industrial action was the 1968 amendments to the Industrial Relations Act. The amendments provided for the Minister to extend an award granted by the IAC, not just to the category of workers affected, but to other categories of workers in the 'public interest', and the IAC was given the power to make awards in relation to disputes it took cognizance of outside the case of dismissals. Hence, the IAC and the Minister took on the role of the trade unions to supposedly defend and protect the workers. Collective Agreements need not now be subjected to negotiations. The Singapore worker was not that Confucian after all. The Singapore working class had a history of strikes since the colonial days to the 1970s. Since the late 1970s till today there has not been a single strike.

A 1982 amendment to the Trade Union Act redefined a Trade Union. The promotion, organisation or financing of strikes or lock-outs in the old definition, was dropped as an object. Still again why must there be legislation if workers are so inspired by the Confucian work ethic? The approach to industrial relations was formally buried in favour of a class collaborationist approach, i.e. Labour collaborating with Capital in industrial development. This collaborationist approach is legitimized by the ideology of Tripartism which will be dealt with.

This 1982 amendment is in fact simply putting in the law of what has been the policy since the National Trade Union Congress (NTUC) was established in 1964. Up till then, trade unions were of the oppositional type led by left-wing radicals called by the PAP "communists" with whom the PAP were in alliance to kick out the British colonial power. There were then many strikes, some political, others over bread and butter issues, but they often merged together. Trade unions were a weapon in the anti-colonial struggle. But once the PAP was in power, trade unions
were expected to go along with the Export-Oriented Industrialization (EOI) strategy and therefore end their oppositional character. Operation Cold Store of 1963 broke these radical trade unions and the PAP’s collaborationist NTUC came into being. The NTUC and its affiliates are part of the State apparatus and are to be described as unions of the integrative type. The Secretary-General of the NTUC is a Deputy Prime Minister. Since 1964, oppositional unions have been whittled down among NTUC’s affiliates and those outside it.

To keep wages down and tied to productivity, a National Wages Council (NWC) was set up in 1972. This was the main instrument of keeping Labour cheap. On it sat Labour, Capital, and the State which recommended yearly percentage wage increases in surveying the state of the economy. Only once did it prominently recommend a wage increase in 1979 in its efforts to compel industry to mechanize and to upgrade into capital-intensive manufacturing processes. The NWC is really the example of the class collaborationist approach to industrial relations or Tripartism, its world-view.

Briefly, a word on Tripartism here.21 Tripartism propagated class collaboration. Class collaboration had its roots in the ideology of co-ownership. Every Singaporean is a co-owner. If all are co-owners then there is no reason for workers and the trade unions to look on the capitalists and the employers as enemies. This co-ownership ideology was identified with socialism and socialism was not the property of any class. It was universal. One sees here an attempt to speak in marxist terms and create "false consciousness" but clearly propertied classes are accepted. Both classes should collaborate with the State for the modernization and economic development of Singapore. This is the national interest. Working class interests are sectional interests which must give way to the national interest. This national interest is that the oppositional trade unions of the past have no place in an independent Singapore. The

21. ibid., page 7.
workers’ life will be better only if they collaborate with managements to make industry prosper. Tripartism was first propagated in 1969.

But Tripartism was not just an ideology but also a political structure which integrated functional interest groups, the unions and the business associations with the State, in a system of representation and cooperative mutual interaction at the leadership level, and mobilization and social control at the mass level. This definition is taken from Leo Panitch whose word for Tripartism was Corporatism. This is what the NWC is. The NTUC, the State trade union apparatus, the employers and the State sat together at the top of the pyramid and concerted. At the bottom of the pyramid the working class is controlled but stifling any oppositional mobilization. To clarify, this tripartite consultation and negotiation also take place outside of the NWC.

The promotion and enforced practice of Tripartism or Corporatism can also be described as Confucian. Harmony is Confucian. Adversarial relationships are non-Confucian. For L’Evenement du Jeudi, a fundamental of Confucianism concerning opposition and conflict was that they are a brake to social harmony. Corporatism and paternalistic Confucianism can go hand-in-hand. However, it must be stated that never was there an attempt to articulate Confucianism with Tripartism just as the delivery of goods was never described as Confucian. Now, this harmony also finds an accord with Functionalism’s world-view of Society and opposition and conflict, a dysfunction.

These were the measures restricting Labour, simply to create that political stability and industrial peace, making Singapore attractive to the foreign investor, making a success of the Export Oriented Industrialization (EOI) strategy. The American research firm, Business Environment Risk Information (BERI) has often placed Singapore in first

22. ibid., page 8.
23. 11-17 April 1985.
place for profit opportunities. It was seen as a safe place for investors to put their money.

Wabour laws fail to restrain workers from industrial action, then the security law, the Internal Security Act (ISA) steps in. The ISA principally allows detention without trial, and in its latest amendment, removes the possibility of judicial review by the Privy Council in London, Singapore's highest appeal court. The PAP had retained previously the Privy Council, a legacy of British colonialism, to demonstrate that doubts concerning the judgements of the Singapore courts may be challenged in a foreign court. The ISA and its antecedent, the Preservation of Public Security Ordinance (PPSO), has broken up strikes, sit-ins, picketing and demonstrations by arresting and detaining leaders of these different actions. This has been combined with the deregistration of unions and societies or associations. The most significant of mass detentions is the 1963 Operation Cold Store and subsequently where something like 130 persons were detained. This broke the back of the radical left-wing movement which was the mortal enemy of the PAP after which PAP dominance was established. It has been used also for preventive detention i.e. detaining people who are potential trouble-makers. From the late 1970s onwards, it has been used more for preventive detention. There are Singaporeans who are not the obedient Confucianists who believe in an all-knowing and all-wise PAP.

The ISA is the legislation which the West recognises as a hallmark of PAP authoritarianism. This is unfortunate for authoritarianism is not manifested simply by such laws which is why the writer has defined an authoritarian State as one where the State absorbs civil society as seen previously. Why? This kind of security law also exists in western democracies but one does not call these democracies authoritarian. There must be more than one criterion to consider a State authoritarian even if repressive laws are a crucial criterion. One can imagine a State which does not have a ISA but has a corpus of laws touching security which amounts to the same because the "Rule of Law" is violated. In the Singapore case, the "Rule of Law" in its procedural sense was used to
permit such an Act violating itself so that the ISA is legitimized force. The writer here refers to the parliamentary mechanism which legitimized the Act when in fact there is no "Rule of Law". The ISA as legitimized force is contrary to Confucianism. The Confucian leader avoids the use of force at all costs in ruling his subjects.  

The absence of the "Rule of Law", imprisonment of political opponents, the majority of the people, workers, who cannot pursue working class interests and rights is the price for economic development. And who benefits most from economic development is never discussed. In Singapore, a higher standard of living has been presented as a choice between economic development with less freedom, more sacrifices, an authoritarian State-form while more freedom, political activism means underdevelopment. The question is never ask why should we follow the West? Why should we become a consumerist society which is what finally the man on the street thinks of development, of a higher standard of living. What is the meaning of development is never asked? Economic development is never portrayed as being just one aspect of human development. The question is never posed as to having a lower standard of living and more human development. Singapore must materially grow all the time but does that make Singaporeans happier by having. And if Singapore has to grow all the time then really one must answer the question who benefits most from development?

Returning from this important diversion. But there were of course financial incentives too. There is free repatriation of profits in the original currency of investment. Investors are assured that no nationalization will befall their investments. Companies granted pioneer status are given exemption of 40% corporate tax for a period of 5-10 years. They are even given incentives for export which consist of 90% exemption on export profits in excess of a specified base. These incentives include State investment in the training of workers, technical education,

housing etc. Investors not only have labour laws in their favour but business incentives.

Cheap, skilled and disciplined labour, political stability and industrial peace coinciding with the "Golden Sixties" and developments in S.E. Asia, led to high foreign investments in the 1966-73 period with the corresponding drop in unemployment. In fact, by 1970, there were labour shortages, and in 1971 immigration laws were relaxed to allow the entry of foreign labour. In 1974, full employment was reached, despite the oil crisis years of 1973-1974. Post 1974 saw moderate growth years with a lower level of investments, but nevertheless, unemployment dropped. However, in 1985, unemployment shot up to 4.1% with the recession of that year.

Clearly, this rosy picture of the health of the Singapore economy in the writer’s view had more to do with the institutional measures legislated than with any Confucian work ethic. The crucial question is: does this successful economic development which has put Singapore into the class of the Newly Industrialized Countries require an authoritarian State-form? Could it have taken place under a more liberalizing State-form? Will the authoritarian State under the guise of a Confucian State continue as it appears borne out by the 1987-88 detentions and by new legislations that will deny the right of religion to comment on societal injustices?

An indicative answer to these questions comes from Mr. Reginald E. Little, the Director of the Office of International Business in Queensland, Australia and a former diplomat. He stated that, in countries with the Confucian tradition, governments tended to be long-lasting, not readily responsive to populist pressures, and backed by a nationally dominant party. This description fits Singapore and Mr. Little

legitimises the PAP authoritarian State. The Confucian authoritarian State will accompany continued economic development. He spoke of Singapore's success as a good example of how Confucian values can promote a high level of prosperity for a multi-cultural society. He does not say that international business which he serves will want to benefit from continued PAP Confucian rule. The Confucian approach to order in society placed greater emphasis on discipline and community coherence stated Mr. Little. Unfortunately this discipline and community coherence has to come through the institutional measures described previously which holds down the working class. It is not impregnated in the mental structure of all Singaporeans to be docile and disciplined, to put the firm before self.

This whole analysis may read like a dogmatic marxist approach on the part of the writer but it is the approach of the PAP in always putting the economic at the centre around which everything else articulates. The example is the harping of political and social stability as a pre-condition for the success of the economic strategy. Mais\textsuperscript{28} put it in a better way. He spoke of the paradox of the violently anti-communist Singapore State in having a marxist vision of society where the economic infrastructure determined all the other ideological superstructures which included this vision of man restricted to his role of '\textit{homo economicus}'.

The writer actually thinks that he can wind up this paper here but he would like to end by developing a bit more on the authoritarian State since Confucianism is linked to it.

### The Authoritarian State and Confucianism

So far two things has been said of the authoritarian State: one is that the State absorbs civil society and that the '\textit{Rule of Law}' does not exist.

Now the writer quotes Juan Linz in stating that authoritarian regimes are political systems with limited political pluralism, without elaborate and guiding ideology (but with distinctive mentalities); without intensive and extensive political mobilization (except some points in their development); and in which a leader (or occasionally a small group) exercises power within formally ill-defined limits but actually quite predictable ones.

Now, to dissect this statement. For Linz limited political pluralism is manifested in State penetration in the life of the society preventing the political expression of certain group interests...or shaping them by interventionist economic policies in comparison to unlimited pluralism in liberal democracies. This statement is exactly the case of PAP's Singapore which is why the writer speaks of the State absorbing civil society which represents the State non-economic interventions while the PAP State's economic intervention is one which does not only provides all the infrastructure for all private economic interests but itself has economic interests giving rise to a State bourgeoisie. The distinction between State and society is not obliterated which is the case with totalitarian regimes. This applies in as far as non-effective organisations of civil society are allowed to exist even independent of the PAP State.

To speak of the PAP as not having an ideology defined according to Linz as a system of thought, elaborated and organised, but having distinctive mentalities defined as ways of thinking and feeling, more emotional than rational, that provide non-codified ways of reacting to situations is hard to imagine. The PAP clearly has a thought-out vision of what Singaporean an society should be that it a well-organised and oiled machine at the service of transnational and multinational companies seen as the only way for it to survive, to prosper. The position of Mais cited above shows that there is rationality in the PAP's thinking.

But there are also moves which are simply reactive to events which makes one wonder whether it has any coherent and consistent ideology. The 'Speak Mandarin' campaign seems to have been a response to traditional Chinese misgiving over the dominance of English. That became tied up to the teaching of Confucianism in the face of a fear that the work ethic was declining with the onslaught of westernization. Now this teaching of Confucianism along with other religions has been withdrawn from the school curriculum because of the fear that religious classes would be used to awaken the social/political consciousness of students to injustices in society. Catholic priests have been attacked for getting involved in politics and there is on the table a new law which will restrict religious leaders to do just that. One sees here reactive responses to events but if one says that these are reactions to unforeseen events then there is another example. Population control was introduced in the 1970s without foreseeing the possibility of a future labour shortage which is the complaint of today. Here is the case of how rational was long-term planning. The PAP did not seem to have learned from other countries that once a norm for small families becomes ingrained it is not easy to encourage parents to have more children today. So how rational was the PAP? How much of its policy moves are based on feelings and emotions?

On the question of mobilization, it is verifiable that the PAP authoritarian State during its consolidation phase excluded any potential for oppositional mobilization. The formation of the Resident Committees from 1979 onwards was the restart of mobilization to support its policies followed by its youth wing. The last time there was mobilization was to bring it into power in 1959 and the period up to 1963 mass arrests and detentions saw intense mobilization against the PAP. Post-1963 saw the decline of mobilization ending at end of the decade. Fear, depoliticization and apathy were the features of the time. Here again is another example of PAP planning because at the end of the 1970s and the 1980s the PAP found it hard to find new leaders as the result of these previous circumstances.

Linz continued in suggesting that personal leadership is a frequent characteristic of an authoritarian regime though not a necessary one
since a junta arrangement can exist. Clearly the Confucianist philosopher-king, Premier Lee or the PAP leadership, fits this authoritarian leader while being conscious that it has never been explicit in PAP propaganda although the Premier behaves in this way.

Now, the writer compares the PAP authoritarian State to the Latin American Bureaucratic-Authoritarian State (BA).\(^\text{30}\) The PAP State is not the military institution, military techno-Bureaucrats, in power as is found in the case of Latin America. One could obviously imagine a military take-over in Singapore if the PAP is ever voted out. The PAP authoritarian State is is run by civilian techno-bureaucrats. A definition of the techno-bureaucrat would be one found in the L'Evenement du Jeudi which spoke of a bureaucratic model which exalted western rationality\(^\text{31}\) or the culture of a rational approach to policy-making and problem-solving. These civilian techno-bureaucrats are found both in the State machinery and in the PAP.

Describing the PAP State as bureaucratic-authoritarian fits well with Confucian rule. A Christian Science Monitor report entitled, "Waves of public discontent rise around the Premier" of 26th April 1986 illustrates this.

It raised the question whether Chinese societies, referring to Singapore, can exist without an emperor? The article went on to speak of Premier Lee as the most self-consciously Confucian ruler in post-War East Asia who has built his administration on a strong, reliable bureaucracy and who is notoriously intolerant of corruption. Mention has already been made of the Minister who had to commit suicide to save his honour because of corruption tainting the exemplary State bureaucracy. In theory, the article stated, this enabled Lee to govern by moral example rather than by force - a cornerstone of Confucian practice but it emphasized

\(^{30}\) See Lim, Paul, op.cit., pages 13-14.

\(^{31}\) op.cit., 11-17 April 1985, page 33.
that Lee's intolerance of his opponents has often resembled political repression as much as the Confucian ruler's demand for absolute loyalty. This Christian Monitor report could have been cited before. Linz's leader is the exemplary Confucian leader who rules with an exemplary civilian bureaucracy intolerant of corruption but whose demand of absolute loyalty is by the repression and force of an authoritarian State.

Now, in trying to establish that the PAP State is a civilian BA State, it is a one-party dominant State i.e. a Parliament dominated by one party where the opposition has just one elected member run by civilian techno-bureaucrats with the military behind it which does not dictate terms. In this respect, it is like the Mexican PRI State which also has features of the BA State but each with their specificities. The PRI harbouring within it peasant, labour, and the middle class sections while the PAP had its men running the NTUC which was legally separated from it. The grassroot organisations: the CCs, CCCs and RCs are formally State apparatus but also PAP apparatuses. This kind of linkages reflect their attempt to find roots in civil society. Both parties, it is to be noted, came into power with the support of the masses.

Now, this fact of the PAP State being a one-party dominant State puts a question mark on the rational approach to policy-making and problem-solving which as stated characterizes a techno-bureaucracy. Why? It has to play according to rules of electoral politics. Recall here also previous statements on moves which were simply reactive to events in connection with a coherent, rational, and consistent ideology. There are the demands of the electorate which enter into consideration in daily policy-making and problem-solving and keeping election promises at the risk of losing electoral support though it is not one which gives in to the electorate. But then how come it has never lost any election? The PAP has the legislative means to change the rules of the game to keep itself

32. See Lim, Paul, op.cit., page 13.
continuously in power which makes a farce of democracy. Democracy in form but authoritarian in substance. The ‘Rule of Law’ in its procedural sense is used to violate itself by Parliament legislating unjust laws. The classic military BA State did not have to deal with the demands of the electorate. Force was at hand for it to use though this polarized society greatly. But in the short or middle term it had a free hand to follow a rational approach of the military and civilian techno-bureaucrats.

But apart from this one-party dominant civilian BA State feature there is much of the BA State typology in the PAP State.

Both the PAP and the BA States came into their own through repression and in their consolidation the policy was to prevent the resurgence of any opposition. In this policy of preventive control fear of coercion, depoliticization, apathy and tacit consent were the hall-marks. This has already been mentioned above on the question of the absence of mobilization. These hall-marks are the mediations of an authoritarian State which absorbs civil society.

What is left for any support of the PAP in such an authoritarian State is the delivery of material goods touched upon previously. Support had to come from the success of the PAP State’s institutions in delivering the goods. Here is the political consideration for continued electoral support. This complements the other approach that the delivery of goods was one way to create loyalty to the State cutting across ethnic lines. The delivery of goods is the State’s raison d’être. The focus is the State hence Statism and Statism is the basis of the Singapore ‘Nation’. The English language and meritocracy as the common ground for all the ethnic groups are the other pillars of this statist nation.

It is to be noted that this delivery of goods which is a form of income redistribution took place from the early days of the PAP when it came into power marking the difference. This was not the case of the Latin American BA States. Income redistribution came only when they reintroduced State Capitalism. The early years of the Latin American BA States were marked by both political and economic exclusion.
The return to State Capitalism in the Latin American States was an attempt to regain the support of the popular sector and the sections of the national bourgeoisie and the middle class. To the popular sector, in particular, the State’s association with transnational capital delegitimised it from being a national State and an above-class State. Workers in Singapore also have this perception of the PAP State. Sections of the national bourgeoisie and the middle class which originally supported the establishment of the BA State deserted it because of the heavy costs and hardships inflicted upon them with this new economic path of normalisation ie. monetarist policies, private capital as the motor of economic development. These sections of the national bourgeoisie were neglected in the process. If it was the contrary their interests could have been interpreted as coequal to the general interest of the Nation but this was not possible with the BA State. The return to State capitalism involved not just income redistribution but also the return of the trade unions to the political arena, the development of certain fractions of the domestic bourgeoisie, and even imposing certain restrictions on transnational capital.33 In so doing, it was hoped that the State will be re-perceived as a ‘national’ State commanding the people’s loyalty reinforced by the success of State capitalism in delivering the goods. State capitalism was the cornerstone of Statism, of the statist Nation.

This return to State Capitalism was opposed by the foreign-allied upper bourgeoisie and the multinational bourgeoisie as being “prematured”, encouraging the flight of capital and bringing back the economic crisis of the pre-BA era. These bourgeois fractions encouraged the replacement of government leaders by others more attuned to their orientations and interests. Only in the case of Brazil was there no opposition to State Capitalism and this had to do with the fact that the Brazilian State excluded the popular sector. In the Singapore case, there was no opposition to State Capitalism by foreign capital because they realized that the trade unions were there to control the workers and

33. See Lim, Paul, op.cit., page 17.
further assured by the fact that they were part of the State apparatus, that their contribution to income redistribution did not enormously increase their wage bill, and that their investments were free from nationalization and there was free repatriation of profits.

The neglected sections of the national bourgeoisie and the middle class referred to above supported the call of the upper bourgeoisie which allied themselves to foreign capital to put an end to the unrest created by the common enemy, the popular sector and the lower middle class as the result of their demand-making. The intervention of the military as an institution to take over the State was the result. The writer mentions this because the establishment of the BA State in Latin America had also to do with a fight between sections of the bourgeoisie which favoured domestic market capitalist development while other sections allied to foreign capital wanted production for world markets. This points to a class formation at a certain advanced stage.

This is not the case in Singapore as with many other Post-Colonial States where at the moment of independence there was either no domestic bourgeoisie or weak ones. Singapore had weak bourgeois fractions divided along ethnic lines at independence and this obviously made for an absence of any national bourgeoisie. The writer also hypothesizes that the local bourgeois fractions were never given any role in national economic planning or in politics in the immediate post independence period because they never supported the anti-colonial movement. In other Post-Colonial States there were cases where the weak beginnings of a bourgeoisie supported the anti-colonial movement in the pre-independence period. The field was left to the Post-Colonial State, to its governing class who in time formed a State bourgeoisie and foreign capital. This continues to be the case in Singapore, but there has been a change of heart to give domestic capitalists a place and role especially after the experience of having to rely on them to generate employment in times of recession.

From these additional last few pages on the authoritarian State, one could finally describe the PAP State in Singapore as a one-man-led,
one-party dominant bureaucratic-authoritarian State shorn of its Latin American military definition attempting to envelope itself in a Confucianist world-view, culture, traditions, values, and norms to portray itself as Confucian in some ways. Confucianism reinforces and articulates with an authoritarian State-form of the capitalist State-type in a social formation where Capitalism was the dominant mode of production. Capitalist accumulation is to strive in some kind of Confucian setting.