

Response to Lee Kuan Yew's Paternalism: From the Perspectives of Huang Tsung-hsi and John Stuart Mill

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Having founded the state of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew has been widely acclaimed for his achievement in creating the economic and diplomatic miracle of Singapore. However, his paternalistic domestic policy is disputed, often accused of depriving Singaporeans of basic liberties. Is such paternalism justified? In this paper, Lee Kuan Yew's paternalism will be reviewed from the perspectives of Huang Tsung-hsi and John Stuart Mill.

In Singapore, as Lee himself admitted, personal matters such as the choice of neighbours or language and the manner of life are highly regulated; ("Government's Hard-nosed Approach Defended") the freedom of the press is subordinate to national interests, ("Address to the General Assembly") and this is also true for the freedom of speech, best illustrated in the recent case of a teenager jailed for posting a YouTube clip which disagreed with Lee Kuan Yew. (Park) While there is formally a democratic election system, the ruling People's Action Party ensured the sustainment of its authoritarian rule through gerrymandering and enlargement of "multi-member districts"

(Tan 641). Hence, it could be concluded that Lee's ideal political system is authoritarian.

As such, Singapore is largely a modern realisation of the Chinese thinker Huang Tsung-hsi's ideal polity. In *Waiting for the Dawn*, Huang illustrated his vision for an ideal state based on the "common good", which includes the happiness of the people (95), social order and morality (97). In his ideal state, there is a prince, analogical to the emperor of Huang's times, who rules the whole country. He took a meritocratic line in his justification, saying that the people are selfish and never consider the common good (91), while the ideal prince would "not think of benefit in terms of his but s[ee]k to benefit all-under-Heaven" (91), thus deriving his authority to rule. From this justification derives the properties of the prince: the prince has the authority to control every aspect of life, from the ownership of land to education, marriage and the military (97), as long as he could cater the common good. There is no such concept as "freedom" since Huang would argue that guidance from an autocrat is necessary for the people to achieve the common good because of their selfishness and moral corruptness.

While there is not a prince in Singapore as it is in Huang's ideal world, there is a prime minister with authoritarian rule, so they could be treated as near-equivalent, with Singapore as a modern realisation. They are similar, for example, in the method of choosing the ruler. Huang criticised purely hereditary monarchy (93), and although Lee's son also became Prime Minister of Singapore, he obtained the position not because Lee Kuan Yew preserved the estate and handed it down to his son, but because of his own ability as he was chosen partly through a general election. The election of Goh Chok Tong as the Prime Minister since 1990, right after Lee's stepping

down from the position, showed clearly that Lee's son was chosen not blindly but for his own ability. As Huang did not reject the monarchical system of his times but wished the prince were chosen for his desire for and the ability to achieve the common good, Lee's father-to-son inheritance of the throne matches exactly Huang's ideal.

The congruence is signified also by Lee's line of discourse: Lee believes that he could "decide what is right" ("Government's Hard-nosed Approach Defended") and "[n]ever mind what the people think," ("Government's Hard-nosed Approach Defended") because the people are not educated (*The Man and His Ideas*) and needs him to tell them what is right and make the right decision, thus justifying his all-pervasive rule. Indeed, Singapore under Lee's rule has been stable and prosperous, with its gross domestic product increasing every year ("Annual GDP at 2010 Market Prices and Real Economic Growth"). Morality was also ensured with such invasive control over private life.

However, it shall be noted that the kind of morality acquired is backward, since strict obedience to the law belongs only to the conventional level (stages 3 and 4) of Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral development. (Crain) While it is true that most adults do not exceed this level, implying, to a certain extent, that Lee's belief contains some truth, an autonomous morality would be more advanced and desirable, and it requires instead open discussion of moral actions. (Crain) Therefore it is disputable whether the kind of morality ensured by Lee's policy is meaningful and desirable. Since that Huang's ideal has its roots from Confucian teaching (Yu 122) and the basis of his argument is the moral corruptness of the majority, morality of the public is clearly an inseparable part of his ideal. If the morality resulted from his political system

is so imperfect and insincere, it is possibly a huge deviation from his real intention, and it would be necessary to consider alternatives. Hence John Stuart Mill's view is now to be considered.

Under Mill's framework ("On Liberty" 150), Lee's Singapore is a state within which the freedom of conduct and the freedom of thought and discussion are both excessively intervened by the state machine. Mill has argued against such interference in personal freedom, for both types of freedom contribute to maximising the overall utility of the society. The freedom of thought and discussion is valuable in that it could prevent us from abolishing correct thoughts by mistake as people did in killing Socrates and Jesus for blasphemy (106–107). The freedom of conduct is important for the development of individuality (134). Apparently Lee's view contradicts Mill's idea.

Indeed, even Huang supported a non-universal type of freedom of speech. He emphasised that the government should "shar[e] with the schools the determination of right and wrong" (104). Huang honoured the Eastern Han system in which scholars could discuss social affairs "without fear of those in power" (105). In Huang's opinion, scholars should enjoy the freedom of thought and discussion, and translating that into the world of today, these scholars should be acting as public intellectuals, and this might involve writing on the newspapers. Huang would not agree that "purpose of an elected government" is overriding. Otherwise it would be impossible for "the highest officials [to be] anxious to avoid their censure" as it were in Eastern Han (105). Huang would accept a certain degree of censorship over the press, but he would prefer more freedom of the press so that scholars could effectively monitor the government, although such a degree of

freedom would still be deemed deficient by Mill as he would suspect whether this is enough to counter the government.

However, Mill's view might, under certain circumstances, approve of Lee's policies. Lee once commented that the Singaporean society consists of people who are neither well educated nor properly brought up, and so he had to incline to the "stick" side of the carrot and stick approach (*The Man and His Ideas*). This is in line with the view of Mill's, who believed that "maturity of faculties" is the prerequisite of the application of his doctrine of liberty to the society ("On Liberty" 95). If Mill considered Singapore a backward society, he would certainly agree with Lee. He would think that Singaporeans should be totally obedient to their ruler.

Yet Mill would more likely refute Lee's idea as Singaporeans are rather advanced. First of all, at the time of publication of *On Liberty*, i.e. 1859, education in the United Kingdom was largely restricted to upper class males: higher education for women was first introduced only in 1849, and it was not until 1880 that schooling became compulsory, and 1891 that elementary education became free. (Gillard) Thus it was entirely conceivable that in most of the rest of the world popular education was absent. Therefore modern citizens, having received compulsory free education, are generally far better educated than the general public in Mill's times, and probably exceeds Mill's conception of improperly brought up people.

Moreover, since the Human Development Index of Singapore was already the 35th highest in the world and listed among the countries of high human development in 1990 (United Nations Development Programme 111), and has been increasing since then ("Table 2: Human Development Index Trends, 1980–2013"), it is unlikely that Mill would consider post-1990

Singapore a backward state, and thus he would oppose Lee's policy, at least since 1990.

Against Lee's claim that interference in personal matters is necessary for Singapore's economic success, Mill would use two arguments: firstly, that the freedom of discussion and that of conduct would be beneficial to the pursuit of better practices, and more efficient practices would contribute to economic progress. For instance, Lee himself has made radical changes in Singapore's policy over casinos (Onishi). Be the changed decision right or wrong, it indicates that the ruling class might make wrong decisions, or they might respond too slowly to changes in the global business environment, and freedom of discussion is probably helpful to better decision making.

Mill would also argue that more economic progress does not necessarily translate into higher aggregated utility. Suppose a tighter grip over the private lives of Singaporeans was really beneficial to economic progress, Singaporeans might still find themselves better off with more freedom and less economic progress. Mill considered utility with respect to the nature of human "as a progressive being" ("On Liberty" 95), so economic progress is merely a small part of total utility as it only contributes to the satisfaction of animal needs such as nutrition. People with freedom would need to choose his own mode of living and this process involves human faculties such as observation, reasoning, self-control etc., (134) thus developing individuality. As Mill put it, "[i]t is better to be a human dissatisfied than a pig satisfied" ("Utilitarianism" 188), individuality is fundamental to the overall utility. It contributes also to individual happiness. Hence individuality is more important for utility than economic progress.

Moreover, by utilitarian arguments, because of diminishing marginal returns, economic benefits for the most well-off would contribute much less

to their happiness than for the worse-off (Wolff 151). Therefore if the method of obtaining economic progress involves only economic activities that are suitable for only part of the population, even if more economic progress is achieved, it would be harmful to the overall utility. Thus it is necessary to allow diversity in modes of life so that people with different temperaments are satisfied (“On Liberty” 143), and it is necessary to allow, through the freedom of conduct, the discovery of better practices of life for all members of the society (138).

Before drawing any conclusion, however, one should also be aware of a speech made by Lee in the Malaysian Parliament in which he called for an open society in which ideas can be preached and openly debated (“Speech by Singapore’s Prime Minister” 1). The speech contradicts the policies he adopted. It was either that he had to speak in line with Malaysian constitution (2), or that he genuinely believed in liberty and merely withheld it for pragmatic reasons. The latter is possible as the geopolitical situation of Singapore¹ makes it necessary for the Singaporean state to be cohesive, and diversity of opinion is harmful to national cohesion. However, if Lee either viewed freedom as a basic right or as fundamental to humans as a progressive being, an integral part of overall utility, it is very unlikely for him to surrender freedom. Thus it would be taken here that Lee’s belief is consistent with his policies.

Hence two sets of arguments are presented, of which Mill’s is against Lee, while Huang’s inclines the other way. However great their differences, one thing is in common: Lee’s paternalism has exerted too much control over the freedom of discussion and it would be harmful for Singapore in the long

¹ Singapore neighbours the much larger Malaysia and was a new-born small state.

run as it is difficult to ensure that every Prime Minister of Singapore would be as good at governance as Lee was. Even Huang himself acknowledged that his political ideal could only be realised when there was “an enlightened ruler” (90). Therefore it is clear that Lee exerted too tight a control over the freedom of expression.

What is left is Lee’s invasion into the freedom of conduct. Considering the Confucian nature of Huang’s view, it is not unlikely that he would revise his theory after an encounter with modern moral development theories. As long as the people are not genuinely compelled by a moral imperative to act as they do but are merely legally obliged to do so, the moral corruptness of them does not alter, and thus the system Huang proposed would not be able to achieve its ends and should be abandoned. Moreover, the discussion about maturity of faculties as a prerequisite of Mill’s theory and the current educational level of Singaporeans should suffice to rebut Lee’s and Huang’s presumption, which is a mistrust of the intellectual capacity of the general public. Thus the suspicion against both the moral and the intellectual capacity of the public are unable to stand, and Lee’s paternalism is unjustified.

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Teacher's comment:

This essay offers a powerful response to Lee Kuan Yew's views on how to rule a country. It has drawn support from Huang Tsung-hsi's *Waiting for the Dawn* and J. S. Mill's *On Liberty*. The author has demonstrated extraordinary analytical skills and profound understanding of both texts. He is able to see not only the differences but also similarities between the Liberal and the Confucian traditions. In particular, the author points out that a Confucian like Huang Tsung-hsi would allow political dissent to exist in society in order to limit the power of the prince. Arguing from a Millian perspective, he is able to refute the commonly-held view that economic progress could compensate for restrictions on individual liberties. All in all, this work succeeds in exposing the problems with state paternalism and authoritarian developmentalism. (Ip Ka Wai Kevin)