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**Le Queux, Stephane, and Kuah, Adrian (2021) *Junzi leadership in Singapore: governance and human capital development*. Journal of Management Development, 40 (5) pp. 389-403.**

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<https://doi.org/10.1108/JMD%2D05%2D2019%2D0194>



**君子 Junzi Leadership in Singapore: Governance and Human Capital Development**

Journal:	<i>Journal of Management Development</i>
Manuscript ID	JMD-05-2019-0194.R1
Manuscript Type:	Original Article
Keywords:	Leadership, Governance, Singapore, Tripartism, Confucius, Human capital development

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## 君子 *Junzi* Leadership in Singapore: Governance and Human Capital Development

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### **Purpose**

12 This paper provides insights as to how a Confucian inspired *Junzi* style of leadership translates  
13 into initiatives towards human capital development in Singapore. After reviewing tripartite  
14 governance in Singapore, we discuss the character of Confucian leadership: how does this  
15 value system inform the moral economy of the Singaporean corporatist model and inherently  
16 come to impact upon the conception and significance of human capital.  
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### **Design/methodology/approach**

25 The case approach was employed using multiple sources of secondary data, supplemented by  
26 interviews with high-profile informants in Singapore. Multiple sources led to data  
27 triangulation in presenting a mutually consistent set of evidence. The paper also draws from a  
28 longitudinal observation of Singapore's industrial relations and human resource development  
29 (HRD) policies over the last 10 years since the Global Financial Crisis.  
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### **Findings**

39 Organized along two thematic areas: governance and human capital development, this paper  
40 proposes and finds that governance in Singapore displays an institutionalized form of *Junzi*  
41 leadership that translates into policy-making toward human capital development.  
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### **Originality/value**

48 This paper brings about an Asian perspective of *Junzi* leadership toward management and  
49 governance. The Confucian value system intrinsic to tripartite governance provides an  
50 original heuristic lens that help shed a light on the significance of human capital development  
51 in Singapore.  
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## 1. Introduction

Singapore has a specific form of leadership and governance, a unique brand of ‘ultra-corporatism’ (Kuah *et al.*, 2017), which arguably provides successful policy-making. The virtue of social dialogue at the epicenter of the EU social model has long been heralded yet proved arduous in monitoring its success, thereby leading to the search for a better “governance architecture” (Armstrong, 2012). In contrast, the tripartite governance in Singapore displays dynamic features of agile coordination enabling quick adjustments which bore fruit, as demonstrated by Singapore’s sustained economic success.

Tripartite governance becomes the backbone of Singapore’s socioeconomic model, but more importantly, it is labour-centric. The development of human capital is indeed core to Singapore’s economic development because of the city–country’s lack of natural resources.

As stated by Coe and Kelly (2000, p. 414), “there can be few other places in the world where the social regulation of the labour market has been so consistently and explicitly a central component of national development strategy as it has been in Singapore.” As such, Singapore is a living laboratory that epitomizes the potential of systemic investment in human capital.

This paper looks at the fabric of tripartite governance, in particular how Tripartism has evolved in Singapore to address labour shortage challenges, and finally how tripartite policies are embedded to enhance human capital development (Leggett, 2013). In doing so, the paper discusses how a Confucian ethos inspired Singaporean leaders and gave ground to the Singaporean model of governance. It is argued that this ethos, in lieu of “political ideology” (Barr, 2000), informs the moral economy underpinning the Singaporean corporatist model.

As a review paper, it does not make an attempt to draw a linear connection between leadership and human capital in the form of a straight relationship between independent and dependent variables. Instead, the paper focuses how leadership molds into a model of

1  
2  
3 governance, of which Tripartism is a key institutional feature instrumental to the  
4  
5 development of HRD strategies (Osman-Gani and Tan, 1998, p. 421). This is consistent with  
6  
7 Miao et al (2012: 391) who suggest that “the main focus of research into Asian leadership  
8  
9 should be on examining how the mix of cultural and wider contextual influences, such as  
10  
11 particular socioeconomic and industrial contexts, along with particular industrial work  
12  
13 dynamics, impact on follower responses to transformational leadership.”  
14  
15

16  
17 The data used is informed by a 10-year longitudinal review of Singapore industrial relations  
18  
19 and HRD policies between 2009 and 2019. External validation was sought through open-  
20  
21 ended interviews with union leaders, directors of employers’ associations, directors of closely  
22  
23 held government agencies, and a Minister of State for the Ministry of Manpower. Scott’s  
24  
25 (1990) criteria were used to assess the authenticity, creditability, representativeness, and  
26  
27 meaning to information, while Silverman’s (2000) technique was used to treat interview data.  
28  
29

30  
31 The paper is organized along two thematic areas, governance and human capital, as follows:  
32  
33 we first review tripartist governance in Singapore and how this has evolved over time to  
34  
35 address contemporary and future challenges. Arising from this, we illustrate how this model  
36  
37 of governance delivered shared prosperity in delivering both economic and wage growth.  
38  
39 Next, we discuss the character of Confucian leadership. Further, we exemplify how such a  
40  
41 model of governance and leadership translates into initiatives toward human capital  
42  
43 development and may provide a lead for best practices regionally, concluding that  
44  
45 considering Confucian value system is a valuable heuristic to understand leadership and  
46  
47 governance in Asia and does impact on the meaning and significance of human capital in  
48  
49 Singapore.  
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## 54 55 **2. The Fabric of Tripartism** 56 57 58 59 60

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3 Tripartism refers to an economic corporatism based on tripartite contracts between business,  
4  
5 labour, and the State within the economy. Each party acts as a social partner to create an  
6  
7 economic policy through cooperation, consultation, negotiation, and compromise (Wiarda,  
8  
9 1996). Tripartism in Singapore is arguably a key reason supporting Singapore's economic  
10  
11 advancement into a highly developed trade-oriented economy (Leggett et al., 2017; Kuah et  
12  
13 al, 2017). This tripartite arrangement has been a platform for the Singapore government to  
14  
15 launch a wide range of schemes to boost productivity growth, encourage skills upgrading,  
16  
17 and even forge consensus on national wage guidelines.  
18  
19  
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21

22  
23 On the one hand, employers' associations and trade union members in Singapore support the  
24  
25 government's initiatives to adopt a non-confrontational labour relations practice. All parties  
26  
27 partake in labour relations and share a belief to work toward an 'amicable and harmonious'  
28  
29 outcome that is not disruptive to work. On the other hand, Singapore's political elite adopted  
30  
31 the concept of patriarchalism to bolster Singapore's "tripartite arrangements by absorbing key  
32  
33 employer interests in building collaborative relationships vital for the developmental state"  
34  
35 (Sheldon *et al.*, 2015, pp. 441).  
36  
37  
38

39  
40 The major players in the Singapore tripartite movement include the Singapore National  
41  
42 Employers Federation (SNEF), National Trade Union Congress (NTUC), and Ministry of  
43  
44 Manpower (MOM). The formation of the NTUC by the ruling political party (the People's  
45  
46 Action Party, or PAP) in 1964 provided a strategic thrust to propel its industrial relations  
47  
48 initiatives that led to the government favoring cooperation with labour unions and forging  
49  
50 strong alliances with businesses in Singapore (Haley *et al.*, 1996). The unique PAP-NTUC  
51  
52 relationship became the core of a wider tripartite system. It has become common to find  
53  
54 senior officials in public service being seconded into the NTUC to boost the quality and  
55  
56 standing of the NTUC leadership. Able union leaders, in turn, are also co-opted into the PAP  
57  
58  
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3 leadership, fielded as Members of Parliament (MP) and appointed to key offices, enabling  
4  
5 cross-fertilization and knowledge exchanges.  
6  
7

8 The opportunity to seal the tripartite industrial relations occurred in 1980 when the Ministry  
9 of Labour (renamed the Ministry of Manpower—MOM in 1998) effected a merger between  
10  
11 the two then largest registered employers' associations (the Singapore Employers' Federation  
12  
13 and the National Employers' Council) into the SNEF. The SNEF's ruling Council is made up  
14  
15 of 14 representatives from leading companies and multinational corporations in Singapore.  
16  
17 The SNEF sets a common agenda on issues such as innovation, productivity, and skills  
18  
19 upgrading but still must work within a system where the NTUC–PAP interests have been  
20  
21 self-styled as “symbiotic” (Leggett *et al.*, 2017; Loh, 2018, p. 2). The MOM is in charge of  
22  
23 orchestrating labour deployment and HRD to meet the needs of companies and multinational  
24  
25 corporations in Singapore. Over the years, the MOM has deployed multiple strategies to  
26  
27 implement manpower planning, lifelong employability, the augmentation of talent, and the  
28  
29 transformation of the work environment (MOM, 2001).  
30  
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### 36 **3. Tripartite Success: Economic and Wage Growth**

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40 To ensure that wage-share grows in tandem with productivity and economic growth in  
41  
42 Singapore, a tripartite National Wages Council (NWC) was set up in 1972. Later, in 1979, the  
43  
44 PAP adopted a corrective high-wage policy to orchestrate belated economic restructuring.  
45  
46 This high-wage policy by the NWC induced a shift in Singapore's economy toward high  
47  
48 technology and high value-added production. However, this required a parallel shift in the  
49  
50 management and development of the labour market. The regulatory means for skills  
51  
52 formation and “character building” were set up by government agencies, the NTUC and the  
53  
54 SNEF. Workforce development increasingly became a tripartite endeavor. Leggett, Kuah and  
55  
56 Gan (2017) assert that nowhere have Singapore's employers' associations engaged more in  
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1  
2  
3 tripartite relations than in the centralized wage determination of NWC. In making its  
4  
5 recommendations on wage adjustments for the year, the tripartite NWC takes into  
6  
7 consideration factors such as productivity growth, employment situation, international  
8  
9 competitiveness, and economic growth and prospects.  
10  
11

12  
13 Singapore successfully made a swift and remarkable recovery from the Global Financial  
14  
15 Crisis (GFC) of 2007–2008. After a peak at over 15.24% average GDP growth across four  
16  
17 quarters in 2010 (World Bank, 2019), GDP growth rates have remained relatively steady  
18  
19 throughout the rest of the decade (3.6% in 2017, 3.2% to 3.5% forecast in 2018). This is  
20  
21 relatively high compared with Western economies. In tandem, the real total wages and the  
22  
23 real basic wages have grown in line with Singapore GDP from 2012 to 2015, while  
24  
25 Singapore's labour productivity exhibits a similar trend as seen in Figure 1.  
26  
27  
28  
29

30 ----- INSERT FIGURE. 1 ABOUT HERE -----  
31

32  
33 The regular deliberations of the tripartite NWC have seen the income of Singapore residents  
34  
35 (citizens and permanent residents) increasing along with Singapore's economic performance.  
36  
37 It is a formula for wage determination that indeed provides effective wealth distribution, with  
38  
39 cumulative change as for 2008–2018 of +53.2% of nominal wages (+30% in real wages). In  
40  
41 contrast to Western counterparts where wages have been stagnant, the annual labour  
42  
43 productivity growth in Singapore has been going hand-in-hand with real wage growth, thanks  
44  
45 to some extent to the NWC wage determination system, which functionally provides a basis  
46  
47 for some form of built-in institutionalized “trickle-down” economics.  
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51 ----- INSERT FIGURE. 2 ABOUT HERE -----  
52

53  
54 The recovery from the GFC was emblematic of Singapore's commitment to human capital,  
55  
56 with “a multi-pronged effort to stabilize employment levels supported by a tripartite approach  
57  
58 to employment relations” (Waring and Lewer, 2013, p. 221). A Tripartite Guidelines on  
59  
60



1  
2  
3 Managing Excess Manpower was issued in November 2008, including temporal flexibility  
4 alternatives and a Job Credits scheme designed to save jobs introduced in the 2009 budget  
5 (Shanmugaratnam, 2009). These guidelines reflected NTUC Secretary-General Lim Swee  
6 Say's sentiment who urged in the 2009 Budget Speech that "businesses should cut costs to  
7 save jobs, not cut jobs to save costs" (Le Queux and Waring, 2010, p. 224).  
8  
9

10  
11 In addition, the Singapore Government introduced the Skills Program for Upgrading and  
12 Resilience (SPUR) program at a cost of \$600 million over two years and providing up to  
13 1000 different courses designed to upgrade a wide variety of workers' skills. Shifting  
14 institutional support to HRD, directed at the Singaporean "core" workforce has been  
15 implemented since to buckle low-wage and low skills employment.  
16  
17

#### 27 **4. Harnessing Human Capital: The Legacy of 君子 *Junzi* leadership**

28  
29 Whether Western theories about leadership fit with the Asian context is debatable (Zhao and  
30 Jiang, 2009; Leung, 2012; Pezzutto, 2019) and various studies have attempted to address the  
31 particularism of the Asian context (Jung and Avolio, 1999; Walumbwa and Lawler, 2003;  
32 Taormina and Selvarajah, 2005; Miao et al 2012; Pezzutto, 2019). Moreover, in a high-  
33 context culture generally found in Asia, there are many contextual elements that help people  
34 to understand the rules and much is taken for granted (Hall and Hall, 1989). This can be very  
35 confusing for person who does not understand the 'unwritten rules' of the culture. It may  
36 appear, for example, that governance in Singapore displays concrete illustrations of both  
37 forms of transactional and transformational leadership, as per Bass's (1996) typology. It may  
38 also be tempting to look at Lee Kuan Yew's transformative influence in shaping Singapore  
39 with the lens of the 'Great Man' theory, as so many biographers did. Rather, it is observed  
40 that considering Confucianism as a value system contribute to better understanding  
41 leadership in the Asian context, and Singapore notably.  
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3 Gong and Jang (1998) characterized the cultures of East Asia, including Singapore, as “neo-  
4 Confucian” and thus rooted in the Confucian teaching tradition. The Confucian revival or  
5  
6 New Confucianism conveys a discourse of inheritance and continuation of Asian values. At  
7  
8 the heart of this discourse lay an emphasis on cultural relativism and the claim that liberal  
9  
10 democracy and the mainstream human rights agenda were Western cultural norms that did  
11  
12 not belong in Asia (Pezzutto, 2019). This discourse was particularly popular throughout the  
13  
14 1980s and 1990s, which saw Singapore emerge as an intellectual centre of a transnational  
15  
16 Confucian revival with the opening the Institute for East Asian Philosophies in 1983 and a  
17  
18 number of international conferences on Confucian thought hosted in Singapore (Makeham,  
19  
20 2008, p. 23).  
21  
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26  
27 Singapore’s success story owes much to its leaders, and notoriously Mr. Lee Kuan Yew.  
28  
29 Amrine (2013) suggested that Singaporeans would not be where they are today if it was not  
30  
31 for these values. Lee Kuan Yew frequently heralded “Confucian values” as the key factor in  
32  
33 the country’s rapid capitalist modernization. Lee himself was a self-confessed Confucianist,  
34  
35 which had deep value-based implications in the way he led Singapore. Lee Kuan Yew noted:  
36  
37 “I am not bound by theories, but my upbringing in a three-generation family made me an  
38  
39 unconscious Confucianist. It steps into you, the Confucianist belief that society works best  
40  
41 where every man aims to be a gentleman. The ideal is a *Junzi*, a gentleman” (Plate, 2013, p.  
42  
43 177).  
44  
45  
46  
47

48 Confucian *Junzi* (gentleman) sought grace and dignity by fulfilling traditional obligations:  
49  
50 “Confucian rationalism meant rational adjustment to the world” (Weber, 1968, p. 248). *Junzi*  
51  
52 leadership is envisioned to possess overlapping attributes balancing both a moral person and  
53  
54 a leader (Trevino et al., 2000; Trevino and Brown, 2007), by matching one’s words with  
55  
56 his/her deeds or actions, thereby serving as a good role model for others to follow. It is the  
57  
58 defining symbol of the ultimate virtuous person and is the personification of the Confucian  
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3 moral core – *Ren*, *Yi*, and *Li*. *Ren* is a human capacity of compassion or benevolence for  
4  
5 fellow human beings. *Yi* is a sense of moral rightness with the capacity to discern  
6  
7 appropriateness through one's acts and relationships. *Li* represents etiquettes, norms, and  
8  
9 protocols in dealing with personal and institutional lives.  
10  
11

12  
13 A complete review of Confucianism lies beyond the remit of this paper, though key  
14  
15 conceptual notifications are needed to contextualize the discussion. At a broad level,  
16  
17 Confucian political philosophy is an open system that is founded on the basis of a humanist  
18  
19 concern for people and the moral idealism of self-cultivation (Cheng, 2011). Confucian  
20  
21 values may refer to a number of things, including, but not limited to, the valuing of education,  
22  
23 discipline, thriftiness, hierarchy, self-reliance, harmony, the centrality of the family, morality,  
24  
25 self-cultivation and peace (Tu, 1984; Koh, 2000; Barr, 2000; Makeham, 2008; Chia, 2015).  
26  
27

28  
29 Confucianism principles insist upon centralized authority, hierarchical order, harmony,  
30  
31 diligence and hard work, seniority-based reward systems, and paternalistic management,  
32  
33 which have been observed as common features in Chinese organizations (Taormina and  
34  
35 Selvarajah, 2005; Pun, Chin and Lau, 2000) and have deep ramifications in Chinese industrial  
36  
37 relations (Laulusa, 2008). As noted by Fu and Tsui (2003, p. 425), "Chinese business leaders  
38  
39 all over the world are known to exhibit an extreme high degree of authoritarianism while also  
40  
41 showing benevolence to subordinates and demonstrating a high level of moral character in  
42  
43 their actions and decisions reflecting the influence of the deeply embedded Confucian  
44  
45 values". Likewise, Rarick (2009) note some common characteristics of the Chinese approach  
46  
47 to organizational management, such as centralised control, collectivism, authoritarian and  
48  
49 paternalistic leadership, and the primacy of the hierarchical family model would be concepts  
50  
51 that are largely an anathema to the Western liberal individualism. In their discussion of  
52  
53 Chinese leadership, McElhatton and Jackson (2012) highlight that an impediment to properly  
54  
55 comprehending the Chinese model of leadership is the West's approach to the notions of  
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3 paternalism or authoritarianism. Indeed, Singapore, alike other neighboring countries such as  
4  
5 South Korea and Taiwan has often been labelled as a ‘soft authoritarian’ regime by Western  
6  
7 observers (Johnson, 2002, in McCann, 2014, p. 289), yet also by Asian critics (Ng, 2018).  
8  
9

10 Confucian leadership style or *Junzi* has been presented as a form of transformational  
11  
12 leadership (Wong, 2013). Ip (2011, p. 692) describes a *Junzi* as a moral person who “would  
13  
14 possess and demonstrate his genuine care and concern toward people, and would be  
15  
16 committed to do the right thing in both personal and professional lives.” Confucius  
17  
18 symbolizes leaders as “authentic idealized influence” (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999), hence  
19  
20 *Junzi* as a moral exemplar. Constantly, Confucius himself reminded his students to establish  
21  
22 themselves, at the same time, to establish others. In sum, the commitment to, and the exercise  
23  
24 of, *Ren*, *Yi* and *Li* virtues constitute the core of *Junzi* leadership (Ip, 2011).  
25  
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30 Lee Kuan Yew’s Confucian ethos has been widely acknowledged, also in the way he  
31  
32 conceived governance in Singapore. Barr (2000, p. 212) highlights, “at many important  
33  
34 levels, Lee Kuan Yew’s approach to the personnel of government was unambiguously  
35  
36 Confucian (...) Lee’s whole notion of an educated elite which is ‘groomed to govern’ fits  
37  
38 comfortably into the Confucian model of mandarin.” Chua Beng Huat (cited in Barr 2000,  
39  
40 pp. 212–213) once remarked that the PAP leadership “... may be said to have  
41  
42 ‘Confucianized’ itself by prescribing for itself a code of ethics, that of *junzi*” (...) setting  
43  
44 themselves up “as a model of a moral leadership which governs in the interest of the people  
45  
46 rather through self-interest.”  
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50  
51 The PAP enshrined Confucian values as a part of Singapore’s national ideology. In 1991, the  
52  
53 Parliament of Singapore passed the “White Paper on Shared Values”, which clearly  
54  
55 emphasized the centrality of Confucianism teachings in Singapore (Pezzutto, 2019). Shortly  
56  
57 thereafter, civics and moral education classes in the national school curriculum drew heavily  
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1  
2  
3 on the idea of Shared Values and was introduced as a subject (Chia, 2015). Confucian  
4 leadership, the moral imperatives of benevolence (*Ren*) and obedience, have arguably  
5 contributed to shaping Singapore's models of economic development and HRD. Of  
6 significance too, the quest for self-development inherent to Confucian ethics is providing a  
7 holistic conception of human capital. In *Confucian Ethics Today – The Singapore Challenge*,  
8 Tu (1984) publicly noted that the “main concern of Confucianism is how we learn to be  
9 human (...) a highly complex process which involves commitment, continuous effort (...) learning to be human does not simply happen by itself” (p. 4); adding, “the gentleman, a  
10 profound person, is not simply a tool or a vessel for the performance of some task (...) the  
11 process of learning to be human, then, involves at least self-cultivation, self-mastery, and  
12 self-understanding” (p. 8).  
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29 From theology down to practice, Confucian principles thus involve a strong work ethic, a  
30 discipline up to the leader to demonstrate and harness. Lee Kuan Yew said, “the task of the  
31 leaders must be to provide or create for them a strong framework within which they can  
32 learn, work hard, be productive and be rewarded accordingly. And this is not easy to achieve”  
33 (Lee, 2012). Such a viewpoint formed the building block for reforms toward the productivist  
34 agenda in nation-building (Haley *et al.*, 1996), which permeated through the public service  
35 and private sector businesses alike. Advocating changes in the labour law in favor of  
36 corporations/businesses and departing from British industrial order, Lee Kuan Yew's address  
37 to Singaporean unions in 1968 set the tone: “I am asking you to lick the labour movement  
38 into shape, cutting out restrictive practices which are no longer relevant and stopping abuse  
39 of fringe benefits which leads to lower productivity ... Cut off all these evils. Jack up  
40 productivity. Cut out abuse of privileges and create a new image of a thinking, hard-headed  
41 movement” (cited in Loh, 2018, p. 24).  
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## 5. From Productivity to Human Capital Development

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3 With the Confucian ethos, Singapore has focused on its productivity movement for nearly  
4  
5 four decades. This can be described in three major stages according to Ohno and Kitaw  
6  
7 (2011) in Figure 3. Initially, the focus had been on promoting teamwork and creating a better  
8  
9 understanding amongst employers and employees in Singapore (Hong and Lugg, 2015). As  
10  
11 Singapore moved to the “action stage” and “ownership stage,” the focus shifted to the actual  
12  
13 implementation of programs by Singaporean companies and benchmarking their processes  
14  
15 against other companies. Throughout these stages, the governance provided contingency  
16  
17 rewards through a transactional leadership style to encourage private and public sector  
18  
19 participation. At present, national productivity initiatives are administered through a  
20  
21 government statutory board called Enterprise Singapore.  
22  
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27 ----- INSERT FIGURE. 3 ABOUT HERE-----  
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29  
30 In the wake of the GFC, Tripartism was further called into play to address waning  
31  
32 productivity among Singaporean firms. An Inter-Agency Productivity Taskforce, including  
33  
34 the SNEF, was set up to examine the problem of declining productivity in services (MOM,  
35  
36 2011). To address the waning productivity, the Taskforce proposed several initiatives under a  
37  
38 new Workforce Development Agency (WDA). Next, a tripartite National Productivity and  
39  
40 Continuing Education Council comprising 25 members including several key Ministers and  
41  
42 representatives from unions, companies, trade associations, and chambers was established to  
43  
44 boost skills and develop a comprehensive system for continuing education and training.  
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49 ----- INSERT FIGURE. 4 ABOUT HERE-----  
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51  
52 In a regional comparison, however, Singapore’s labour productivity (based on value added  
53  
54 per worker) had been sluggish from 2012 to 2016 at between –0.1 and 1.8 percent. Figure 4  
55  
56 indicates the average growth in productivity and wages in Singapore between 2010 and 2016  
57  
58 to be lower levels than countries like Thailand and China, although these countries were in a  
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2  
3 catch-up mode. Southern Asia had a hike in annual productivity growth between 2007 and  
4  
5 2017, at 4.8 percent, which was 0.8 points higher than the 1997–2017 period, and well above  
6  
7 the global average of 2.4 percent (ILO, 2018a, p. 2). Productivity growth in Singapore picked  
8  
9 up in 2017 to 3.4 percent (MOM, 2018), perhaps an early sign of policy interventions  
10  
11 yielding results.  
12  
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14  
15 To this end, the Singapore government has introduced a raft of further policy measures to  
16  
17 improve Singapore's productivity output. These include (a) curtailing Singapore's  
18  
19 dependency on low-skilled foreign labour in certain sectors, (b) providing tax exemptions and  
20  
21 incentives to businesses to innovate and embrace the use of technology, and (c) establishing  
22  
23 funding mechanisms for Singaporean workforce constantly to upgrade their skills in  
24  
25 emerging economies. Echoing the Singapore government's concern, the SNEF undertook the  
26  
27 management of a program, SkillsFuture, launched by the WDA in 2014 (MOM, 2019).  
28  
29 However, in October 2016, the WDA went through a restructuring exercise and was  
30  
31 reconstituted into Workforce Singapore (WSG) and SkillsFuture Singapore (SSG).  
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### 36 ***Recent Initiatives toward Human Capital Development***

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39 The newly instituted SSG and WSG are complemented by the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and  
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41 Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP), set up in 2006, to enable employees to realize  
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43 their potential and help their employers achieve better organizations in areas such as age  
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45 management and work–life balance. Importantly, TAFEP also investigates workplace  
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47 discrimination complaints, to be reported to the MOM when breaches are confirmed.  
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49 TAFEP's *Human Capital Partnership*, in particular, allows all firms to access a human  
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51 capital development advisory service and to identify schemes and grants for human capital  
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53 development. *Work-Life Works!* is another key project of TAFEP. It is providing a resource  
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55 portal to assist employers in the implementation of work–life strategies.  
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3 It was recently announced that these two statutory boards (SSG and WSG) would move the  
4 national focus on employment and skills forward in Singapore (Seow, 2016). The SSG, now  
5 a statutory board under the Ministry of Education, aims at promoting lifelong learning  
6 through the pursuit of skills. SSG integrates adult training infrastructure in Singapore  
7 (Committee for Private Education and Institute for Adult Learning) and fosters a culture of  
8 continuing education in the country. On the labour front, WSG under the MOM was set up to  
9 transform the local workforce and industry to meet ongoing economic challenges. While its  
10 key focus is to help workers meet their career aspirations and secure quality jobs at different  
11 stages of life, WSG is also set to address the needs of business owners and companies by  
12 providing support to enable manpower-lean enterprises. *WorkPro*, by WSG, encourages  
13 progressive employment practices in companies to benefit Singaporeans. Additional grants  
14 are available in *WorkPro* to support companies in job redesign, age management schemes,  
15 and to sustain flexible work arrangements. The NTUC and SNEF, under the tripartite  
16 arrangements, administer *WorkPro* schemes. All these measures suggest active engagement  
17 on human capital development by the State (and its organs) using tripartite partners in  
18 addressing future challenges.

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41 Alongside and in responding to the local population's resentment to the flood of migrant  
42 workforce into the Singapore labour market, the government has been promoting the concept  
43 of the Singaporean "core" (Kuah *et al.*, 2017). This involves looking after and improving the  
44 capabilities of local talents to ensure Singapore's future competitiveness. The MOM also  
45 instituted the Fair Consideration Framework (FCF) as part of an effort to shield jobs for the  
46 Singaporean "core." The FCF, complemented by the TAFEP, established clear guidelines for  
47 companies to consider fairly the hiring of Singaporeans over foreigners. Companies that  
48 violate the FCF risk scrutiny from the MOM and privileges given to them to hire foreigners  
49 on a work pass may be curtailed. Another policy aimed at cementing the notion of the  
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3 “Singaporean core” is the implementation of SkillsFuture policy which grew to the statutory  
4 board, SSG. Through SSG, all Singaporeans, no matter at what stage of their life or career,  
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6 can access various funding schemes to pay for their skills upgrade courses to help them  
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8 remain employable in an ever-changing economic landscape.  
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13 It must be observed, however, that while human capital development is currently being  
14 promoted in Singapore, the tenure of unskilled foreign workers, who make up a third of the  
15 workforce, is strictly temporary and as such unskilled and semi-skilled foreign workers are  
16 less subject to human capital development. Singapore does celebrate an International  
17 Migrants Day, where the NTUC and the SNEF have established a Migrant Workers’ Center  
18 to facilitate the training of migrant workers and educating them about fair employment  
19 practices (Lin, 2011), yet steps to protect or “partially incorporate” foreign workers seem to  
20 be at an infant stage (Leggett and Le Queux, 2014).  
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## 31 32 **6. Discussion**

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35 Lee Kuan Yew has been using the wake of New Confucianism as a building block for his  
36 leadership and nation building in a form of ‘reverse Orientalism’ (Pezzutto, 2019). It  
37 provided the ideological and sociological foundations to legitimize and activate the PAP’s  
38 power structure, including a state sponsored narrative of elitism and meritocracy (Teo, 2019).  
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40 From the late 1970s onwards, New Confucianism served as a catalyst for identity building,  
41 marked by a “sino-centric nation building narrative” that allowed Lee to “tap into the shared  
42 sentiment of ‘Chineseness’ through the stress of Confucian values” (Pezzutto, 2019, p.232).  
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52 The value system (New Confucianism) justifies the cohesion of the Tripartite system. To  
53 borrow from industrial relations paradigms, the context can be characterized by a strong  
54 Pluralism within Unitarism. From a sociological perspective, the system is functionally  
55 performing as an actor, hence consequently the capability to activate agencies and diffuse  
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3 policies towards the national agenda and capacity building, which, in the case of Singapore,  
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5 is much about human capital development.  
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8 Lee has widely been heralded as a great leader and being the subject of several although not  
9  
10 undisputed historiographies (Ang, 2019). Despite being treated with “scant respect” by the  
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12 Academe, the spell of the Great Man theory is still hard to break (Mouton, 2019). To avoid  
13  
14 this caveat, leadership in Singapore have been examined and contextualized through the lens  
15  
16 of governance. Another caveat is to apprehend leadership in terms of a ‘closed system’  
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18 ignoring broader sets of ‘relationalities’ (Alvesson, 2019); all the more so if we consider, to  
19  
20 borrow from the field of cultural studies, that Singapore can be classified as a ‘high context’  
21  
22 Asian culture, where the emphasis lies on relationships (Hall and Hall, 1989).  
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24 Contextualising leadership is thus about focusing on the ruling, the rules and their agencies,  
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26 instead of the ruler. It helps providing an insider insight of social dynamics and power  
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28 relations at play.  
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34 This constructivist disposition also opens avenues for ‘contextualized comparison’ (Locke  
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36 and Thelen, 1995) and creates space for heuristic equivalence and conceptual  
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38 correspondences allowing to ‘think across’ or, say differently, for a ‘dia-logue’ to take  
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40 François Jullien’s viewpoint on board (Jullien, 1995). In the French tradition for instance,  
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42 from Emile Durkheim to Jean-Daniel Reynaud, rules and actors’ agency to the rules  
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44 (regulation as a process) have been central to social explanation, including the interplay  
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46 between meta-representations (ideology or value systems) and intermediate forms of  
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48 representation.  
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53 Singapore could indeed be branded as a model of ‘organic solidarity’, in Durkheim’s  
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55 terminology. There are several ways to look at it in the case of Singapore. *Junzi* leadership  
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57 implies benevolence and therefore a moral injunction for social inclusion and the need to lay  
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3 foundations for well-being and self-development, not forgetting that it reciprocally involves  
4 mutual responsibilities, hence subordination and discipline, including one's moral obligation  
5 to become a better person to the limits of their capacity. This is where the politics and  
6 economics of human capital meets an ethics, or in critical terms, an internalization of control.  
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8 Back to Durkheim: rules are constraints. Then too, social *cohesion* is essential because it is  
9 functionally what makes the *coherence* between the system and the value system. Yet, as  
10 coined elsewhere by Richard Hyman, the boundaries of inclusion are also the frontiers of  
11 exclusion (Hyman, 1999). Hence heightened local concerns over the expansion of the migrant  
12 workforce aside the so-called Singaporean 'core'.  
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15 Exploring further correspondences are beyond the scope of this paper and would perhaps be  
16 more adequately debated in regards to industrial relations: e.g. the quasi absence of industrial  
17 conflict, industrial democracy under 'ultra-corporatism' and blurring lines between  
18 collectivism and individualism. However, we share the view that looking at the social  
19 foundations of governance can lead to a multi-layered and more nuanced examination of  
20 leadership. In essence, to recap the argument, harnessing manpower is vital to Singapore and  
21 Tripartism has long been pivotal to HRD strategies (Osman Gani and Tan, 1998, p. 418, 421).  
22 Human capital is existential to Singapore both as an economic and moral imperative.  
23  
24 Leadership in Singapore can be usefully comprehended by looking at how governance has  
25 been set up to meet those two imperatives intertwining a system and a value system in a tight  
26 knit manner.  
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## 29 **7. Conclusion**

30 Tripartism in Singapore differs from European-style corporatisms, through which  
31 government agencies relayed by social partners orchestrate and diffuse their policy, often as a  
32 facilitative tool. Indeed, policy diffusion in Singapore happens rapidly because of closely  
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3 knitted relationships, cooperation and collaborations between the tripartite actors arguably  
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5 producing “faster, deeper, more effective transmission of state policy” as pointed out by  
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7 Sheldon *et al.* (2015, p. 441).  
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10 With the recent focus on skills upgrade, the NTUC and SNEF are all geared-up to encourage  
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12 workers to take advantage of the various government training grants. Employers, unions,  
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14 education, and training providers are all guided by the direction set forth by the high-level  
15  
16 Council for Skills, Innovation and Productivity, which is currently chaired by the Deputy  
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18 Prime Minister, Mr. Tharman Shanmugaratnam. In keeping with Singapore’s tripartite labour  
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20 management system, the SkillsFuture Council was established as a tripartite body that, in the  
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22 view of the MOM, is expected to “coordinate and drive a national effort to help Singaporeans  
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24 develop skills relevant to the future, and build a future based on the mastery of skills in every  
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26 job” (MOM, 2019).  
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32 Under the same initiative, SkillsFuture has identified certain sectors to focus on boosting  
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34 national productivity. Further, an Industry Transformation Map across 23 sectors is being  
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36 used under an Industrial Transformation Policy fostering new business models with the  
37  
38 objective to retain talent and to deepen skills to increase value addition in an approach  
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40 designed to meet each sector-specific need. As observed by Sakamoto and Sung (2018, p.  
41  
42 15): “the most useful insight from the Singapore approach is the need for a highly balanced  
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44 approach that involves both the demand for higher and new skills as well as the supply to  
45  
46 meet the new demand”. However, although job quality and upskilling are important policy  
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48 outcomes, productivity remains the primary concern in the mix: “raising productivity is not  
49  
50 just our most important priority but enables us to build a better society. Higher productivity is  
51  
52 the only sustainable way to raise incomes for ordinary Singaporeans, and provide jobs that  
53  
54 give people a sense of responsibility and empowerment” (Shanmugaratnam, 2013, cited in  
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56 Bali *et al.*, 2019, p. 1).  
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3 Yet, evidence still suggests that labour foreign inbound has so far provided and continues to  
4 provide the primary input for economic growth. As one prominent observer was to comment  
5 in a discussion in late 2018: “employers are still on steroids with migrant labour.” The  
6 Singapore government is aware that the volume of labour and associated migration has  
7 become a social dilemma. Hence, the productivity and skills formation agenda is getting even  
8 more central to governance. Interviewed in 2015, the MOM actually confirmed that the  
9 tightening of the labour market through restrictions of employment passes was to pressure the  
10 demand side to seek innovative ways to achieve productivity gains instead.  
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22 The 2018 ILO report on *Skills and the Future of Work: Strategies for Inclusive Growth in*  
23 *Asia and the Pacific* stated that if “serious about achieving inclusive growth, there is more  
24 than just the demand and supply of skills to deal with. Policy must address the challenges of  
25 transition, such as identifying barriers and ensuring steady progress. These challenges mean  
26 that adjustments should be treated as societal and institutional and are not just coming from  
27 individuals” (Sakamoto and Sung, 2018, p. 16). It is thus a matter of governance. And indeed,  
28 how the SkillsFuture has been used to address upskilling is a demonstration of system-based  
29 leadership and coordination in policy-making.  
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41 Such an institutional approach in management development, we have observed, is embedded  
42 into the Singaporean model of governance and is intrinsic to the Confucian *Junzi* leadership  
43 that inspired Singaporean leaders and their commitment toward human capital development.  
44 Singapore is leading human capital development by example, and it will be interesting to  
45 assess how policies and social mechanism put in place and best practices, still a work-in-  
46 progress, can set a benchmark for the ASEAN, especially within Singapore’s renewed  
47 Partnership Agreement with the ILO (ILO, 2018b) to promote Decent Work and contribute to  
48 the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in Asia.  
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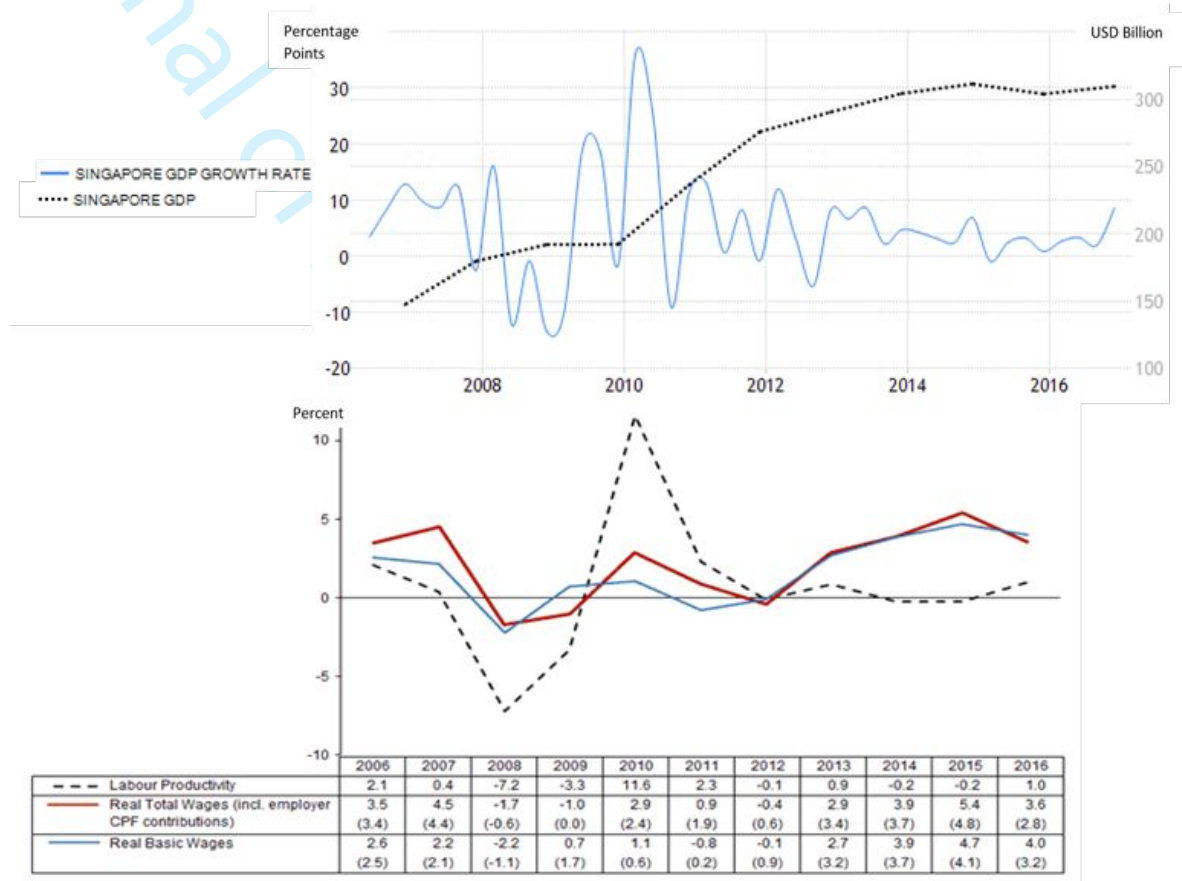
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**Figure 1: Singapore's GDP, GDP growth rate, labour productivity, and real wages**



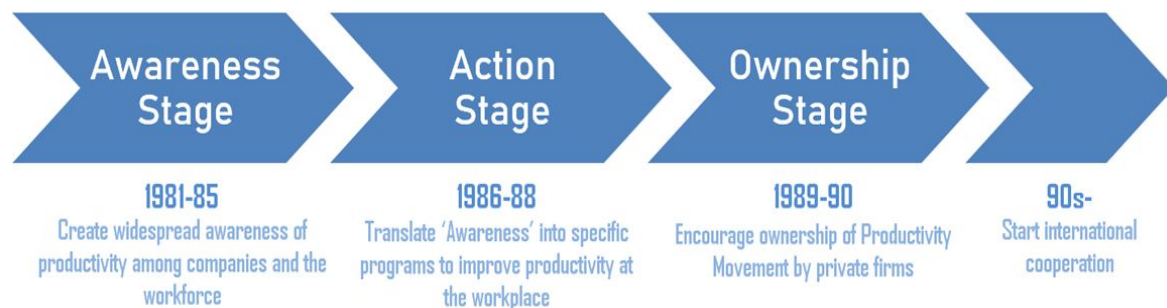
Sources: Survey on Annual Wage Changes, Manpower Research and Statistics Department, Ministry of Manpower; Ministry of Trade and Industry (for Productivity data); and The World Bank (for GDP data)

**Figure 2: Change in Median Gross Monthly Income from Work of Singapore's Residents**

Mid-Year	Annualized Change (% p.a.)			Cumulative Change (%)		
	2008–2018	2008–2013	2013–2018	2008–2018	2008–2013	2013–2018
Nominal	4.4%	5.0%	3.7%	53.2%	27.9%	19.8%
Real <sup>^</sup>	2.7%	1.9%	3.5%	30.0%	9.7%	18.7%

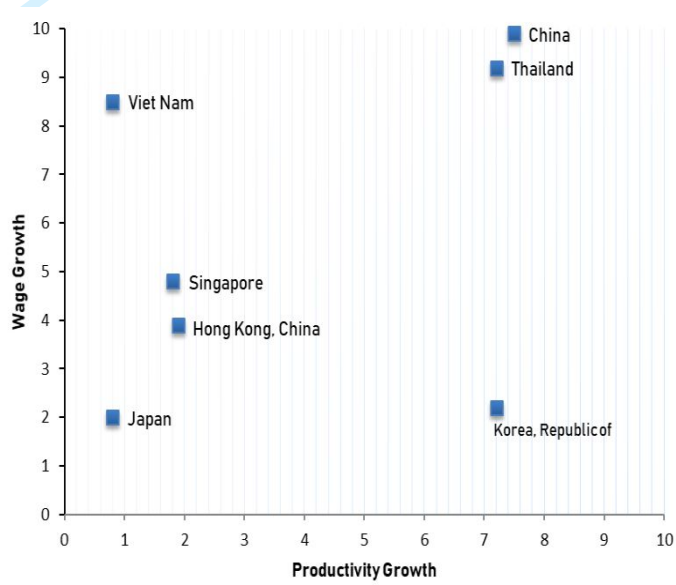
Source: Gross Monthly Income From Work - Comprehensive Labour Force Survey, Manpower Research & Statistics Department, MOM; Latest figures published in: [Labour Force in Singapore](#)

**Figure 3: Three Stages of Singapore's Productivity Movement**



Source: Ohno and Kitaw (2011)

Figure 4: Average Annual Growth in Wages and Productivity (2010–2016)



Source: Adapted from ILO, 2018a, p. 4

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Journal of Management Development

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## 君子 *Junzi* Leadership in Singapore: Governance and Human Capital Development

10

### **Purpose**

11 This paper provides insights as to how a Confucian inspired *Junzi* style of leadership translates  
12 into initiatives towards human capital development in Singapore. After reviewing tripartite  
13 governance in Singapore, we discuss the character of Confucian leadership: how does this  
14 value system inform the moral economy of the Singaporean corporatist model and inherently  
15 come to impact upon the conception and significance of human capital.  
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### **Design/methodology/approach**

24 The case approach was employed using multiple sources of secondary data, supplemented by  
25 interviews with high-profile informants in Singapore. Multiple sources led to data  
26 triangulation in presenting a mutually consistent set of evidence. The paper also draws from a  
27 longitudinal observation of Singapore's industrial relations and human resource development  
28 (HRD) policies over the last 10 years since the Global Financial Crisis.  
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### **Findings**

38 Organized along two thematic areas: governance and human capital development, this paper  
39 proposes and finds that governance in Singapore displays an institutionalized form of *Junzi*  
40 leadership that translates into policy-making toward human capital development.  
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### **Originality/value**

47 This paper brings about an Asian perspective of *Junzi* leadership toward management and  
48 governance. The Confucian value system intrinsic to tripartite governance provides an  
49 original heuristic lens that help shed a light on the significance of human capital development  
50 in Singapore.  
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## 1. Introduction

Singapore has a specific form of leadership and governance, a unique brand of ‘ultra-corporatism’ (Kuah *et al.*, 2017), which arguably provides successful policy-making. The virtue of social dialogue at the epicenter of the EU social model has long been heralded yet proved arduous in monitoring its success, thereby leading to the search for a better “governance architecture” (Armstrong, 2012). In contrast, the tripartite governance in Singapore displays dynamic features of agile coordination enabling quick adjustments which bore fruit, as demonstrated by Singapore’s sustained economic success.

Tripartite governance ~~is~~ becomes the backbone of Singapore’s socioeconomic model, but more importantly, it is labour-centric. The development of human capital is indeed core to Singapore’s economic development because of the city–country’s lack of natural resources. As stated by Coe and Kelly (2000, p. 414), “there can be few other places in the world where the social regulation of the labour market has been so consistently and explicitly a central component of national development strategy as it has been in Singapore.” As such, Singapore is a living laboratory that epitomizes the potential of systemic investment in human capital.

This paper looks at the fabric of tripartite governance, in particular how ~~tripartism~~ Tripartism has evolved in Singapore to address ~~challenges facing a~~ labour shortage challenges, and finally, how tripartite policies are embedded to enhance human capital development (Leggett, 2013). In doing so, ~~we discuss~~ the paper discusses how a Confucian ethos ~~or Junzi leadership~~ inspired Singaporean leaders and ~~help~~ gave ground to ~~explain~~ the Singaporean model of governance. It is argued that this ethos, in lieu of “political ideology” (Barr, 2000), informs the moral economy underpinning the Singaporean corporatist model.

As a review paper, it does not make an attempt to draw a linear connection between leadership and human capital in the form of a straight relationship between independent and

dependent variables. Instead, the paper focuses how leadership molds into a model of governance, of which Tripartism is a key institutional feature instrumental to the development of HRD strategies (Osman-Gani and Tan, 1998, p. 421). This is consistent with Miao et al (2012: 391) who suggest that “the main focus of research into Asian leadership should be on examining how the mix of cultural and wider contextual influences, such as particular socioeconomic and industrial contexts, along with particular industrial work dynamics, impact on follower responses to transformational leadership.”

The data used ~~in this paper are~~ informed by a 10-year longitudinal review of Singapore industrial relations and HRD policies between 2009 and 2019. External validation was sought through open-ended interviews with union leaders, directors of employers’ associations, directors of closely held government agencies, and a Minister of State for the Ministry of Manpower. Scott’s (1990) criteria were used to assess the authenticity, creditability, representativeness, and meaning to information, while Silverman’s (2000) technique was used to treat interview data.

The paper is organized along two thematic areas, governance and human capital, as follows: we first review tripartist governance in Singapore and how this has evolved over time to address contemporary and future challenges. Arising from this, we illustrate how this model of governance delivered shared prosperity in delivering both economic and wage growth. Next, we discuss the character of Confucian leadership. Further, we exemplify how such a model of governance and leadership translates into initiatives toward human capital development and may provide a lead for best practices regionally, concluding that considering Confucian value system is a valuable heuristic to understand leadership and governance in Asia and does impact on the meaning and significance of human capital in Singapore.



## 2. The Fabric of Tripartism

Tripartism refers to an economic corporatism based on tripartite contracts between business, labour, and the State within the economy. Each party acts as a social partner to create an economic policy through cooperation, consultation, negotiation, and compromise (Wiarda, 1996). Tripartism in Singapore is arguably a key reason supporting Singapore's economic advancement into a highly developed trade-oriented economy (Leggett et al., 2017; Kuah et al, 2017). This tripartite arrangement has long been a platform for the Singapore government to launch a wide range of schemes to boost productivity growth, encourage skills upgrading, and even forge consensus on national wage guidelines.

On the one hand, employers' associations and trade union members in Singapore support the government's initiatives to adopt a non-confrontational labour relations practice. All parties involved partake in labour relations and share a belief to work toward an 'amicable and harmonious' outcome that is not disruptive to work. On the other hand, Singapore's political elite adopted the concept of patriarchalism to bolster Singapore's "tripartite arrangements by absorbing key employer interests in building collaborative relationships vital for the developmental state" (Sheldon *et al.*, 2015, pp. 441).

The major players in the Singapore tripartite movement include the Singapore National Employers Federation (SNEF), National Trade Union Congress (NTUC), and Ministry of Manpower (MOM). The formation of the NTUC by the ruling political party (the People's Action Party, or PAP) in 1964 provided ~~the Singapore government~~ a strategic thrust to propel its industrial relations initiatives ~~needed due to supply-side bottlenecks and that~~ led to the government favoring cooperation with labour unions and forging strong alliances with businesses in Singapore (Haley *et al.*, 1996). The unique PAP–NTUC relationship became the core of a wider tripartite system. ~~As a result, it~~ has become common to find senior

officials in public service being seconded into the NTUC to boost the quality and standing of the NTUC leadership. Able union leaders, in turn, are also co-opted into the PAP leadership, fielded as Members of Parliament (MP) and appointed to key offices. ~~Some PAP MPs are tasked to work in the unions to get to know union leaders and members, and their problems, enabling cross-fertilization and knowledge exchanges.~~

The opportunity to seal the tripartite industrial relations occurred in 1980 when the Ministry of Labour (renamed the Ministry of Manpower—MOM in 1998) effected a merger between the two then largest registered employers' associations (the Singapore Employers' Federation and the National Employers' Council) into the SNEF. The SNEF's ruling Council is made up of 14 representatives from leading companies and multinational corporations in Singapore. The SNEF sets a common agenda on issues such as innovation, productivity, and skills upgrading but still must work within a system where the NTUC–PAP interests have been self-styled as “symbiotic” (Leggett *et al.*, 2017; Loh, 2018, p. 2). The MOM is in charge of orchestrating labour deployment and HRD to meet the needs of companies and multinational corporations in Singapore. Over the years, the MOM has deployed multiple strategies to implement manpower planning, lifelong employability, the augmentation of talent, and the transformation of the work environment (MOM, 2001).

### 3. Tripartite Success: Economic and Wage Growth

To ensure that wage-share grows in tandem with productivity and economic growth in Singapore, a tripartite National Wages Council (NWC) was set up in 1972. Later, in 1979, the PAP adopted a corrective high-wage policy to orchestrate belated economic restructuring. This high-wage policy by the NWC induced a shift in Singapore's economy toward high technology and high value-added production. ~~This~~ However, this required a parallel shift in the management and development of the labour market. The regulatory means for skills

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3 formation and “character building” were set up by government agencies, the NTUC and the  
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5 SNEF. Workforce development increasingly became a tripartite endeavor. Leggett, Kuah and  
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7 Gan (2017) assert that nowhere have Singapore’s employers’ associations engaged more in  
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9 tripartite relations than in the centralized wage determination of NWC. In making its  
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11 recommendations on wage adjustments for the year, the tripartite NWC takes into  
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13 consideration factors such as productivity growth, employment situation, international  
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15 competitiveness, and economic growth and prospects.  
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20 Singapore successfully made a swift and remarkable recovery from the Global Financial  
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22 Crisis (GFC) of 2007–2008. After a peak at over 15.24% average GDP growth across four  
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24 quarters in 2010 (World Bank, 2019), GDP growth rates have remained relatively steady  
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26 throughout the rest of the decade (3.6% in 2017, 3.2% to 3.5% forecast in 2018). This is  
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28 relatively high compared with Western economies. In tandem, the real total wages and the  
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30 real basic wages have grown in line with Singapore GDP from 2012 to 2015, while  
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32 Singapore’s labour productivity exhibits a similar trend as seen in Figure 1.  
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36 ----- INSERT FIGURE. 1 ABOUT HERE -----  
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39 The regular deliberations of the tripartite NWC have seen the income of Singapore residents  
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41 (citizens and permanent residents) increasing along with Singapore’s economic performance.  
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43 It is a formula for wage determination that indeed provides effective wealth distribution, with  
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45 cumulative change as for 2008–2018 of +53.2% of nominal wages (+30% in real wages). In  
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47 contrast to Western counterparts where wages have been stagnant, the annual labour  
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49 productivity growth in Singapore has been going hand-in-hand with real wage growth, thanks  
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51 to some extent to the NWC wage determination system, which functionally provides a basis  
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53 for some form of built-in institutionalized “trickle-down” economics.  
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3 The recovery from the GFC was ~~also~~ emblematic of Singapore's commitment to human  
4 capital, with "a multi-pronged effort to stabilize employment levels supported by a tripartite  
5 approach to employment relations" (Waring and Lewer, 2013, p. 221). A Tripartite  
6 Guidelines on Managing Excess Manpower was issued in November 2008, including  
7 temporal flexibility alternatives and a Job Credits scheme designed to save jobs introduced in  
8 the 2009 budget (Shanmugaratnam, 2009). These guidelines reflected NTUC Secretary-  
9 General Lim Swee Say's sentiment who urged in the 2009 Budget Speech that "businesses  
10 should cut costs to save jobs, not cut jobs to save costs" (Le Queux and Waring, 2010, p.  
11 224).

12  
13 In addition, the Singapore Government introduced the Skills Program for Upgrading and  
14 Resilience (SPUR) program at a cost of \$600 million over two years and providing up to  
15 1000 different courses designed to upgrade a wide variety of workers' skills. Shifting  
16 institutional support to HRD, directed at the Singaporean "core" workforce has been  
17 implemented since to buckle low-wage and low skills employment.

#### 36 4. Harnessing Human Capital: The Legacy of 君子 *Junzi* leadership

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38 Whether Western theories ~~and assumptions~~ about leadership fit with the Asian context is  
39 debatable (Zhao and Jiang, 2009; Leung, 2012; [Pezzutto, 2019](#)) and various studies have  
40 attempted to address the particularism of the Asian context (~~Miao et al 2012~~, Jung and  
41 Avolio, 1999; [Walumbwa and Lawler, 2003](#); Taormina and Selvarajah, 2005; ~~Walumbwa and~~  
42 ~~Lawler, 2003~~). [Miao et al 2012; Pezzutto, 2019](#)). Moreover, in a high-context culture  
43 generally found in Asia, there are many contextual elements that help people to understand  
44 the rules and much is taken for granted (Hall and Hall, 1989). This can be very confusing for  
45 person who does not understand the 'unwritten rules' of the culture. It may appear, for  
46 example, that governance in Singapore displays concrete illustrations of both forms of  
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3 transactional and transformational leadership, as per Bass's (1996) typology. It may also be  
4 tempting to look at Lee Kuan Yew's transformative influence in shaping Singapore with the  
5 lens of the 'Great Man' theory, as so many biographers did. Rather, it is observed that  
6 considering Confucianism as a value system contribute to better understanding leadership in  
7 the Asian context, and Singapore notably.

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15 Gong and Jang (1998) characterized the cultures of East Asia, including Singapore, as "neo-  
16 Confucian" and thus rooted in the Confucian teaching tradition. The Confucian revival or  
17 New Confucianism conveys a discourse of inheritance and continuation of Asian values. At  
18 the heart of this discourse lay an emphasis on cultural relativism and the claim that liberal  
19 democracy and the mainstream human rights agenda were Western cultural norms that did  
20 not belong in Asia (Pezutto, 2019). This discourse was particularly popular throughout the  
21 1980s and 1990s, which saw Singapore emerge as an intellectual centre of a transnational  
22 Confucian revival with the opening the Institute for East Asian Philosophies in 1983 and a  
23 number of international conferences on Confucian thought hosted in Singapore (Makeham,  
24 2008, p. 23).

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39 Singapore's success story owes much to its leaders, and notoriously Mr. Lee Kuan Yew.  
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41 Amrine (2013) suggested that Singaporeans would not be where they are today if it was not  
42 for these values. Lee Kuan Yew frequently heralded "Confucian values" as the key factor in  
43 the country's rapid capitalist modernization. Lee himself was a self-confessed Confucianist,  
44 which had deep value-based implications in the way he led Singapore. Lee Kuan Yew noted:  
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46 "I am not bound by theories, but my upbringing in a three-generation family made me an  
47 unconscious Confucianist. It steps into you, the Confucianist belief that society works best  
48 where every man aims to be a gentleman. The ideal is a *Junzi*, a gentleman" (Plate, 2013, p.  
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Confucian Junzi (gentleman) sought grace and dignity by fulfilling traditional obligations: “Confucian rationalism meant rational adjustment to the world” (Weber, 1968, p. 248). Junzi leadership is envisioned to possess overlapping attributes balancing both a moral person and a leader (Trevino et al., 2000; Trevino and Brown, 2007), by matching one’s words with his/her deeds or actions, thereby serving as a good role model for others to follow. It is the defining symbol of the ultimate virtuous person and is the personification of the Confucian moral core – Ren, Yi, and Li. Ren is a human capacity of compassion or benevolence for fellow human beings. Yi is a sense of moral rightness with the capacity to discern appropriateness through one’s acts and relationships. Li represents etiquettes, norms, and protocols in dealing with personal and institutional lives.

A complete review of Confucianism lies beyond the remit of this paper, though key conceptual notifications are needed to contextualize the discussion. At a broad level, Confucian political philosophy is an open system that is founded on the basis of a humanist concern for people and the moral idealism of self-cultivation (Cheng, 2011). Confucian values may refer to a number of things, including, but not limited to, the valuing of education, discipline, thriftiness, hierarchy, self-reliance, harmony, the centrality of the family, morality, self-cultivation and peace (Tu, 1984; Koh, 2000; Barr, 2000; Makeham, 2008; Chia, 2015).

Confucianism reinforces principles insist upon centralized authority, hierarchical order, harmony, diligence and hard work, seniority-based reward systems, and paternalistic management, which have been observed as common features in Chinese organizations (Taormina and Selvarajah, 2005; Pun, Chin and Lau, 2000) and have deep ramifications in Chinese industrial relations (Laulusa, 2008). As also noted by Fu and Tsui (2003, p. 425), “Chinese business leaders all over the world are known to exhibit an extreme high degree of authoritarianism while also showing benevolence to subordinates and demonstrating a high level of moral character in their actions and decisions reflecting the influence of the deeply

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3 embedded Confucian values”. Likewise, Rarick (2009) note some common characteristics of  
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5 the Chinese approach to organizational management, such as centralised control,  
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7 collectivism, authoritarian and paternalistic leadership, and the primacy of the hierarchical  
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9 family model would be concepts that are largely an anathema to the Western liberal  
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11 individualism. In their discussion of Chinese leadership, McElhatton and Jackson (2012)  
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13 highlight that an impediment to properly comprehending the Chinese model of leadership is  
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15 the West’s approach to the notions of paternalism or authoritarianism. Indeed, Singapore,  
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17 alike other neighboring countries such as South Korea and Taiwan has often been labelled as  
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19 a ‘soft authoritarian’ regime by Western observers (Johnson, 2002, in McCann, 2014, p. 289),  
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21 yet also by Asian critics (Ng, 2018).  
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27 Confucian leadership style or *Junzi* has been presented as a form of transformational  
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29 leadership (Wong, 2013). Ip (2011, p. 692) describes a *Junzi* as a moral person who “would  
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31 possess and demonstrate his genuine care and concern toward people, and would be  
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33 committed to do the right thing in both personal and professional lives.” Confucius  
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35 symbolizes leaders as “authentic idealized influence” (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999), hence  
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37 *Junzi* as a moral exemplar. Constantly, Confucius himself reminded his students to establish  
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39 themselves, at the same time, to establish others. In sum, the commitment to, and the exercise  
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41 of, *Ren*, *Yi* and *Li* virtues constitute the core of *Junzi* leadership (Ip, 2011).  
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47 Lee Kuan Yew’s Confucian ethos has been widely recognized/acknowledged, also in the way  
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49 he conceived governance in Singapore. Barr (2000, p. 212) highlights, “at many important  
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51 levels, Lee Kuan Yew’s approach to the personnel of government was unambiguously  
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53 Confucian (...) Lee’s whole notion of an educated elite which is ‘groomed to govern’ fits  
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55 comfortably into the Confucian model of mandarinship.” Chua Beng Huat (cited in Barr 2000,  
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57 pp. 212–213) once remarked that the PAP leadership “... may be said to have  
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59 ‘Confucianized’ itself by prescribing for itself a code of ethics, that of *junzi*” (...) setting  
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3 themselves up “as a model of a moral leadership which governs in the interest of the people  
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5 rather through self-interest.”  
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8 ~~Confucian leadership, the moral imperatives of benevolence (ren)~~ The PAP enshrined  
9 Confucian values as a part of Singapore’s national ideology. In 1991, the Parliament of  
10 Singapore passed the “White Paper on Shared Values”, which clearly emphasized the  
11 centrality of Confucianism teachings in Singapore (Pezzutto, 2019). Shortly thereafter, civics  
12 and moral education classes in the national school curriculum drew heavily on the idea of  
13 Shared Values and was introduced as a subject (Chia, 2015). Confucian leadership, the moral  
14 imperatives of benevolence (Ren) and obedience, have arguably contributed to shaping  
15  
16 Singapore’s models of economic development and HRD. Of significance too, the quest for  
17 self-development inherent to Confucian ethics is providing a holistic conception of human  
18 capital. In *Confucian Ethics Today – The Singapore Challenge*, Tu (1984) publicly noted that  
19 the “main concern of Confucianism is how we learn to be human (...) a highly complex  
20 process which involves commitment, continuous effort (...) learning to be human does not  
21 simply happen by itself” (p. 4); adding, “the gentleman, a profound person, is not simply a  
22 tool or a vessel for the performance of some task (...) the process of learning to be human,  
23 then, involves at least self-cultivation, self-mastery, and self-understanding” (p. 8).  
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27 From theology down to practice, Confucian ~~ethics~~ principles thus involve a strong work ethic,  
28 a discipline up to the leader to demonstrate and harness. Lee Kuan Yew ~~was then to say~~ said,  
29 “the task of the leaders must be to provide or create for them a strong framework within  
30 which they can learn, work hard, be productive and be rewarded accordingly. And this is not  
31 easy to achieve” (Lee, 2012). Such a viewpoint formed the building block for reforms toward  
32 the productivist agenda ~~and in~~ nation-building (Haley et al., 1996) that translate into), which  
33 permeated through the public service and private sector businesses alike. Advocating changes  
34 in the labour law in favor of corporations/businesses and departing from British industrial  
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3 order, Lee Kuan Yew's address to Singaporean unions in 1968 set the tone: "I am asking you  
4 to lick the labour movement into shape, cutting out restrictive practices which are no longer  
5 relevant and stopping abuse of fringe benefits which leads to lower productivity ... Cut off all  
6 these evils. Jack up productivity. Cut out abuse of privileges and create a new image of a  
7 thinking, hard-headed movement" (cited in Loh, 2018, p. 24).  
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## 15 5. From Productivity to Human Capital Development

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18 With the Confucian ethos, Singapore has focused on its productivity movement for nearly  
19 four decades, ~~which~~. This can be described in three major stages according to Ohno and  
20 Kitaw (2011) in Figure 3. Initially, the focus had been on promoting teamwork and creating a  
21 better understanding amongst employers and employees in Singapore (Hong and Lugg,  
22 2015). As Singapore moved to the "action stage" and "ownership stage," the focus shifted to  
23 the actual implementation of programs by Singaporean companies and benchmarking their  
24 processes against other companies. Throughout these stages, the ~~Singapore~~  
25 ~~government~~governance provided contingency rewards, ~~through~~ a transactional leadership  
26 style, to encourage private and public sector ~~organizations to participate actively~~participation.  
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28 At present, national productivity initiatives are administered through a government statutory  
29 board called Enterprise Singapore.  
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47 In the wake of the GFC, ~~tripartism~~Tripartism was ~~further~~ called into play to ~~look into~~address  
48 waning productivity among Singaporean firms. An Inter-Agency Productivity Taskforce,  
49 including the SNEF, was set up to examine the problem of declining productivity in services  
50 (MOM, 2011). To address the waning productivity ~~in companies and the nation~~, the  
51 Taskforce proposed several initiatives under a new Workforce Development Agency (WDA).  
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59 Next, a tripartite National Productivity and Continuing Education Council comprising 25  
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3 members including several key Ministers and representatives from unions, companies, trade  
4 associations, and chambers was established to boost skills and develop a comprehensive  
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6 system for continuing education and training. ~~The Council comprises 25 members including~~  
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8 ~~several key Ministers, representatives from unions, companies, trade associations, and~~  
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10 ~~chambers.~~  
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18 In a regional comparison, however, Singapore's labour productivity (based on value added  
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20 per worker) has had been sluggish from 2012 to 2016 at between -0.1 and 1.8 percent. Figure  
21  
22 4 indicates the average growth in productivity and wages in Singapore between 2010 and  
23  
24 2016 to be lower levels than countries like Thailand and China, although these countries were  
25  
26 in a catch-up mode. Southern Asia had a hike in annual productivity growth between 2007  
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28 and 2017, at 4.8 percent, which was 0.8 points higher than the 1997–2017 period, and well  
29  
30 above the global average of 2.4 percent (ILO, 2018a, p. 2). Productivity growth in Singapore  
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32 picked up in 2017 to 3.4 percent (MOM, 2018), perhaps an early sign of policy interventions  
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34 yielding results.  
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40 To this end, the Singapore government has introduced a raft of further policy measures to  
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42 improve Singapore's productivity output. These include (a) curtailing Singapore's  
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44 dependency on low-skilled foreign labour in certain sectors, (b) providing tax exemptions and  
45  
46 incentives to businesses to innovate and embrace the use of technology, and (c) establishing  
47  
48 funding mechanisms for Singaporean workforce constantly to upgrade their skills in  
49  
50 emerging economies. Echoing the Singapore government's concern, the SNEF undertook the  
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52 management of a program, SkillsFuture, launched by the WDA in 2014 (MOM, 2019).  
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56 However, in October 2016, the WDA went through a restructuring exercise and was  
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3 reconstituted into Workforce Singapore (WSG) and SkillsFuture Singapore (SSG), ~~to be~~  
4 ~~examined below.~~  
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### 8 ***Recent Initiatives toward Human Capital Development***

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11 ~~The SSG and WSG are two contemporary statutory boards of the Singapore government~~  
12 ~~pivotal to human capital development in Singapore. They~~ The newly instituted SSG and WSG  
13  
14 are complemented by the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices  
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16 (TAFEP), set up in 2006, to enable employees to realize their potential and help their  
17  
18 employers achieve better organizations in areas such as age management and work–life  
19  
20 balance. Importantly, TAFEP also investigates workplace discrimination complaints, to be  
21  
22 reported to the MOM when breaches are confirmed. TAFEP’s *Human Capital Partnership*, in  
23  
24 particular, allows all firms to access a human capital development advisory service and to  
25  
26 identify schemes and grants for human capital development. *Work-Life Works!* is another key  
27  
28 project of TAFEP. It is providing a resource portal to assist employers in the implementation  
29  
30 of work–life strategies.  
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37 It was recently announced that these two statutory boards (SSG and WSG) would move the  
38  
39 national focus on employment and skills forward in Singapore (Seow, 2016). The SSG, now  
40  
41 a statutory board under the Ministry of Education, aims at promoting lifelong learning  
42  
43 through the pursuit of skills. SSG integrates adult training infrastructure in Singapore  
44  
45 (Committee for Private Education and Institute for Adult Learning) and fosters a culture of  
46  
47 continuing education in the country. On the labour front, WSG under the MOM was set up to  
48  
49 transform the local workforce and industry to meet ongoing economic challenges. While its  
50  
51 key focus is to help workers meet their career aspirations and secure quality jobs at different  
52  
53 stages of life, WSG is also set to address the needs of business owners and companies by  
54  
55 providing support to enable manpower-lean enterprises. *WorkPro*, by WSG, encourages  
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3 progressive employment practices in companies to benefit Singaporeans. GrantsAdditional  
4 grants are available in *WorkPro* to support companies in job redesign, age management  
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6 schemes, and to sustain flexible work arrangements. The NTUC and SNEF, under the  
7  
8 tripartite arrangements, administer *WorkPro* schemes. All these measures suggest active  
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10 engagement on human capital development by the State ~~and strong collaboration between~~  
11  
12 ~~the~~(and its organs) using tripartite partners in addressing future challenges.  
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18 Alongside and in responding to the local population's resentment to the flood of migrant  
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20 workforce into the Singapore labour market, the government has been promoting the concept  
21  
22 of the Singaporean "core" (Kuah *et al.*, 2017). This involves looking after and improving the  
23  
24 capabilities of local talents to ensure Singapore's future competitiveness. The MOM also  
25  
26 instituted the Fair Consideration Framework (FCF) as part of an effort to shield jobs for the  
27  
28 Singaporean "core." The FCF, complemented by the TAFEP, established clear guidelines for  
29  
30 companies to consider fairly the hiring of Singaporeans over foreigners. Companies that  
31  
32 violate the FCF risk scrutiny from the MOM and privileges given to them to hire foreigners  
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34 on a work pass may be curtailed. Another policy aimed at cementing the notion of the  
35  
36 "Singaporean core" is the implementation of SkillsFuture policy which grew to the statutory  
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38 board, SSG. Through SSG, all Singaporeans, no matter at what stage of their life or career,  
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40 can access various funding schemes to pay for their skills upgrade courses to help them  
41  
42 remain employable in an ever-changing economic landscape.  
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49 It must be observed, however, that while human capital development is currently being  
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51 promoted in Singapore, the tenure of unskilled foreign workers, who make up a third of the  
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53 workforce, is strictly temporary and as such unskilled and semi-skilled foreign workers are  
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55 less subject to human capital development. Singapore does celebrate an International  
56  
57 Migrants Day, where the NTUC and the SNEF have established a Migrant Workers' Center  
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59 to facilitate the training of migrant workers and educating them about fair employment  
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practices (Lin, 2011), yet steps to protect or “partially incorporate” foreign workers seem to be at an infant stage (Leggett and Le Queux, 2014).

## **6. Discussion and**

Lee Kuan Yew has been using the wake of New Confucianism as a building block for his leadership and nation building in a form of ‘reverse Orientalism’ (Pezzutto, 2019). It provided the ideological and sociological foundations to legitimize and activate the PAP’s power structure, including a state sponsored narrative of elitism and meritocracy (Teo, 2019). From the late 1970s onwards, New Confucianism served as a catalyst for identity building, marked by a “sino-centric nation building narrative” that allowed Lee to “tap into the shared sentiment of ‘Chineseness’ through the stress of Confucian values” (Pezzutto, 2019, p.232).

The value system (New Confucianism) justifies the cohesion of the Tripartite system. To borrow from industrial relations paradigms, the context can be characterized by a strong Pluralism within Unitarism. From a sociological perspective, the system is functionally performing as an actor, hence consequently the capability to activate agencies and diffuse policies towards the national agenda and capacity building, which, in the case of Singapore, is much about human capital development.

Lee has widely been heralded as a great leader and being the subject of several although not undisputed historiographies (Ang, 2019). Despite being treated with “scant respect” by the Academe, the spell of the Great Man theory is still hard to break (Mouton, 2019). To avoid this caveat, leadership in Singapore have been examined and contextualized through the lens of governance. Another caveat is to apprehend leadership in terms of a ‘closed system’ ignoring broader sets of ‘relationalities’ (Alvesson, 2019); all the more so if we consider, to borrow from the field of cultural studies, that Singapore can be classified as a ‘high context’ Asian culture, where the emphasis lies on relationships (Hall and Hall, 1989).

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3 Contextualising leadership is thus about focusing on the ruling, the rules and their agencies,  
4 instead of the ruler. It helps providing an insider insight of social dynamics and power  
5 relations at play.  
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10 This constructivist disposition also opens avenues for ‘contextualized comparison’ (Locke  
11 and Thelen, 1995) and creates space for heuristic equivalence and conceptual  
12 correspondences allowing to ‘think across’ or, say differently, for a ‘dia-logue’ to take  
13 François Jullien’s viewpoint on board (Jullien, 1995). In the French tradition for instance,  
14 from Emile Durkheim to Jean-Daniel Reynaud, rules and actors’ agency to the rules  
15 (regulation as a process) have been central to social explanation, including the interplay  
16 between meta-representations (ideology or value systems) and intermediate forms of  
17 representation.  
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30 Singapore could indeed be branded as a model of ‘organic solidarity’, in Durkheim’s  
31 terminology. There are several ways to look at it in the case of Singapore. *Junzi* leadership  
32 implies benevolence and therefore a moral injunction for social inclusion and the need to lay  
33 foundations for well-being and self-development, not forgetting that it reciprocally involves  
34 mutual responsibilities, hence subordination and discipline, including one’s moral obligation  
35 to become a better person to the limits of their capacity.. This is where the politics and  
36 economics of human capital meets an ethics, or in critical terms, an internalization of control.  
37 Back to Durkheim: rules are constraints. Then too, social *cohesion* is essential because it is  
38 functionally what makes the *coherence* between the system and the value system. Yet, as  
39 coined elsewhere by Richard Hyman, the boundaries of inclusion are also the frontiers of  
40 exclusion (Hyman, 1999). Hence heightened local concerns over the expansion of the migrant  
41 workforce aside the so-called Singaporean ‘core’.  
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Exploring further correspondences are beyond the scope of this paper and would perhaps be more adequately debated in regards to industrial relations: e.g. the quasi absence of industrial conflict, industrial democracy under ‘ultra-corporatism’ and blurring lines between collectivism and individualism. However, we share the view that looking at the social foundations of governance can lead to a multi-layered and more nuanced examination of leadership. In essence, to recap the argument, harnessing manpower is vital to Singapore and Tripartism has long been pivotal to HRD strategies (Osman Gani and Tan, 1998, p. 418, 421). Human capital is existential to Singapore both as an economic and moral imperative. Leadership in Singapore can be usefully comprehended by looking at how governance has been set up to meet those two imperatives intertwining a system and a value system in a tight knit manner.

#### **6.7. Conclusion**

Tripartism in Singapore differs from European-style corporatisms, through which government agencies relayed by social partners orchestrate and diffuse their policy, often as a facilitative tool. Indeed, policy diffusion in Singapore happens rapidly because of closely knitted relationships, cooperation and collaborations between the tripartite actors arguably producing “faster, deeper, more effective transmission of state policy” as pointed out by Sheldon *et al.* (2015, p. 441).

With the recent focus on skills upgrade, the NTUC and SNEF are all geared-up to encourage workers to take advantage of the various government training grants. Employers, unions, education, and training providers are all guided by the direction set forth by the high-level Council for Skills, Innovation and Productivity, which is currently chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister, Mr. Tharman Shanmugaratnam. In keeping with Singapore’s tripartite labour management system, the SkillsFuture Council was established as a tripartite body that, in the

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3 view of the MOM, is expected to “coordinate and drive a national effort to help Singaporeans  
4 develop skills relevant to the future, and build a future based on the mastery of skills in every  
5 job” (MOM, 2019).  
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10 Under the same initiative, SkillsFuture has identified certain sectors to focus on boosting  
11 national productivity. Further, an Industry Transformation Map across 23 sectors is being  
12 used under an Industrial Transformation Policy fostering new business models with the  
13 objective to retain talent and to deepen skills to increase value addition in an approach  
14 designed to meet each sector-specific need. As observed by Sakamoto and Sung (2018, p.  
15 15): “the most useful insight from the Singapore approach is the need for a highly balanced  
16 approach that involves both the demand for higher and new skills as well as the supply to  
17 meet the new demand”. However, although job quality and upskilling are important policy  
18 outcomes, productivity remains the primary concern in the mix: “raising productivity is not  
19 just our most important priority but enables us to build a better society. Higher productivity is  
20 the only sustainable way to raise incomes for ordinary Singaporeans, and provide jobs that  
21 give people a sense of responsibility and empowerment” (Shanmugaratnam, 2013, cited in  
22 Bali *et al.*, 2019, p. 1).  
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41 Yet, evidence still suggests that labour foreign inbound has so far provided and continues to  
42 provide the primary input for economic growth. As one prominent observer was to comment  
43 in a discussion in late 2018: “employers are still on steroids with migrant labour.” The  
44 Singapore government is aware that the volume of labour and associated migration has  
45 become a social dilemma. Hence, the productivity and skills formation agenda is getting even  
46 more central to governance. Interviewed in 2015, the MOM actually confirmed that the  
47 tightening of the labour market through restrictions of employment passes was to pressure the  
48 demand side to seek innovative ways to achieve productivity gains instead.  
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3 The 2018 ILO report on *Skills and the Future of Work: Strategies for Inclusive Growth in*  
4 *Asia and the Pacific* stated that if “serious about achieving inclusive growth, there is more  
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6 than just the demand and supply of skills to deal with. Policy must address the challenges of  
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8 transition, such as identifying barriers and ensuring steady progress. These challenges mean  
9  
10 that adjustments should be treated as societal and institutional and are not just coming from  
11  
12 individuals” (Sakamoto and Sung, 2018, p. 16). It is thus a matter of governance. And indeed,  
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14 how the SkillsFuture has been used to address upskilling is a demonstration of system-based  
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16 leadership and coordination in policy-making.  
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22 Such an institutional approach in management development, we have observed, is embedded  
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24 into the Singaporean model of governance and is intrinsic to the Confucian *Junzi* leadership  
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26 that inspired Singaporean leaders and their commitment toward human capital development.  
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28 Singapore is leading human capital development by example, and it will be interesting to  
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30 assess how policies and social mechanism put in place and best practices, still a work-in-  
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32 progress, can set a benchmark for the ASEAN, especially within Singapore’s renewed  
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34 Partnership Agreement with the ILO (ILO, 2018b) to promote Decent Work and contribute to  
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36 the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in Asia.  
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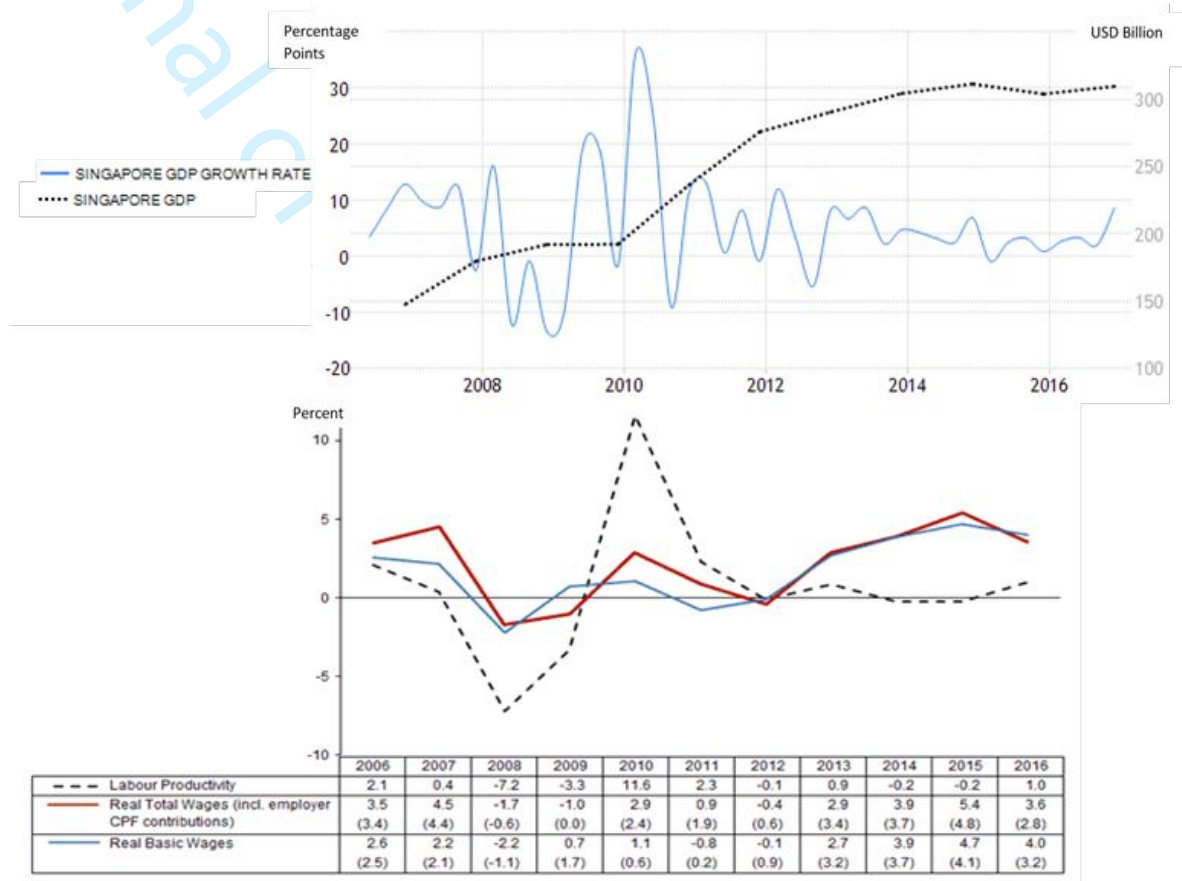
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**Figure 1: Singapore's GDP, GDP growth rate, labour productivity, and real wages**



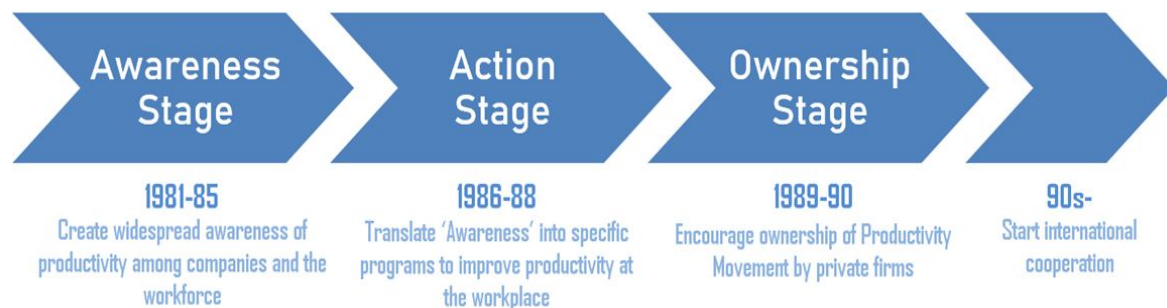
Sources: Survey on Annual Wage Changes, Manpower Research and Statistics Department, Ministry of Manpower; Ministry of Trade and Industry (for Productivity data); and The World Bank (for GDP data)

**Figure 2: Change in Median Gross Monthly Income from Work of Singapore's Residents**

Mid-Year	Annualized Change (% p.a.)			Cumulative Change (%)		
	2008–2018	2008–2013	2013–2018	2008–2018	2008–2013	2013–2018
Nominal	4.4%	5.0%	3.7%	53.2%	27.9%	19.8%
Real <sup>^</sup>	2.7%	1.9%	3.5%	30.0%	9.7%	18.7%

Source: Gross Monthly Income From Work - Comprehensive Labour Force Survey, Manpower Research & Statistics Department, MOM; Latest figures published in: [Labour Force in Singapore](#)

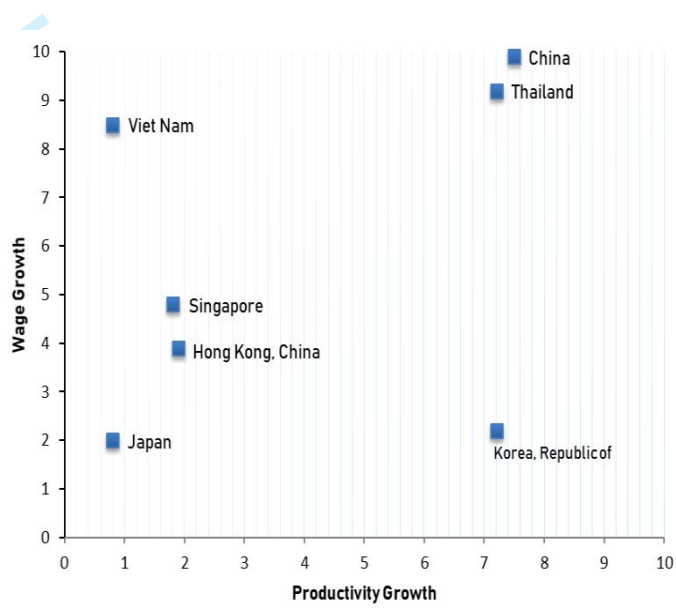
**Figure 3: Three Stages of Singapore's Productivity Movement**



Source: Ohno and Kitaw (2011)



**Figure 4: Average Annual Growth in Wages and Productivity (2010–2016)**

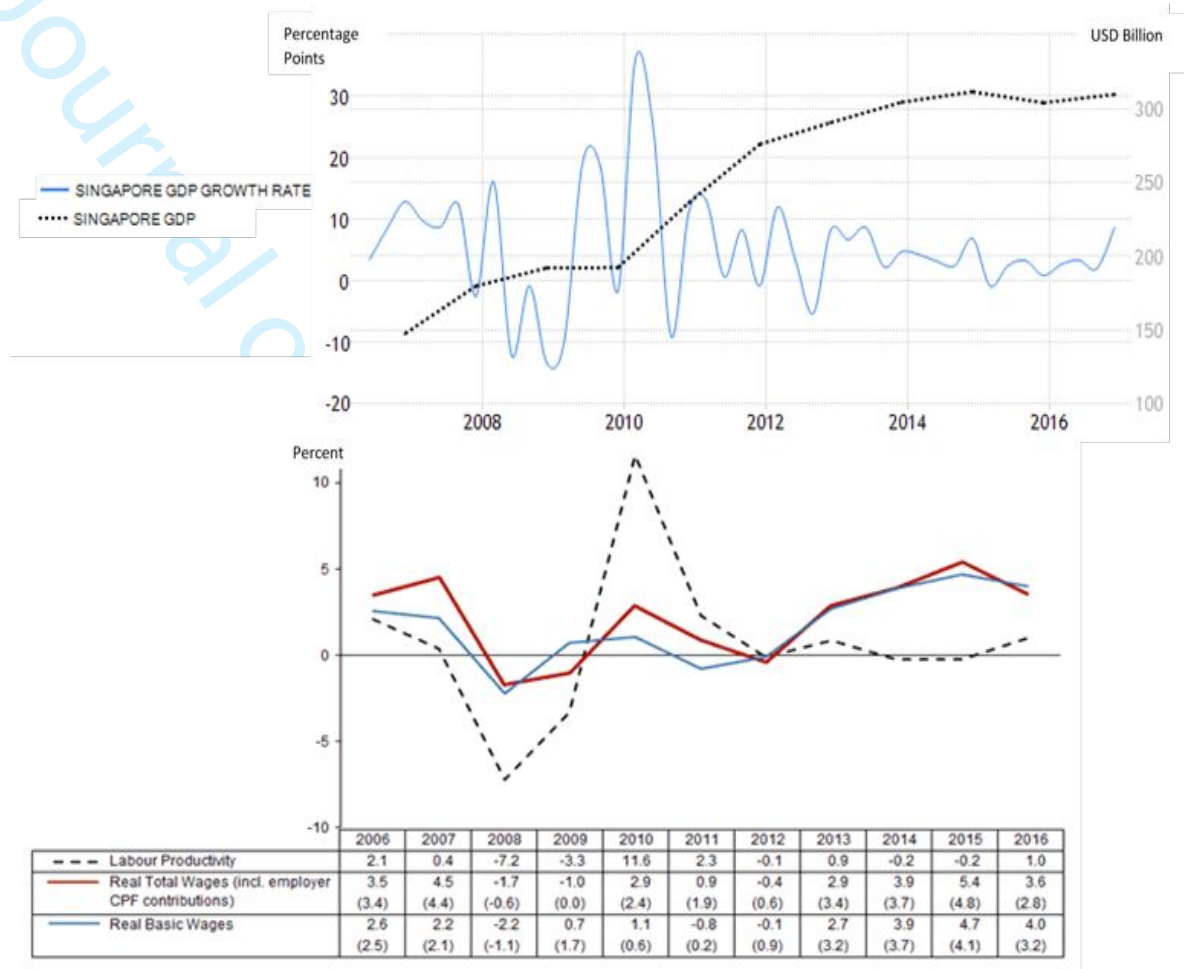


Source: Adapted from ILO, 2018a, p. 4

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**Figure 1: Singapore’s GDP, GDP growth rate, labour productivity, and real wages**



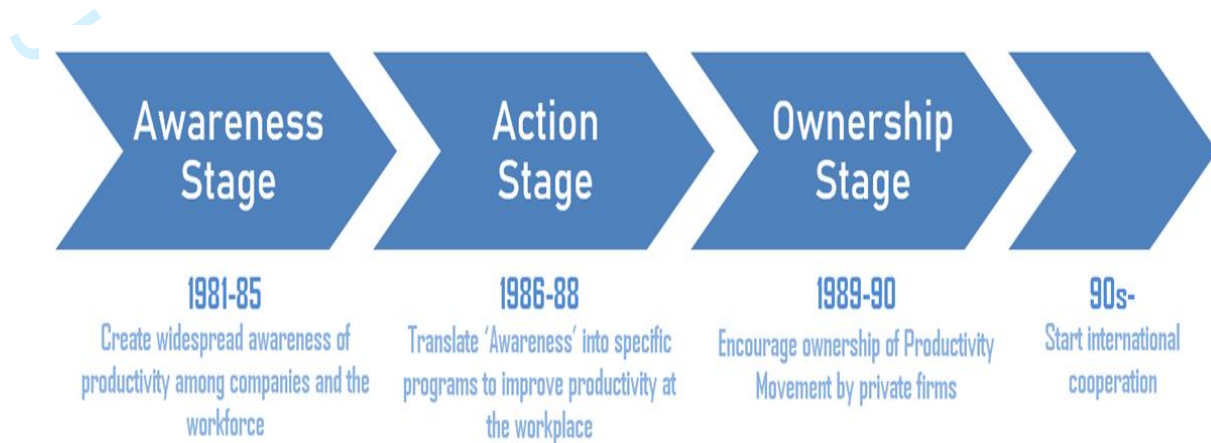
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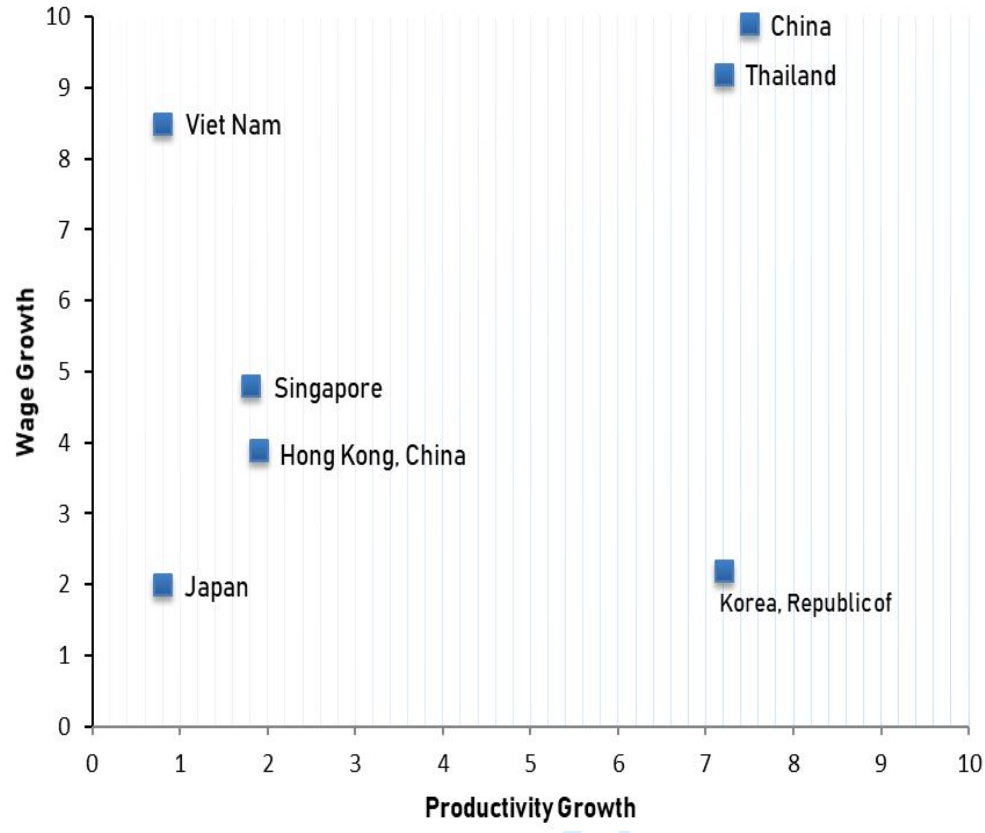


Source: Adapted from Ohno and Kitaw (2011)

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