



Bridging Worlds

How philosophy, culture, and ethics shape leadership and learning.

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hat can ancient Chinese philosophy teach us about modern leadership, education, and societal transformation? Professor Alan K.L. Chan, Provost of Singapore Management University (SMU), discusses how ethical traditions, cultural humility, and relational thinking can help universities and society at large navigate today's complex global challenges.

Your academic roots lie in religious studies. What sparked your interest in this field, and in what ways has your scholarly training in religion and philosophy influenced your career path and your personal worldview?

I have always been interested in history and culture, and religion plays a vital role in all cultures. I am particularly interested in the history of ideas, so philosophy also came into the picture. As a young person migrating from Hong Kong to Canada, I wanted to understand Western culture, so I took several courses in literature, philosophy, religion and related subjects – and they cohered. Eventually, I got accepted to do a PhD in religious studies and never looked back. But I guess the important point to note is that religion is not really something that stands apart from everything else; rather, it is always integrated with the larger canvas of one's culture.

Canada was a very warm and welcoming country, and I got to meet very different people with diverse backgrounds. They were very open to understanding Chinese culture and traditions, and at the time, I knew very little about it. So I thought that I really should understand a bit more about my own culture. And that is how it started – from the study of Western culture, philosophy, and traditions to returning, as it were, to my cultural roots. Eventually, the comparative dimension has become a key part of my own intellectual work.

The study of cultures makes one realise how important it is to always remain open and develop a sense of humility. You appreciate that there are good people all over the world who have something to share, and that process of learning and understanding changes the kind of person you are. That is why I feel it is so important that we include world cultures as a part of the undergraduate curriculum because it does make an impact on how young people view the world.

How has your research in Chinese philosophy, particularly its ethical and metaphysical dimensions, informed your leadership style and approach to decision-making?

It is true for all cultures; the more you dive into one, the more you realise how rich it is. It is not just about any -ism, but about ideas – how they permeate culture, how they shape individuals, and how they enable people to develop a

strong sense of identity. These are important elements that will emerge as you study philosophy in any culture. And that study and understanding will impact your own personal development as long as you remain open, humble, and curious. It has a certain feedback effect on your own development as a person, and impacts the way you work and interact with others.

I often reflect on an oft-quoted African proverb: “If you want to go fast, go alone, but if you want to go far, go together.” Given my academic leadership roles, I understand that for any enterprise to flourish, it takes the whole village. That is something I have learnt from my intellectual pursuits of the past.

My leadership style has evolved along the way, especially when I came to work with engineers and scientists. Witnessing the way they think opened me up to other possibilities. Even in philosophy, there are different approaches to understanding problems. When I first joined the National University of Singapore, I got to work with analytic philosophers more closely, and learnt a lot from the way they approached concepts, ideas, and problems, which was quite different from someone who primarily has an interest in the history of ideas. When I went to Nanyang Technological University, I worked with engineers, scientists, and medical doctors, and there was a certain sharpness to their approach, a kind of pragmatism that has also greatly influenced me.

What is some of the enduring wisdom offered by ancient Chinese philosophies like Confucianism and Taoism? How might they help societies reflect on and respond to today’s global challenges?

One could approach this question from the perspective of an ethical core, which is basically in all traditions, but I have now come to see it in a slightly different light. I believe the key lies in managing and transforming complexities, especially in Confucian thought and philosophy, where the individual always stands in a web of relationships. Some have come to contrast that with a kind of individualistic outlook in other traditions, but I do not want to overemphasise or overstate that divide, because every culture has this similar concern about managing and transforming complexities.

Think of oneself as being in a web of relationships. You play different roles, and with each role comes its own obligations and responsibilities. You deal with different people – parents, siblings, kin, friends, workers, and so on – every day. Relationships do not function on autopilot. Relationships always need to be cultivated, even with those you are closest to. There will always be complexities. One’s reaction to another person will have impact on many others. There is a ripple effect – an angry look or outburst will cause a reaction – and the impact does not stop between the two individuals concerned, but it will have wider implications.

So how do you manage such relational complexities? From the Confucian perspective, the idea is not only to manage them, but also to transform them. You can be obedient to your elders and fulfil all your roles and duties, but it will not lead to the kind of results you want to see if it’s not done with some ethical principles in mind. So this idea of moving from management to transformation, and transforming relationships from biological or social relationships to ethical ones is the key to understanding Confucian philosophy.

And what is an ethical relationship? It has to do with how we understand traditions. Every tradition has a set of core values, often called virtues. Consider the word ‘virtue’. It is a mass noun; it can also be a countable noun. When looking at virtues as conceptually distinct ethical principles, we can name a whole list. In the Confucian tradition, these would include filial piety, humaneness, and rules of propriety, among others. There are particular Chinese terms attached to each and

every one of them. But to understand these conceptually distinct virtues, we have to understand how they work and recognise that they do not stand alone. Each is influenced by its interaction with the others. For instance, filial piety is always shaped by a deep sense of humaneness, justice, and rightness. That is how virtues come to cohere as virtue in the singular.

Sometimes, I use the analogy of cooking to describe these things. Chicken soup is common in all cultures, but it does not follow that all chicken soups are the same. In other words, these virtues have a certain universality to them, and yet at the same time, there is also cultural specificity. And that kind of cultural specificity is precisely defined by how one ethical principle or conceptually distinct virtue works with the others. How they cohere, integrate, and then shape culture as a whole becomes pervasive and shapes individuals. That is why I believe understanding culture and the ancient Chinese philosophies has a global significance.



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What are your views on the role of religious literacy in tertiary education today?

For a multicultural society like Singapore, it is especially important that we understand the faiths of our neighbours, friends, and fellow residents. This does not mean that one has to give up one’s beliefs. Rather, there is much to be gained if we could remain open, suspend our beliefs for a moment, and just listen to what others have to share. When we listen without preconceived biases, ‘magic’ can sometimes happen, as new insights emerge, perhaps even weaving themselves into our intellectual fabric, enriching us in the process. This is in any case a requirement for genuine dialogue; without such openness and willingness to listen, a dialogue can easily become a shouting match. If we cannot even go beyond that, we will be in serious difficulty.

I believe that religious literacy is not simply about learning particular doctrines. Rather, it is about inculcating a certain set of core values that will enable the individual to flourish. But at the same time, a more holistic education would also enable the student to learn about other things. Especially in today’s context, where technology is fast reshaping the way we work, learn, play, and live, a high degree of digital literacy will become ever more important. But at the same time, the need for critical thinking, understanding, and discernment does not diminish. In fact, it increases. So what we want to do is see how we can integrate digital literacy with essential life

skills in every course we offer to our students, and not treat them as separate components in a siloed approach to learning.

And finally, appreciating diversity is very important. To draw an analogy, biodiversity is crucial to the health of the planet – and it is the same with social and cultural diversity. It enriches the human condition and that is why it has intrinsic value. Diversity requires inclusiveness to yield optimal value, otherwise, conflicts may dictate relationships. Once you recognise the value of diversity – when you are willing to be drawn into the world of another tradition without imposing your own prejudices and preconceived ideas about what is good and what is best, as well as attempting to change others – then you begin to understand how much they, in turn, have to give to you. And in that process, your willingness to be inclusive and their willingness to accept you become the basis for the kind of ethical transformation I have been talking about.

What are some of the key initiatives that SMU is embracing in its aspiration to become a leading university in Asia and globally?

SMU is investing in an interesting and important experiment to see if a university can make meaningful impact beyond research output. That is a fundamental philosophy in SMU. I would say that research is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for making meaningful change. How we can turn research into impact is the challenge we

willingly embrace and hopefully we will make some headway in this endeavour as SMU continues to develop and grow.

And how do you make that transformation? Most of all, I think it is important to be open, and to work with different stakeholders including government and industry. All universities would agree that we can no longer afford to be like an ivory tower, and at SMU, we ought to spare no effort in reaching out proactively to understand the questions, problems, and challenges which industry, government, and society are facing, and see how our research can contribute to resolving them.

This means we cannot treat impact as an afterthought. Some may consider impact as a very nice icing on the cake, but first they need to write those papers, that is, bake the cake first! What we want to see though is the integration and embedding of impact at the very beginning of one’s research. This would mean redesigning our research questions, and convening teams of collaborators and experts in addressing especially the larger problems and challenges we face. What we need to make sure of is that we do not have academic silos, because when good people come together with their own backgrounds, training, and expertise, good things happen.

Another point I would like to add is that I hope SMU will remain a fully internationalised university, because the involvement of collaborators from different traditions and learning environments will only add to and enrich what

we do here. For that, the whole ecosystem, meaning the whole learning environment in SMU, has to be open, welcoming, and humble.

And SMU has a certain locational advantage by being at the centre of the city, close to major corporations and companies. Our location is also the cultural heart of Singapore with so much history in this part of the city. So we do have certain advantages and hopefully we will continue to grow and attract local and international students at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and that is how you build a vibrant learning ecosystem.

Looking ahead, what are the top two to three priorities that you wish to focus on at SMU?

First, I need to learn all the SMU acronyms! And sometimes I still break out in Cantonese! It is also interesting that some colleagues are already bringing their complaints to me, which is good in the sense that they feel comfortable enough to share.

In terms of the larger initiatives though, I think faculty recruitment and development would be very high on my to-do list. The idea is not only to bring in the best, but also to bring out the best in our people. I will see how best we can develop our colleagues here and provide an environment that is conducive to their flourishing, as well as the support they need. I would also try to find ways to open up more possibilities and opportunities for faculty members and staff to come together and work together as ‘One SMU’.

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In terms of undergraduate education, it is probably timely to review our core curriculum, which I view as foundational to cultivating sound habits and discipline of mind, a prerequisite for a successful future. With the advent of artificial intelligence (AI) and other technologies, it is timely that we do that, and a task force has already been formed to look into this. As I shared in a recent conference, AI can significantly enhance learning, but we need to guard against over-reliance and passive consumption of knowledge. Management and the social sciences, broadly defined, have a lot to offer to the design of AI tools that integrate critical thinking and discernment from the ground up.

Our postgraduate education is also a very important piece. Our research postgraduate student community is still a bit small, and I am hoping that we can gather more scholarship support in order to attract really talented PhD students, because you do need good young people coming together. They have fresh ideas, they challenge you, they keep you honest!

The postgraduate professional programmes, or PGPP as we refer to them, also serve a very important social function. As the workplace continues to evolve at a much faster pace than before, we want to make sure that working adults have the opportunities to upskill, and in some cases, retool altogether. That is really what PGPP is for. And of course, it will also enable us to attract more international students, and in so doing, contribute to the development not only of Singapore, but also the region and beyond when they return to their home countries.

Finally, I would say SMU has achieved remarkable successes in just the first 25 years of its existence. Since I’m still relatively new, I can say that with some degree of objectivity. SMU does enjoy a fine reputation both locally and internationally. While we must continue to scale new heights, we should also pause and congratulate Team SMU for the excellent work done! 