

Nan Chiau, The Vanguard Of Chinese Culture

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My formative years in Nan Chiau High School (南侨中学) began in 1979. There were just two classes in my cohort, and we were among the final batch of students to graduate after sitting for our Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE) with Chinese taught as a first language.

Founded in 1947, the Nan Chiau family was a member of a larger school cluster managed under the directive of the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan. The primary school section was an ancillary branch of the larger secondary school division. Back then, the Chinese-centric institution was located along Kim Yan Road, off the upmarket River Valley area in Singapore's central business district.

In January 2001, driven by falling student enrolment figures, Nan Chiau, the grand old dame was relocated to its current premise in the new Seng Kang estate in the island's outlying north-east region. The establishment now operates two separate institutions catering to pupils in primary and secondary levels: Nan Chiau Primary School and Nan Chiau High School, respectively.

Influence of Chinese Heritage

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Singapore's economic growth swelled with the incoming wave of foreign investment and trade (Changi Airport, the country's international gateway, opened to great fanfare in 1981). As a result, the English language was propelled to primary status, as the lingua franca to the rest of the world.

The ascent of English as the primary language in Singapore's education system was accompanied by the overshadowing of the other languages, including Chinese, Malay and Tamil. Today, only a handful of Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools in Singapore offer students opportunities to deepen their learning of the Chinese language and culture.

Nan Chiau High School ranks among the few remaining bastions that offer a strong Chinese foundation in both the teaching of the language and in promulgating

traditional values and heritage. Like all other institutions supported by ethnic-based associations, the dominance and influence of the Chinese heritage is not confined to classroom curriculum.

This cultural philosophy reverberates in all corners of the school. There is a strong emphasis on the transmission of Confucius-like values such as integrity, respect, and diligence. During my school days, discipline imposed by the teaching staff was strict but not authoritarian.

In many ways the school is an extension of a tied-kinship family where everyone knows everyone. For some, this includes siblings and parents who studied in the same school.

Forging Resilience in School

We had a close, intimate network of teachers, students and alumni. However, this did not mean we were let off lightly in our academic pursuits, especially in the learning of the Chinese language. We were piled with homework; essays, comprehension exercises, pronunciations, hanyu pinyin, idioms and Chinese characters to master. Very much like today's classroom experience, in fact.

But unlike today's education landscape, we by and large did not lose sleep over examinations or grades. Our lives were comparatively carefree. We were unburdened by the pressures and expectations that plague students of today. We survived miraculously without any of the modern day gadgets or learning aids. Our most trustworthy companion was a 3.5-inch thick dictionary.

What was the secret of its success?

For Nan Chiau High School, the 67-year old icon, character-building supersedes academic achievement. Its mantra was: Learning is a life-long journey and primary education (and PSLE) is but one of the many destinations.

Regardless of background, all pupils were given the necessary support and encouragement to achieve their best potential. The teaching culture is shaped by a strong Confucius' ethos on egalitarian learning (有教无类), augmented by a strong institutional heritage.

The premium on inculcating the right values was, and still is, encapsulated in the school's motto – Sincerity and perseverance (诚毅) – the belief in the need to be honest to ourselves and to others, and on the importance tenacity in pursuit of personal growth and success.

Building character first, chasing T-Score second

Lesson number one: Failure is an inescapable fact of life. What separates those who succeed and those who do not is neither their T-score nor scholarships, but personal integrity and perseverance. Against the conventional wisdom of the time, Nan Chiau, the institution, chose to forge resilience by moulding a pupil's character, over pursuing grades.

This basic philosophy is not the surest way to move up the socio-economic ladder but it provides a longer-lasting ballast against a world that is increasingly complex, unpredictable and less benign.

Since then, the standard of Chinese teaching has since been on the ascent, and the Ministry of Education has finally recognised the need for a more structured framework for character development. The strong gravita-

tion to the values inherent in our Chinese heritage from the 1980s may not sit well with the complex multicultural contour of present-day Singapore. What has not changed, however, is the student-centric approach to nurture and inspire resilience.

Many of my fellow classmates and teachers have kept in touch over the years. This includes the notorious school bully whom I once tried to poison in retaliation to his taunts. As a footnote, he has now become one of my closest friends, and we even meet regularly for dinner.

We remember the good old days for not we have done but what we stand for.

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