

# 31

## PRIVATE TUTORING IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

### Knowledge economies, positional goods, and double entendres

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#### **Introduction**

In a 2015 interview with Vietnam News Agency, the then-Secretary-General (2013–2017) of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Le Luong Minh, used the phrase “unity in diversity” to describe a so-called common identity among the region’s 10 member states (Vietnam News Agency, 2015).<sup>1</sup> The notion of a pan-Asian identity within Southeast Asia, despite the region’s economic, political, ethnic, and religious diversity, can be traced to the aftermath of the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 when the collapse of the Thai baht spread economic chaos not only regionally but also worldwide (Jones & Smith, 2006, pp. 148–149). Regional integration into the global economy through a renewal of ASEAN, which formally began in 1967, was believed to be the best way to prevent another crisis.

Although the call for unity did not end the geopolitical tensions among member states (Jones, 2012), observers of ASEAN called for the region to transition to knowledge-based economies as a way to stay competitive in global markets (e.g., Freeman & Hew, 2002, p. 4). Calls to develop knowledge-based economies to increase a nation’s competitiveness during globalisation typically included reform to a nation’s education system (Mok, 2006, p. 4). Yet these reforms were rarely unique to each national context; rather, educational reforms born out of 21st-century globalisation were “remarkably similar across very different education jurisdictions . . . stress[ing] the need for greater attention to processes, higher order thinking skills, better utilisation of technology in education, changes to assessment, greater devolution of power to principals, etc.” (Gopinathan, 2007, p. 56). These reforms were positioned as the needed inputs into human resource development to stay “attractive to the shifting requisites of global capital” (Baildon, 2009, p. 59).

Some nations, such as Singapore, initiated educational reforms in line with knowledge-based economies earlier and more quickly than others, such as Cambodia. In 1997, Singapore launched an education reform called “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation” to ensure that students were “continually prepared for the future” (Ng, 2005, p. 1). Cambodia was caught in a political crisis in the 1990s that had begun in the 1960s (Ayres, 2000). Reforms to its education system in response to globalisation were delayed but not abandoned. In 2014, the Cambodian Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS) set out its vision of a future comparable

to that of Singapore's where "human resources of the very highest quality and ethically sound in order" would develop "a knowledge-based society in Cambodia" (MoEYS, 2014, p. 12).

Despite the diversity in the ASEAN region, the emphasis on education as a key ingredient in developing a successful knowledge-based economy has created the conditions for growth not only of the formal education system but also, and perhaps unexpectedly at first glance, of the private tutoring industry. In all ASEAN countries, private tutoring existed prior to the call from policymakers for a knowledge-based economy. Nevertheless, the rhetoric of continuous education as essential for an individual's economic success has added to the conditions whereby additional education outside schooling is (perceived as) a necessity. In Singapore, for instance, 8 out of 10 primary school children attend tutoring (*Straits Times*-Nexus Link Tuition Survey, 2015), and the amount households pay for tutoring increased from \$650 million SGD in 2004 to \$1.1 billion SGD in 2014 (Tan, 2014). Although tutoring in Singapore may be extreme in its near-ubiquity, the private tutoring industry can be found across ASEAN member states (Bray & Lykins, 2012).

Le Luong Minh's call for "unity in diversity" across ASEAN rings true when it comes to private tutoring: it is a common phenomenon linked to the rise of knowledge-based economies. However, the formation and organisation of the phenomenon differs across jurisdictions. In some cases, such as Cambodia, Brunei Darussalam, and Laos, tutoring is commonly initiated by school teachers to top-up (sometimes substantially) low salaries. In these cases, it is difficult to know when mainstream schooling ends and private tutoring begins. In other cases, such as Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines, tutoring has developed into a legitimate and recognised business sector of the economy. Students typically take extra lessons in centres organised as for-profit companies, outside the control of education ministries but connected to school curricula and examinations. Cambodia and Singapore represent these two divergent cases and therefore offer insight into the complexity of the private tutoring phenomenon in Southeast Asia.

### Private tutoring as a positional good

A 2015 household survey in Singapore captured a paradox in private tutoring (see Table 31.1). The survey found that across all levels of schooling 70 percent of respondents sent their children to some form of private tutoring. The primary reason given for this choice was to improve the academic performance of children in mainstream schooling. Yet, 70 percent of respondents *also* claimed they did not believe tutoring significantly improved their children's grades. These empirical findings are problematic; why would households pay for tutoring if they did not believe that it would yield significant academic gains (as defined by parents, not in a statistical sense)?

Before trying to answer that question, it is important to outline tutoring in Singapore, which requires a brief overview of the mainstream education system.

Formal schooling in Singapore begins during the first year of the Foundation Stage, usually when a child is 6 years old. This is labelled Primary 1 and continues for four years, ending at Primary 4. After Primary 4, students are tracked into different subject streams, primarily among mother tongue, science, and mathematics subjects. The tracking is done based on student scores at the Foundation Stage. Streaming begins in the first year of the Orientation Stage, which is equivalent to Primary 5. At the conclusion of the Orientation Stage in Primary 6, students take the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). Based on the results of this test and a student's identified choice, a secondary school is matched to each student.<sup>2</sup>

Secondary schools are grouped into different categories: Normal (Technical), Normal (Academic), and Express. Normal level secondary schools are composed of four years, ending with the Normal-Level (N-Level) examination. Some students, primarily in the Normal (Academic)

Table 31.1 Key findings from the *Straits Times*-Nexus Link Tuition Survey (2015)

|  | <i>% of respondents</i> | <i>Top Subjects</i>                         | <i>Median spent on tuition per month (\$SGD)</i> |
|--|-------------------------|---|--|
| Overall Prevalence                           | 70                      |   |  |
| Preschool Prevalence                         | 40                      | English, Maths, Chinese                     | \$155  |
| Primary School Prevalence                    | 80                      | Maths, English, Chinese                     | \$205  |
| Secondary School Prevalence                  | 60                      | Elementary Maths, English, Additional Maths | \$255  |
| Tuition Improved Grades Significantly        | 30                      |   |  |
| Tuition Did Not Improve Grades Significantly | 70                      |   |  |
| Top Reasons for Tuition                      | To improve grades       | To keep up with others                      |  |

stream, can enrol in an additional year of secondary schooling to take the General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level (O-Level) examinations. Students in the Express stream attend secondary education for four years and sit the O-Level examination at the conclusion. Based on the results of the O-Level examination, students can attend different types of post-secondary schooling. For particularly gifted students, there is an Integrated Programme stream that bypasses the O-Level examination altogether and leads instead to the Advanced Level (A-Level) or the International Baccalaureate (IB) examination after six years of secondary schooling. Students who pass the A-Level examination (or its equivalent) can begin tertiary education instead of going to other post-secondary schooling.

The various points in the education system where students are streamed into different educational tracks (Primary 4 and Primary 6) and the different school-leaving examinations (the PSLE, N-Level, O-Level, A-Level, and IB) provide an important context for the prevalence of tutoring found in Table 31.1. Since primary school contains two tracking points *and* a school-leaving examination, it makes sense that more students would attend tutoring in primary school (80 percent) than in secondary school (60 percent), where no such points of streaming exist. Once children begin secondary school, streaming has finished. Primary school contains more pitfalls that parents want their children to avoid.

Although teaching in mainstream schools in Singapore has been found to focus on “preparing students for end-of-semester and national high stakes examinations” (Hogan, 2014), tutoring is perceived as an additional way for parents to ensure they have done everything possible to prepare their children for the streaming points and examinations. This logic was captured as the top reason why households pay for tutoring (in the *Straits Times*-Nexus Link Tuition Survey [2015]): to improve grades. The pressure to improve grades to advance into desired streams and pass examinations increases when the mainstream school day is perceived as too short to cover all curricular subjects to their fullest. This perception is captured in a blog post by an employee of Epigami, a for-profit company that matches students to tutors based on need: “In school, teachers often do not have sufficient time to cover every single aspect of the topic, because quite frankly, there’s a lot of it” (Foo, 2015).

Once parents decide to send their children to private tutoring, they face a myriad of options. Tutoring can be delivered in a range of settings, from one-on-one to large-group settings. The tutors themselves range in experience and training; some are professional tutors with graduate degrees working for large for-profit companies, while others are individuals in university trying

to earn additional income who may be hired informally. Sometimes mainstream school teachers provide tutoring themselves, but this work cannot exceed six hours per week as stated in the Ministry of Education's official rules (Lu 2004).

To return to the paradox in question: although the vast majority of parents admit tutoring does not improve the academic performance of their children, a similarly large percentage of parents continue to spend vast sums of money to send their children to extra lessons outside of mainstream school. Why has tutoring not only been present but also expanding in Singapore despite the perception of parents and findings by academics of its small academic effect?

Various theories as to why parents send children to private tutoring have been put forward. Based on Bray's (2003) categorisation of cultural, economic, and academic factors, it could be argued that Singapore is (1) *culturally* attuned to a competitive (so-called "Asian") society and therefore tutoring is an outcome of the drive towards maximising student achievement (Baker & LeTendre, 2005); (2) *economically*, the rate of return from education, based on human capital theory, may make private tutoring a rational choice (Kwan-Terry, 1991); or (3) *academically*, the high-stakes examination environment in Singapore causes households to rely on private tutoring services to ensure children move to later stages of schooling and into desirable slots in the labour market (this is what Epigami wants people to think).

A slightly alternative reading deduced from Table 31.1 adds to these theories. The second most prevalent answer as to why parents send their children to tutoring was "to keep up with others". That is to say, one reason why households spend money on tutoring is because of the desire to mimic other households. I label this the "social" factor of tutoring. The social factor can exist alongside the other factors.

The social factor of tutoring signals a level of relationality among individuals in the education system that must be explained. Bray and Lykins (2012) point to one such explanation in a box on positional goods: "[W]hen private tutoring is received by one group, other groups feel that they must follow until almost everybody is receiving it – and those who do not are disadvantaged" (p. 68). Although they did not situate positional goods within the knowledge-based economy, other scholars do:

Indeed, beyond states and companies, for those individual citizens who do not want to be left behind in an increasingly flexible and dualised labor market, education is also more and more perceived both as a positional good – a symbol or site of competition for prestige – and as a worthwhile investment.

(Verger, Lubienski, & Steiner-Khamsi, 2016, p. 7)

As one of the first nations to embrace a knowledge-based economy, Singapore has constructed a schooling system where continuous education is believed to be the primary way to find success in the global economy. Such a belief has been articulated at the highest levels of government. The Senior Parliamentary Secretary at the Singaporean Ministry of Education and Manpower said, "Those who are able to survive and thrive in this new borderless, global environment are those who can respond quickly to take advantage of the new opportunities and meet the challenges presented by globalisation" (Hawazi Daipi cited in Baildon, 2009, p. 64). Tutoring has become a good to be consumed by households that signifies their willingness to "survive" in the global economy.

As an educational positional good (Hollis, 1982), tutoring is marked by conspicuous consumption (see Veblen, 1898). Tutoring is conspicuous in the advertisements put on television and in newspapers – when government school teachers offer tutoring; when students see each other at tutoring centres; and when the "backwash effects" (Bray, 2003, p. 17) from the long

hours of tutoring enter mainstream schools. For all of these reasons and more, tutoring must be understood not only as an individual choice by households but also as a social, relational practice that requires an outward orientation.

Pressure in the Singaporean system of education is partly created by the examination and tracking mechanisms explained earlier. These instruments allocate scarce positions in education, over which families compete. On top of these system-wide mechanisms of distribution that create (real or perceived) pressure, the relationships among families competing for the positional goods within the education system further adds pressure in the education system. This form of pressure is clearly seen in private tutoring. Most households perceive that private tutoring does not necessarily improve grades; however, sending a child to private tutoring does signify (to one's neighbours) a willingness to follow the national rhetoric of survival within the knowledge-based economy. This form of pressure and adherence to normative, nationally oriented behaviour signals a social side of tutoring. Consuming tutoring must be conspicuous, as most people assume there is no absolute (or internal) value to be had. Value is derived from other people knowing private tutoring is being consumed. Once education is believed to be a positional good (distributed through instruments such as examinations and tracking systems) and tutoring is a main way in which to showcase one's educational consumption outwardly, more families will spend larger sums of money on tutoring. This logic is not irrational and can explain the problematic data presented at the beginning of this section.

### **Private tutoring as double entendre**

Fee-based private tutoring in Cambodia has been open to interpretation and double meaning (double entendre). On the one hand, it has been conceptualised as *hiding* behind a “façade” of fee-free public schooling (e.g., Bray, Kobakhidze, Liu & Zhang, 2016). Implied in this interpretation is that the outward appearance of the public education system *deceives* people from the system's so-called “true” nature, which is, as the interpretation goes, based on an assortment of fees and other access barriers that are essential for the system's functioning. Tutoring is a primary example of this hidden part of the education system: it is essential because it provides additional time for mainstream school teachers to cover the national curriculum and increases low teacher salaries but remains unacknowledged by government officials and development partners because it is counter to the constitutional right of fee-free education. In effect, tutoring *embarrasses* those with an interest in creating a public education system, so it must be hidden – but not abolished – behind the façade of public education.

Despite the façade that may exist in elite society, when one walks into a public school in Cambodia, private tutoring is anything but hidden. Parents, teachers, students, and principals are not *deceived* by tutoring at all. Rather, they acknowledge its existence openly. How then can we explain (or theorise) private tutoring in Cambodia when it is essential to the system, acknowledged by (most) stakeholders, yet profoundly problematic for those in government and civil society to recognise? How do we make sense of the private tutoring double entendre?

Before answering that question, a brief overview of the system of mainstream education and private tutoring is needed. The Cambodian system of education is divided into three sections: primary school (grades 1–6), lower secondary school (grades 7–9), and upper secondary school (grades 10–12). Students receive monthly scores primarily based on subject examinations created by teachers. There are semester examinations in grades 6, 9, and 12 – the three transition points in the education system. These examinations are developed by provincial and district offices of education and graded by a student's own teacher. There are also national leaving examinations developed by MoEYS. The first takes place after grade 9, which is the conclusion

of basic education. A student must pass this examination to continue onto upper secondary school. Although this examination was previously graded at the national level, reforms have recently devolved authority of grading to teachers at the school level. The second school-leaving examination takes place at the conclusion of grade 12. Students who passed the two semester examinations during the year must then sit and pass the national school leaving examination in order to receive a diploma.

Although cheating was historically common on the grade 12 examinations (Brehm, 2016), reforms in 2014 aimed to prevent much of the rampant cheating and, subsequently, reduced the passing rate. In 2013, some 80 percent of students *passed* the national 12th grade examination. In 2014, after examination reforms were implemented, some 70 percent of students *failed* the examination (Radio Free Asia, 2014). The minister of education was quoted as saying, “During this year’s exam, there was no cheating because proctors have strictly frisked all candidates for cheat sheets before allowing them to sit for exams” (Hang Chuon Naron quoted in Xinhua News Agency, 2014). In 2013, an estimated half a million US dollars had been spent on various bribes and cheat sheets by students, mainly funnelled to teachers in hopes of obtaining a passing grade (Chhay, 2014).

It is important to highlight the role teachers play in the education system. Notwithstanding the newly implemented grade 12 examination, teachers are tasked with designing and grading most examinations. This places them in a position of power vis-à-vis students’ ability to advance grade levels. This position of power brushes up against an ethical line when those same teachers designing and grading examinations also tutor their own students (Dawson, 2009). Is a student paying for extra hours of study or for favourable treatment on tests either by receiving examination questions beforehand or by receiving lenient grading by the teacher? Although the answer to this question is nearly impossible to find empirically and certainly cannot be generalised to all circumstances, it is known that after the national grade 6 examination was eliminated, tutoring continued (Dawson, 2010, p. 22). This suggests that despite the multiple examinations in the country, it is possible that they are *not* the main drivers of the tutoring system after all. Students, in other words, are not attending tutoring sessions to *pass* examinations.

The rates of tutoring have increased since the Kingdom of Cambodia was formed in the early 1990s. Although tutoring existed in different forms in the history of Cambodia (see Brehm 2015), attendance rates have increased since the 1990s: the median rate of private tutoring participation in the late 1990s at primary school level was 36.5 percent (Bray, 1999); by the mid-2000s, the median rate was 52.5 percent (Bray & Bunly, 2005); and by the late 2000s, the median rate was 71 percent (Dawson, 2009). Since wealthy families typically opt-out of public education, preferring private (international) schools for their children, it is the growing middle class and the large population of low-income households that generally consume the tutoring described here. This is likely due to a similar effect of mimicry found in Singapore’s case.

Acknowledging the high rates of tutoring and the low-stakes examination system (save for the new 12th-grade test) in Cambodia, it is now time to return to the question at hand: how can we explain tutoring in Cambodia if it is a visible practice not completely linked to the testing regime in the country?

The first part of the answer situates the recent development of the Cambodian system of education within the birth of the knowledge-based economy rhetoric that dominated (and dominates) development discourse (see Robertson, 2005). At the same time that international agencies and donors emerged in Cambodia after the first elections in 1993, the logic of knowledge-based economies was becoming popularised globally. Kenway, Bullen, Fahey, and Robb (2006) locate the origin of the contemporary meaning of the knowledge economy in an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report published in 1996 titled

*The Knowledge-based Economy* and detail its spread globally. In Cambodia, the adoption of “a free market economy via the construction of a policy environment in which foreign investment and a private property regime could emerge” (Springer, 2015, p. 7) came after the Paris Peace Accords in 1991. The accords ended the long-standing conflict in the country and amounted to the eventual full-scale embrace of education for the knowledge-based economy. Education was repeatedly linked to “human resource” development both by government reforms and the large number of international civil society organisations. Private tutoring within this discursive environment forms an embrace of the knowledge-based economy to which Cambodia (and its external development partners) aspired.

The second part of the answer acknowledges the historical prevalence of clientelism in Cambodia and the ability of the practice to exist in society despite institutional reforms. Clientelism is “not a distinct type of social organisation, but [rather] different modes of structuring the flow of resources and of interpersonal interaction and exchange in society: different modes of generalised exchange” (Eisenstadt & Roniger, 1984, p. 164). This exchange is based on patronage networks, where patrons protect certain groups (i.e., clients). The clients pay some sort of rent to the patron, and in return the patron protects the clients from outside harm.

Clientelism has been seen as the basis for social life in Cambodia (Ledgerwood & Vijghen, 2002). Individuals pay various fees to persons in positions of power who provide a level of protection or service. Ebeling (2008) found that 70 percent of the population pays an informal fee *every day*. These fees often go to police officers, school teachers, and doctors. These types of social positions provide needed services (e.g., safety, education, or health) to individuals, who thus see an informal fee as a necessary payment. Springer (2011) suggested that although the government embraced the knowledge-based economy, what he calls “a neoliberal configuration”, it was done in a way so as to further entrench patron-client relations (Springer, 2011, p. 2558).

Based on the long-standing history of clientelism, I argue that private tutoring is not only explained by individuals embracing the admittedly abstract notion of a knowledge-based economy but also a site where certain patron-client relationships historically found in society can continue to exist despite official policies advocating for their abolishment. Tutoring has become the space where traditional forms of student-teacher relationships can thrive uninhibited by national reform. Roberts (2009, p. 149) finds that

after 17 years . . . [change in political and social organisation has] been superficial and remains operationalised dominated by informal, socially-ruled systems of patronage and clientelism rather than determined by impartial, independent and impersonal institutions associated with the democratic prerogative explicit in statebuilding and democratisation.

Similarly, reforms to the education system have been superficial insofar as the patron-client relationship between teacher and student remains strong inside the space of private tutoring. It is for this reason that tutoring did not subside when the grade 6 examination was eliminated. Tutoring was not primarily *for* examinations; it was rather for maintaining a set of historical relations between student and teacher. The student pays a rent to the teacher, and the teacher protects the student by awarding good marks.

I propose the answer to the question at the beginning of this section as not based on the idea of a façade deceiving some people of tutoring’s existence but rather as based on the idea of a “double entendre” of private tutoring (Silova & Brehm, 2013, p. 69). Tutoring has two meanings in the Cambodian context. On the one hand, tutoring is justified by a discourse associated with knowledge-based economies that see tutoring as an investment in the education of a child.

This signals the willingness of (poor) households to participate in development discourses that dominate social life. On the other hand, tutoring has a second meaning: it is used as a way to resist the changes to the education system imposed by external parties that emphasise student-centred learning and student-teacher relationships based on mutual respect. In the space of private tutoring, teachers are able to enact clientelism without being reprimanded by the state (and its external partners) who (publically) look down upon patronage.

## Conclusion

Tutoring in Cambodia appears wholly different from that in Singapore. Whereas the education system in Singapore creates an environment of pressure through high-stakes examinations and student tracking, in Cambodia, student tracking is not officially sanctioned, and until 2014, examinations were not perceived by households as high stakes because cheating was more or less expected. Moreover, whereas Singapore has strong oversight of its tutoring industry in terms of commercial regulations (although not in content), in Cambodia, minimal state supervision of either commercial or curricular aspects creates an environment where mainstream teachers can tutor their own students without restriction. Although tutoring has been linked to corruption because a student's mainstream school teacher is typically also his or her tutor, the main reasons for tutoring given by teachers and students in Cambodia are low teacher salary and inadequate time to finish the national curriculum. Tutoring, in other words, offers students additional time to complete the national curriculum in exchange for providing needed increases to teacher salaries. In Singapore, by contrast, parents want – but do not expect – their children's examination scores to increase significantly because of tutoring. They also feel pressure to mimic their neighbours.

Despite these differences, the tutoring systems in Cambodia and Singapore share a commonality. If both of my arguments about tutoring as a positional good and tutoring as some double entendre are correct, then in both systems, tutoring is primarily driven by *social* – not economic, cultural, or academic – factors. This is particularly important in the study of private tutoring because the social side of tutoring has not received as much attention as other causal factors. Future research would need to determine if social factors exist in other contexts and, if so, how.

Returning to Le Luong Minh's phrase about "unity in diversity", this chapter has shown two divergent cases of private tutoring that are in fact united. The practice of tutoring exists across Southeast Asia, but its particular features are dependent on each jurisdiction's contextual history. Cambodia's patron-client relationships continue to thrive through private tutoring, while Singapore's total embrace of the knowledge-based economy turned education into a consumable good that dictates prestige and status in society. In both cases, the best theory to explain the existence of private tutoring is based on social relations, not the economic theories most prevalent in educational discourse. Without a clear understanding of the everyday practices of tutoring, it is impossible to explain the phenomenon in concrete terms. The academic work ahead now must turn to discerning what, if any, concepts of social relations can be abstracted from the Cambodian and Singaporean cases to explain private tutoring in other parts of Southeast Asia and beyond.

## Notes

- 1 The 10 member states are Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.
- 2 For some students, a secondary school can select them *before* the PSLE through the Direct School Admission scheme.



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