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Mimicking Religion as Coping Strategy: The Emergence of the Bell-Curve God in Singapore

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Among OECD countries, South Korea has maintained its pole position since 2003 as the country with the highest suicide rate. The rate peaked in 2009 at 33.8 per 100,000. Suicide is the leading cause of death among the country's population aged between ten and twenty-four, and much of it is attributed to stress in the education system.

In China the university entrance exam known as *Gaokao* is an emotive topic. About nine million annually sit the nine-hour test. In 2014, it was reported that parents blocked the traffic outside a *Gaokao* venue in Nanjing to ensure silence during the test. In May 2016, street protests were observed in at least six cities in Jiangsu province, as the number of spots set aside for local students in provincial universities was reduced, putting still more pressure on *Gaokao* performance.

In Singapore the Health Promotion Board, a government organization, offers tips on how to deal with exam stress, from practicing yoga to eating stress-relieving foods. Thousands of students and parents will pay respect to Confucius at Chinese temples, particularly ahead of his birthday, which often coincides with the exam season in schools. At temples, mini abacuses may be given out to devotees to symbolize help with numeracy, or lanterns known as *guang ming deng* (bright light lanterns) may be lit and offerings made as devotees pray for good exam results.

The importance placed on education and, relatedly, examinations, in many Asian societies is well known. The means adopted to cope with the stresses that come along with such intensity are myriad. It is in such contexts that the emergence of a "Bell Curve God" in Singapore must be understood.

The "Bell Curve God" originates from the bell curve grading system, where the performance of a student in an examination is determined based on his/her performance relative to his or her peers, and grades in a class are expected to be distributed along a curve, which in the most "pristine" is a normal distribution (that is, a bell curve). Grades may be moderated to achieve this. The popular myth among students is that there is a simple bell curve, and that they will be "forced" somewhere along the curve. The anxiety that this has created has led the Provost of a local university to blog extensively about this, explaining the intricacies of how it is done at the university, including, for example, that higher-level courses with small enrolments do not use the curve and grades are typically based on absolute performance, and that the curve, when applied, is not necessarily a normal distribution, taking into account a number of factors.

The Bell Curve God is characterized as capable of granting "blessings" to those who worship and pray to it. Students pray for its intervention to not have their grades classified in the lower end of the curve. They pray for "deliverance" and seek reward in the form of grades "sustenance".

The manner of “worship” of the Bell Curve God can take different forms. Generally, these practices emerge near exam time. Some students may carry an imprint of the Bell Curve God in their daily lives, such as placing this as a background photo on personal devices such as mobile phones. More commonly, students visit physical “altars” or “shrines” containing caricature drawings of the Bell Curve God. Inevitably, the Bell Curve God is toggled in a mortar cap with a graduation gown. In one of the local universities, a lion (the university’s mascot) dons the graduation gown (Figure 1). Physical shrines may be decorated with items such as food and candles. A series of “rituals” is also involved in the worship, and a set of instructions accompany the shrine to enact worship—e.g. taking sweets from a glass jar, ringing a bell, throwing dice, bowing, reciting words (Figure 2). A certain informality prevails, with pictures that are hand-drawn, and instructions handwritten, with spontaneous, almost makeshift “altars” thrown together. As much as there is a serious element to the worship of the Bell Curve God, it simultaneously carries humor, as caricature drawings of the “God” create amusement. The “offerings” presented to the Bell Curve God include popular snacks such as “Pocky sticks,” which carry a physical resemblance to the joss sticks used in Chinese worship. Such expressions suggest a creative imagination among students and offer some amusement for them as they face impending exams. In one local university, students suggested the theme of “You are your GPA [grade point average] Day” as a “celebration” of April Fool’s Day, and got librarians with a sense of humor to play out the theme at the library. Among the “religious” elements was the setting up of GPA confession booths, where students could go to confess why their GPA was so low or so high. The “truly hopeless” could then be directed to the Bell Curve God to seek forgiveness/blessings, and they could pen their wishes to offer to the Bell Curve God. The playfulness apparent in the association with April Fool’s Day is also manifest in the “worship” on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, where pages are dedicated to the Bell Curve God. The informality and sense of humor associated with this “worship” is apparent as students engage in a playful and interactive process of communicating with “God.” For some, all of this is about finding humor through the mimicry of religion, while for others there may be a genuine sense of investing in insurance through prayer. In a competitive examination-important context, the Bell Curve God constitutes part of the range of coping strategies for stressed students.

Fig 1 An “altar” to the Bell Curve God at Singapore Management University. Courtesy of Singapore Management University Li Ka Shing Library.

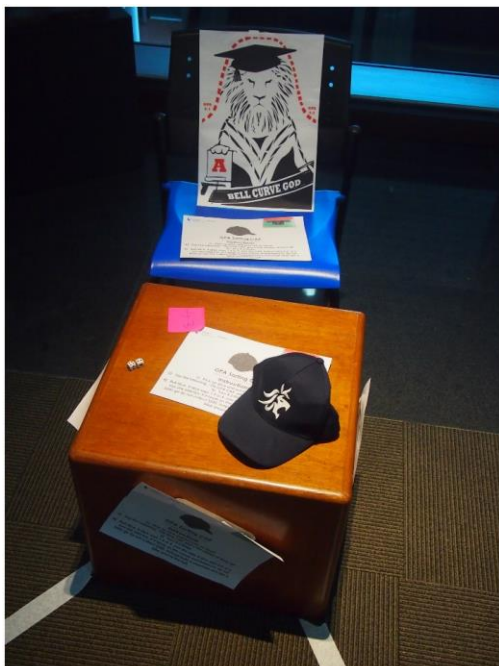


Fig 2 The Bell Curve God, with a “prayer” wall where students can stick their “prayers.” Courtesy of Singapore Management University Li Ka Shing Library.



Of the many conceptual categories that have developed to characterize multiple forms of metamorphosed or mimicked religion (from parody religion to liquid religion to invented religion), the Bell Curve God exemplifies but also nudges current conceptual thinking in new ways. From one perspective it is a manifestation of “liquid modernity,” where “solid modernity” melts away into a “melting pot of ideas, from which individuals freely build their own meaning systems” (Taira 2006, 20–22, cited in Mäkelä and Petsche 2013; and drawing from Bauman’s 2000 work). As a form of “liquid religion,” the Bell Curve God demonstrates how “the solid borders of institutional religion have broken down or ‘liquified’” (Taira 2006, 7–35, cited in Mäkelä and Petsche 2013), and phenomena and symbols from everyday lives have been appropriated and combined with the affect and rituals of traditional beliefs and practices, resulting in a re-formulation of the phenomenon in question as well as of traditional religion (Mäkelä and Petsche 2013, 419). At the same time, the Bell Curve God exemplifies a “fake religion,” an “invented religion” and a “parody religion,” which entails “a category of objects, artefacts, and popular movements that look and feel like religion, but whose apparent excess, irreverence and arbitrariness seem to mock religion” (Alberts 2008, 126). Yet, the Bell Curve God exists not so much to mock religion as to draw from its meritorious effects, even while there is a certain irreverence and excess in its very existence and expression. In its “fakeness,” invention is apparent, and as a product of the human imagination, embodies the quality of invented religion, at once “fictional” and “confrontational” (Cusack 2010, 1, 141, 146, cited in Sutcliffe and Cusack 2013).

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