

**GENERAL PAPER**

**8807/02**

Paper 2

**23 August 2021**

INSERT

**1 hour 30 minutes**

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**READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS FIRST**

This Insert contains the passage for Paper 2.

**Passage 1.** *Lester Wong examines the potential dangers of 'woke' culture*

- 1 Being woke, or socially conscious of injustice, is a good thing. The 'woke' movement seems to be gaining traction among the young people of Singapore today, judging from social media comments. The term 'woke' was added to the Oxford English Dictionary in 2017 as: "Originally: well informed, up to date. Now chiefly: alert to racial or social discrimination and injustice". So if you are woke, your eyes are opened to various societal injustices, and you try your best not to perpetuate them and to raise awareness about them. You are also prepared to take a stand against them by, for example, censuring a friend or family member for a racist remark, or calling for policy changes on social media. Sounds like a good thing, right?

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- 2 Sure, but there can also be too much of a good thing. Make no mistake: I wholeheartedly believe in what wokeism purports to achieve. There is no question that I would rather live in a society that is respectful of individual differences and offers equal opportunity to all, rather than in one where discrimination and inequality are part of the status quo. Entrenched stereotypes and biases held by the majority, the wealthy and the powerful can, and often do unfairly stack the deck against minority groups. At the same time, I cannot help but be dismayed by the toxic by-products generated by increasingly prominent strains of wokeism.

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- 3 There are three ways, I think, by which wokeism can be taken too far and become too much of a good thing. Firstly, it is a short slippery slope from taking a firm stand against discrimination to self-righteous bullying and ostracisation, especially when behind the veil of Internet anonymity. So-called 'cancel culture', for instance, is an extension of woke mindsets that involves denying money, attention or support for companies or people that are perceived to have offended others through what they say or do. The underlying assumption is that if you disagree with what someone has said, you have the right to punish them, all the more so if there are enough people who agree with you. Prominent past targets include Harry Potter author J. K. Rowling, who was judged to have tweeted remarks offensive to transsexual people. But cancel culture has also made a victim of an African-American high school security guard who lost his job in 2019 for using an African-American racial slur while telling an African-American student not to direct the word at him. There are times to be forceful when pushing for change, but I am not sure that punishing people for innocuous remarks taken out of context can count as a victory of any kind. If the goal is harmony and a shared respect between different groups in society, then there is nothing to be gained from hyper-vigilantly policing other people's words and thoughts, waiting to pounce on their 'mistakes'. Nothing, except a smug sense of moral superiority, which is used to boost one's ego or salve one's conscience.

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- 4 Secondly, there is also a slippery slope from carving out a space for all shades of identity to coexist, to enabling the weaponisation of these identities and accentuating the differences between people instead. The question is one of degree, and I think it fair to say that there is a clear difference between offering respectful reminders on minority viewpoints, and aggressively thrusting said viewpoints in the face of people who may not even be out to offend you. One is needful, the other, at best, self-indulgent and entitled. What we will end up with, in the worst case scenario, is a society carved into thousands of pockets of micro-identities, each virulently hostile to all others for the simple crime of being different.

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- 5 Thirdly, the strong emotions aroused by wokeism can equally be harnessed to effect genuine change or be exploited to serve the agenda of malicious, opportunistic individuals. The Capitol Hill riots in the United States demonstrated just how much damage an emotional mob can do to a hallowed societal institution when incited by a sufficiently powerful and unscrupulous person. Young people attracted to woke ideas must be alert to the possibility that their good intentions can turn rancid. The irony is that, at its most pernicious, wokeism can become exactly what it says it is fighting - an ideological sledgehammer that brooks no dissent, creating a new in-group and out-group. Sensible woke people exercise their social consciousness with consideration, and do not demand that others come on board the journey immediately, or leave the vessel.

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- 6 I doubt I am alone in being sceptical and a little worried about the excesses of the woke movement, and would encourage those with similar concerns to voice them. If not, we are tacitly allowing the more vocal and extreme adherents of wokeism to shape and dominate discourse just because they are willing to be louder, to the point that their message becomes the only message. And if that is what being woke means, then I would much rather stay asleep. 55

**Passage 2.** *Kirsten Han argues that the dangers of ‘woke’ culture are exaggerated*

- 1 To be woke is to identify with social justice causes, such as racial justice and other progressive issues like LGBT rights and feminism. At least, that is what it means when used by the political left. But the term has also been hijacked by far-right or right-wing conservatives in the United States and elsewhere to conjure up the image of irrational, intolerant leftist mobs, prowling around online spaces, workplaces, and college campuses in search of unwitting targets to shame and harass. In the same vein as past cries of “this is just political correctness gone mad!”, this right-wing narrative frames people who are woke as oppressors, mercilessly cancelling people by silencing them, ostracising them, boycotting their work, or depriving them of their livelihoods because of real or perceived infractions, like expressing a dissenting opinion. Say the wrong thing, use the wrong pronoun, make the wrong joke, and the mob will descend and cancel you! 5
- 2 However, contrary to what the critics of wokeism believe, Singaporeans who are woke do not wield significant amounts of influence over the national agenda, policy-making, or public discourse. They are not given much airtime in the mainstream media. Some of these communities and causes are actively censored or excluded from national platforms. There are performances that are given classifications restricting their audience (such as M18, which means you have to be 18 and above to enter) because they touch on some of these above-mentioned issues or topics. Many woke Singaporeans are still young, and might be studying in institutions where they have less power than their lecturers, tutors, and school administrators who are absolutely not woke. Issues that would be associated with being woke mainly exist only on the margins of Singaporean national discourse. Even those that have broken into the ‘mainstream’ consciousness – such as discussions of LGBTQ+ issues, or race – measure their ‘prominence’ only by occasional appearances in the local media, or lip service paid by politicians. But this once-in-awhile recognition does not translate to actual power or change. 15  
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- 3 Careless use of woke as a label makes it sound as if people support LGBTQ+ rights, migrant labour rights or feminism simply because it is the trendy thing to do, and not because of personal conviction or belief, or because there are serious ethical and moral reasons for taking these positions. It makes these issues sound like the new-fangled, irrational posturing of impressionable youth, possibly ‘just a phase’ and not to be taken seriously. It creates a conceptual skew: while the government’s positions are always framed as sensible conclusions drawn from sensible deliberations, progressive arguments for reform can be brushed off as the delusions of the ‘woke movement’, possibly imported from abroad because our young people are consuming too much American content on Instagram and TikTok. 30
- 4 None of this is new – people used to moan about ‘political correctness’, now they complain about ‘woke culture’. For some, it is a way to get attention and pander to a base. For others, it is about their unhappiness over being challenged, or told that some of their views are dated, inappropriate and/or offensive. There will probably always be some people who will feel threatened by prevailing woke cultures, whether they are really there or not, and whether anyone in Singapore has actually been cancelled. It is important that we collectively resist this sort of lazy framing that erases differences in power, influence, and responsibility. It does nothing for us; it only dumbs down discourse and hinders us from engaging with analysis that will help us learn and grow. 35  
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