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LIBERAL ARTS FOR ASIANS

A Commentary on Yale-NUS

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liberal arts

neoliberalism

Singapore

tertiary education

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This critical commentary discusses Yale-NUS College, a recently established liberal arts college in Singapore enabled by a controversial partnership between Yale University and the National University of Singapore. The Yale–NUS collaboration marks a shift in the role of educational institutions in Singapore's neoliberal economy and one that contends with the legacy of Singapore's earlier discourse of 'Asian values'. The essay analyses the curricular design process of the college's 'literature and humanities' common curriculum course, as well as one faculty member's experience of teaching a course on modern Chinese literature and film, to highlight both the potential and the challenges of liberal arts education in the context of Singapore's postcoloniality and neoliberal economy.

Introduction

Even in a context abounding in global higher education initiatives, the 2013 opening of Yale-NUS College has attracted an unusual degree of US attention and commentary. There are good reasons why. Yale's partnership with the National University of Singapore (NUS) to create Singapore's first stand-alone liberal arts college belongs to a host of higher education trends driven

by Asian entry into the so-called global knowledge economy, manifesting in high government investment in research and higher education. This in turn is orienting the global outlook of US universities towards concrete opportunities in Asia (Hvistendahl 2009; Morgan 2012). Most US and Asian university partnerships involve 'knowledge transfer' in the areas of business administration, medicine, science and engineering. By suggesting that there may in fact be a new life for the liberal arts in Asia, the Yale–NUS initiative seems on the face of it to buck the assumption that US universities' turn to Asian education markets and a pragmatic orientation towards the value of college are necessarily mutually reinforcing developments. However, can the liberal arts education embodied in the Yale–NUS experiment be the content of 'knowledge transfer' in the postcolonial context of a strong Asian state without the college functioning either as an apologist for an authoritarian government or as a bastion of western extraterritorial privilege? While the debate on Yale-NUS has so far been governed by assumptions of a transcendental relationship between the liberal arts and democracy, with the latter understood to be exemplified by the normative right to the expression of minority views, consideration of the Yale–NUS partnership in the context of Singapore's mode of postcolonial governmentality and its pragmatic relation to global capital reframes the key political questions at stake.

In the short time since the college's opening, a series of episodes has placed on trial Yale-NUS's pledge to guarantee its students and faculty the same freedom of speech as exercised by those in New Haven. These events include criticisms of the Yale-NUS administration's effort to secure permission to screen Tan Pin Pin's *To Singapore, With Love*, a documentary banned in the country for 'national security' reasons; enquiries from the Media Development Association about the proposed use of *The Satanic Verses* after the college library added the title to its collection; an open letter from Yale-NUS faculty in response to NUS Professor Khairudin Aljunied's posting of two Facebook blogs likening lesbianism and 'liberal Islam' to 'cancers' that must be cured 'through education and reasoned arguments';[1] protests against the perceived political motivations behind the negative tenure decision of Cherian George (an outspoken government critic) at Nanyang Technological University (NTU); Yale-NUS Professor Robin Hemley's resignation from the panel of judges in protest at the National Library Board's removal of three children's books 'with homosexual content'; and concerns that Yale-NUS College's academic freedom was under attack when the Office of Housing Services removed student-created posters in support of Hong Kong's Umbrella Revolution, news of which spread 'like wildfire' among the student body 'within minutes' (Battacharya 2014).

The terms of debate about academic freedom at Yale-NUS have from the beginning belonged to a generically recognizable one about the obligations of a university to its host society, now complicated by universities' mutation

1 The original post was entitled 'Liberal Islam, Lesbianism and the Likes of It'. Khairudin has since edited the wording of this post.

into transnational entities consisting of multiply sited locations (Wilhelm 2013; Redden 2009). As in the cases of NYU Abu Dhabi or Duke in China, many North American faculty, Yale's included, worry that doing business with an authoritarian state means the betrayal of US universities' commitment to academic freedom and democracy's cognate values of tolerance and free expression.[2] Others, meanwhile, defend the Yale–NUS initiative as a form of constructive engagement with a nation-state that is already in the process of liberalizing its norms on a range of issues, and whose presence in Singapore is likely to promote a healthy culture of dissensus (Lewis 2012; Jacobs 2013). Is there a way to view the Yale–NUS project other than through the lens of a clash of political cultures, leaving us with at best the hesitant conviction that western liberal freedoms are historically contingent, compromised norms that we nevertheless 'cannot not want'?[3] In the next section of this essay, more specific context for the Singapore state's recent interest in investing in liberal arts education will prepare the way for our reporting on the actual experience of teaching at Yale-NUS and what it reveals of our material institutional grounds for intellectual critique.

2 Jim Sleeper is Yale's most vocal faculty critic of the Yale–NUS initiative. See, for example, Sleeper (2012). For the argument that the 'liberal arts model' of education is 'of critical importance for democracy in both Asia and the United States', and that US educators should be wary of emulating 'the Singapore success story', see Nussbaum (2011, 737).

Neoliberalism and the Liberal Arts in Singapore

3 Spivak's (1996, 28) formulation of deconstruction as the 'persistent critique of what one cannot not want' continues to define the stance of critical human rights discourse.

As Beng-Huat Chua (1995, 172) has observed, Singapore's mode of governance is not easily reducible to an immature version of western democracy and indeed may fundamentally elude the apprehensions of liberal theory. Though the use of direct and subtle coercion has been a key tactic of the People's Action Party (PAP), the ruling party's electoral dominance since independence is also to be chalked up to its ability to earn popular consent for its agenda. Where the years since the late 1980s have seen some weakening of support for PAP's paternalistic governing style, this electoral decline is equally evidence of the people's political rationality that no proponent of democracy can ignore. While Chua's interest is in how Singapore's model of 'communitarian democracy' might indicate an *alternative* form of modernity, our interest is in the extent of the *convergence* between forms of neoliberal subject-making in Singapore and the United States.

As the editors of this special issue of *Interventions* discuss in their introduction, top-down inventions and reinventions of Singapore's national cultural identity long formed a major cornerstone of state policy. In the 1970s and 1980s this took the form of creating a global workforce of 'rugged people' who would avoid becoming too 'westernized' (that is, rights-minded) by being inculcated with 'Asian values' (specifically, 'Confucian' values). This essay focuses more on the late 1990s onwards, when – in the context of the Asian financial crisis, persistent Japanese stagflation, and the US tech

boom – Singapore's social engineering took a new direction, in quest of foster-ing the innovativeness, flexibility and entrepreneurialism featured by the New Economy. Reflecting the influence of Richard Florida's concept of the 'creative class', city planners in Singapore and elsewhere around the world channelled investment into the support of so-called creative industries, both to satisfy the leisure requirements of a global class of creative workers and because these sectors might themselves represent new engines of economic growth (Florida 2002; Kong 2011). The 2008 decision by the Singapore Ministry of Education (MOE) to add a US-style liberal arts college to the nation's exist-ing 'menu' of higher education offerings follows upon a decade of educational reforms to promote not just more innovation but more inherent capacity on the part of the citizen-subject to innovate (Gopinathan 2013).

These educational reforms involved massive government investment in the increase of cohort participation rates, the upgrading of polytechnics, enhan-cing the international reputations of Singapore's universities as world-class research-intensive institutions, and establishing Singapore as a globally com-petitive 'education hub'. Various collaborations with US universities such as MIT, Duke and Johns Hopkins coincided with the opening of a new School of Art, Design and Media at NTU and the establishment of the new Singapore University of Technology and Design. Accompanying the introduction of new domestic options for professional training in arts, media and design were actions taken to liberalize the British-inherited model of specialized education characteristic of NUS itself: these included the addition of universal breadth requirements and the creation of a selective University Scholars Programme (USP) in 2001, modelled on a US liberal arts style of education. The success and high demand for USP, which had limited enrollment capacity, paved the way for a successful government proposal submitted by NUS to create a full, stand-alone liberal arts college that could provide an 'intellectually invi-gorating environment and additional avenue to develop independent and criti-cal thinkers who can go on to become leaders in the economic, social and political fields' (*Report* 2008, 3). For such a college to succeed in attracting top-quality students and faculty from around the world, however, it was con-sidered necessary that NUS 'leverage' on the 'brand name of a reputable foreign partner' (26).

Singapore's earlier discourse of 'Asian values' had blatantly thematized a convergence between the desiderata of industrial labour discipline and civic deference to political authority, which drew on US neoconservative ideas (Chua 1995, 187). Singapore's latter-day efforts to remake its citizen-subjects as innovators and entrepreneurs notably entailed for the first time an *explicit* US cultural embrace. Singapore's postcolonial governmentality by econo-mistic pragmatism is best seen as coeval with the rise of US neoliberalism and belonging to the same phase of global capitalism, variously described

as 'disorganized capitalism' (Lash and Urry 1987) or ushering in a new, flexible, network-based form of organization (Boltanski and Chapiello 2005).

Over the course of the 2000s – despite or perhaps because of the tech financial crashes of the early 2000s and the post-2008 era – the innovation and flexibility rhetoric of the 1990s were hardly deflated. They were instead updated in a post-bubble context to mean lifelong adaptability to global volatility. As such, the campaign for 'An Entrepreneurial Culture for Singapore' – in which Singaporeans over the last decade have been exhorted to give up on egalitarian values and accept increasing income disparity lest they lose out on Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) to China – seems at once to mark a newly arrived US neoliberal discourse *and* the replay of a familiar postcolonial rhetoric of bare survivalism.[4] In retrospect, Singapore's founding leaders' characterization of a new country possessed of no natural resources other than human capital and requiring of its people a posture of constant flexibility seems to have well articulated from early on the ideal traits of neoliberal man, by now widely familiar as 'manipulable man, man who is perpetually responsive to modifications in his environment' (Ong 2006, 173). If it should thus be difficult to distinguish what in Singapore's official adoption of New Economy values (in place of 'Asian values') is neoliberal and what is postcolonial, this is likely because the early years of Singapore's national formation belongs to the same period (the 1970s) when the growth of financialization and government deregulation marked the United States' turn to a post-Keynsian economic consensus.[5]

What are the conceptual payoffs of reframing Singapore's postcolonial self-description in terms of the problematics of neoliberalism? On Aihwa Ong's account, neoliberalism is a mode of political optimization and not just an economic doctrine with a negative relation to state power; it is a new relationship between government and knowledge that recasts the activity of governing as involving the search for technical solutions to problems characterized as non-political and non-ideological (Ong 2006, 3). This definition of neoliberalism allows for the expansion of the term to include a range of practices from North Atlantic – led by Anglo-American – state actions to reduce public ownership of the economy *and* Asian state entrepreneurship and practices of high public investment. The selective adoption of neoliberal calculations through the differential management of populations can be seen in the contemporary practices of various East and Southeast Asian states (Ong 2006, 173–174, 77–79). In that neoliberal governance involves a model of what Ong calls 'graduated sovereignty' designed to facilitate the operations of global capital, its adoption appears to portend for Asian states both increasing global prominence and problems for national identity and autonomy.

Examples of such problems arise in the policy context of Singapore government leaders' stated objective of maximally globalizing Singapore without turning it into a client state, or, more recently, a host space for an 'ecology of expertise' in which foreign knowledge professionals take first rank over

4 See the 2002 speech by Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew quoted in Sidhu (2005, 187). For Singapore's postcolonial rhetoric of survivalism, see Devan and Heng (1991).

5 For an account of the financialization of the US economy in the 1970s from the perspective of policymakers, see Krippner (2011).

native born (Ong 2005, 346). In this context, how is state policy to encourage a new breed of citizen-subjects who will be both more 'connected to the world' yet still committed to 'our best home' (Olds and Thrift 2004, 110)? Meanwhile, the internal contradictoriness of the notion of a 'managed flexibility' extends to the puzzle of how much autonomy the state should grant foreign corporations to operate according to their own rules within Singapore space. In the case of foreign *universities*, whose presence Singapore first began courting in the areas of science and business so as to replicate the 'synergy' of Silicon Valley-area students and entrepreneurs, the rub was whether Singapore's limits on freedom of expression would collide with the academic freedom required for a robust culture of research. Singapore's quest to promote more intellectual property creation, which required the loosening of restrictions around what could be said in scholarly journals and within academic spaces, resulted to an extent in the stretching of the institutional norms and architecture of elite western universities into Singapore space. Still, to operate in Singapore, these institutions had to accept some limits on expression – specifically, speech that might be deemed racially or religiously incendiary, insulting to other countries, or to interfere in local politics (Olds and Thrift 2004, 203). While these imposed limits were considered acceptable because largely irrelevant (or at least thought to be) to the business schools that were the first to establish a foreign university presence in Singapore, they remain more manifestly problematic for the *professed* mission of arts and liberal arts institutions that have subsequently been invited to operate there. Given the fact that these educational spaces operate in a situation of 'bounded creativity' because of government censorship of the public sphere, observers have questioned whether it is possible for Singapore to ever attain the cultural/creative 'quotient' to rival New York, London or Paris (Ooi 2010).[6]

6 On the lack of demonstrable changes to well-entrenched modes of teaching and learning resulting from post-1997 reforms introduced at the primary and secondary school levels to foster creativity and innovation, see Tan (2004, 193).

Whether actually successful or not, educational reforms introduced since the late 1990s reflect an important shift in the ideal citizen-subject who is the object of government planning. In the wake of the 1980s attempt to promote religious education (including Confucianism) in the school curriculum that had the unintended effect of heightening tensions along ethno-religious lines rather than binding Singaporeans together as Asians, no new humanistic programme can be said to have posed itself as a potential alternative cultural means of resolving the contradiction between local belonging and global aspiration until the proposal to experiment with US-style liberal arts education. Meanwhile, within the United States itself, the waning prestige of state-welfarist modes of containing the tension between citizenship and market reason even more describes today's dominant political common sense as compared to the 1980s. Thus, among the conditions of possibility for Singapore's introduction of US-style liberal arts education is the fact that 'Americanness' now appears more one-sidedly than ever before to be associated with entrepreneurial man rather than the rights of man.

Occasioned by Singapore's investment in education for the sake of encouraging 'technopreneurial citizenship' (Ong 2005, 343–346), the Yale–NUS case prompts us to ask what might be the present-day relationship – including the fit and friction – between the 'liberal' in 'liberal arts' and the 'liberal' in 'neoliberalism'. The college highlights adaptability as one of its prime educational goals: according to its president, Pericles Lewis, 'a Yale–NUS education will create leaders who can adapt to diverse and challenging environments and who are well-placed to embrace the uncertainties of our future as active citizens of the world' (Lewis 2014, 5). If at the level of marketing rhetoric this description may hardly distinguish Yale-NUS from many another liberal arts college today, Yale-NUS's recent vintage means that as an educational mission statement this description is more likely to have been operational to the college's ground-up design. If 'liberal arts for Asians' turns out to mean education for global adaptability – a term that implies both adaptability to a world understood to be in a state of constant change and a thoroughgoing adaptability within one's person – what concrete forms does this take at Yale-NUS College?

Teaching at Yale-NUS: A Report

In the drama of academic freedom at Yale-NUS as staged in the global media, there has come to be something of a moral impasse between the two main protagonists, the Singapore government (as a spokesperson for postcolonial difference) and Yale (as an avatar of universal rights and freedoms). What happens if we attend to the experience of a third agent, the faculty at Yale-NUS? Placing them at the centre of the story of the practice of liberal arts in Singapore shifts our focus from episodes of state interference into academic activity to the prior question of what the university, in the process of being reinvented as a global institution, is now thought to be for.[7] Whereas a normative liberal perspective might frame the task of the Yale-NUS educator as one of assisting the student's liberation from political censorship (whether subtly internalized or crudely imposed from above), the actual experience of teaching at Yale-NUS suggests it is the tension between liberal and neoliberal educational values that presents more of a day-to-day challenge – and perhaps particularly so for literature-trained faculty. In the rest of this essay we provide two narrative accounts of how this might be so, one involving the experience of curricular development and the other of teaching.

7 Neoliberal 'structural adjustments' to public higher education in the United States and Britain, accelerated since the 2008 financial crisis, have made this a pressing question. See Collini (2012).

1 World Literature in the Age of Asia Rising

Even if those at Yale University might have expected a certain degree of deference from their Singapore partners, who were, after all, paying for their expertise, the collaborative task of designing a new liberal arts college in

Asia was never taken for granted as a matter of simply exporting existing US models to a non-US context. On the account of key Singaporean negotiators, the decision to partner with Yale was influenced by the fact that Yale exhibited more interest in treating NUS as a equal partner in the design process than another US liberal arts institution they'd previously considered.[8] Part of the unpredictability of the projected curriculum was that there would be multiple agents involved in its creation, and among them the inaugural faculty – recruited almost entirely from North American universities where they had received their graduate training or held previous teaching positions – were an important factor.

According to the college's prospectus documents, the mission was to 'develop a novel curriculum spanning Western and Asian cultures, exploring their similarities and differences, and better preparing students for lifelong learning in an interconnected, interdependent global environment' (Levin and Salovey 2010).[9] While the Singaporean decision-makers were obviously swayed by statistics showing the career success of US liberal arts college graduates, Yale-NUS's target population dictated that the content of its liberal arts curriculum be contextually appropriate and adapted accordingly. As noted by NUS President Tan Chorh Chuan, whose conversation with then-Yale President Richard Levin at the World Economic Forum in Davos is part of the origin story of the collaboration, top US liberal arts programmes are impressive in quality, but 'in a world which is globalizing rapidly, where Asia is growing rapidly … we needed graduates and leaders who would view the world through a much more multidimensional, multicentric perspective, with an understanding of the ideas and contexts of the West and the East' (Tan interview). Whether representing a more affordable alternative to Singaporeans who might otherwise have gone overseas for study or an education more worldly than its equivalent in the United States and therefore attractive to forward-looking non-Singaporeans, the college was conceived as offering a US-style, broad-based education that would be both cosmopolitan and regionally embedded. With regard to Singaporeans – whom the government (which was funding the college with public money) expected to constitute a floating majority of the college body – the local presence of a liberal arts option might present the additional benefit of alleviating the risks of brain drain that arose whenever Singaporeans went abroad.[10] The centrality of 'East meets West' thematics to the college's founding conceptualization thus represented more than a ritual echo of Singapore's postcolonial rhetoric of the comparative economic advantages of the island's entrepôt identity. Given the college's promise of equipping its graduates for success in a global, increasingly Asia-centred world economy, a culturally syncretic curriculum bore a special burden in providing the kind of cosmopolitan exposure that Singaporeans might have otherwise gained from studying abroad.

Singapore's 'ability to bridge East and West' (*Report* 2008, 25). 10 Of the inaugural class, 62 per cent (97 members) are Singaporean. The rest are from North America (13 students), Asia, Australia and New Zealand (32 students), and Europe and Africa (11 students) (Lewis 2014, 10).

11 This seemed to be agreed upon by all members of the literature/humanities inaugural group, whom we interviewed in the spring and summer of 2013. Besides Petrus Liu, the group consisted of Claudine Ang, Rebecca Gould, Derek Heng, Andrew Hui, Rajeev Patke and Mira Seo.

12 For how the literature/humanities core course at Yale-NUS presented an opportunity to 'diversify the canon for a global age' from the perspective of one

Before moving to Singapore, the inaugural faculty spent a full year working on curriculum development and pedagogy training in New Haven, with input from the Yale Consultative Group, academic colleagues, corporate consultants and educational experts. Training workshops emphasized instruction in 'liberal arts pedagogic techniques' such as experiential learning, continuous assessment, scaffolding, low-stake writing exercises, ungraded assignments, metacognition, team-based learning, portfolio writing, capstone projects, the promotion of a student-centred classroom, the encouragement of independent thinking, student–faculty collaborative research projects, mentoring and the like. It was decided that Yale-NUS College could offer the most distinct alternative within an educational ecosystem traditionally built on pre-tracking by offering a common curriculum that would be required of all students in their first two years. As compared to other 'common curriculum' programmes in the United States, Yale-NUS's would be distinguished by team-taught, multidisciplinary core courses. For example, the teaching and design team of 'modern social thought' included an anthropologist, a literature scholar, an urban geographer, a historian of science, a feminist political philosopher and a sociologist. 'Great works: literature and humanities' was to be the product of a collaboration between a modern art historian, an ancient archaeologist, a musicologist, an art practitioner, a creative writer, a classicist, and comparative literature scholars. And so on.

The remit to create a collaborative, integrated and multidisciplinary curriculum presented unique challenges for each of the faculty clusters. However, the 'literature and humanities' group was the most internally contentious and outwardly rebellious.[11] Whereas the literature/humanities faculty found little in the abstract to quarrel with the ethical and educational value of preparing students for 'lifelong learning in an interconnected, interdependent global environment', they struggled with how to develop a 'curriculum spanning Western and Asian cultures' that would not be guilty of gross cultural reductionism and essentialism. The literature/humanities faculty shared a universal skepticism about the very premises of a 'great works' approach – the notion that cultural literacy consists of an education in the 'masterpieces' of human civilization, even if such had been expanded beyond the 'West' to include Asia. The inaugural literature faculty were all comparative scholars of a sort who had been formally trained in comparative literature or classics departments, and were excited by the prospect of re-envisioning 'comparative literature in the age of globalization' (Saussy 2006).[12] Arising at a time of US disinvestment in the humanities, the creation of a liberal arts college that understood itself as being 'in Asia, for the world' presented the allure of a second life for the humanities in not only a displaced context but also on substantively new, more globally inclusive terms.[13]

From the beginning, and in part due to the linguistic competencies of the inaugural faculty group, Chinese literature was expected to loom large in

of its faculty practitioners, see Gould (2014).
13 The college's full motto is 'A community of learning / Founded by two great universities / In Asia, for the world' (Lewis 2013).

the curriculum. At the same time, the group worried about the equation of Asian culture with Chinese culture (and to some extent also Indian culture, whose presence on the syllabus was also assumed), and wondered about the extent to which China's contemporary economic power was driving assumptions of Chinese civilizational importance. Given Singapore's demographic makeup as a Chinese-majority state in Southeast Asia, the literature/humanities faculty were also conscious of the dangers of reinforcing Chinese cultural chauvinism at the expense of Singapore's multiracial reality. Interestingly, with the practical and ethical obsolescence of Eurocentric perspectives – a *de facto* house doctrine – the challenge of avoiding Sinocentrism instead became the faculty's preoccupying concern.

In the end a compromise was reached with a syllabus that featured some predictable 'great works' but approached them by emphasizing the invented-ness of tradition. The course began with the Indic epic *Ramayana* to set up a comparative framework for reading Homer's *Odyssey* and the Chinese *Book of Songs*. In the second half of the course the Chinese vernacular novel *Journey to the West* was presented alongside *Hamlet* and *Don Quixote* as narratives in quest of the self in the early modern period. Several 'minor' texts that are not typically taught in 'great works' courses also made the final cut: Manuel Godinho de Eredia's *Description of Malacca, Meridional India and Cathay* (a seventeenth-century historiographic text written in Portuguese), Armijn Pane's *Belenggu: Shackles* (a modern Indonesian novel), Jami's *Yusuf and Zulaikha* (a fifteenth-century Persian narrative based on the Quran), and the supplementary *Sejarah Melayu* (*Malay Annals*) (a Malay-language historiographic text composed between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries). Placed alongside the 'great works' of East and West from Homer to Lu Xun, the presence of these 'minor' works on the syllabus reflected an indirect address to Singapore's Southeast Asian context of religious multiplicity. The selection of Jami's Quranic story was a nod to the existence of Muslim minorities in Singapore and the surrounding Islamic environments of Malaysia and Indonesia. Major works such as Augustine's *Confessions* and Wu Cheng'en's *Journey to the West* (a sixteenth-century Chinese vernacular novel about a Buddhist monk's pilgrimage to India) were chosen over other candidates partly for their capacity to represent religious diversity.

In sum, the literature/humanities faculty's role in the curricular design process might be described as resistant to a cosmopolitanism suspected of reflecting contemporary global economic dominants. While the long-term societal effect of the literature/humanities syllabus's pluralizing gestures can hardly be predicted at this stage,[14] it is worth entertaining what it might mean for this course to be taught in a space where formal equality is *not* the reigning political fiction that it is in the North American context from which the faculty had acquired their multicultural academic values (cf.

14 As of this writing, the college has enrolled only two student cohorts.

Guillory 1995). At the very least, reframing the question of the liberal arts' relationship to democracy in terms of a historicized comparison of the differential limits and functions of a syllabus's imaginary representation of real political relations in Singapore and the United States would constitute a good starting point for displacing a normative approach to the topic.

2 Emerging Cultures of Self-Entrepreneurship

If Sinocentrism was an abstract representational concern for the literature/humanities faculty during the course design phase of the common curriculum, the experience of teaching an elective course on the subject of 'modern Chinese film and literature' (MCLF) turned out to be highly revealing of the contemporary, lived form it takes among the college's Southeast Asian students. The following account is drawn from a Fall 2014 course taught by one of this essay's authors, a literature/humanities faculty member at Yale-NUS.

The MCLF elective attracted an exclusively 'Asian' class: sixteen heritage speakers who were more or less fluent in Chinese, one Indonesian Chinese, and one Vietnamese student. MCLF sought to impart a critical sense of the historicity of the self – how the terms of one's existence, which may at times appear to be something one owns or authors, are radically dependent on an ensemble of social relations that only a historicist approach to the artefacts of culture can unveil. Course readings were chosen with the aim of questioning a unitary notion of Chinese identity, and thus privileged writings from the 1980s 'root-seeking' literary movement (e.g. Ah Cheng, Han Shaogong) that explored a multitude of regional – especially non-Han Chinese – myths and symbols, as well as texts by Hong Kong and Taiwan authors (e.g. Jin Yong, Chu T'ien-wen) who expanded the meanings of Chineseness from diasporic perspectives. Masculinist and heteronormative senses of history were defamiliarized by the inclusion of historical fiction by Zhang Ailing and Wang Anyi about 1930s and 1940s China that centred on domesticity and the everyday rather than war and revolution, and a postmodern Taiwanese novel by Chu T'ien-wen about the lives of gay men during the AIDS emergency. A centrepiece of the course was a class field trip to Beijing and Shanghai, where students met and interviewed contemporary Chinese writers, filmmakers and critics. It was hoped that students' immersion in complex literary texts before and after their brush with 'experiential learning' would heighten their perception of the contradictory unevenness of the China they encountered and raise consciousness of minority difference.

Although the vast majority of the enrolled were heritage speakers, only one had previously been to China. On information questionnaires filled out at the start of the semester, many explained that their primary motivation for taking the course was to 'get to know their cultural roots better'. Reporting on the experience of the trip, many were thus surprised to be treated as foreigners

in a context where their clothing, accents or manners immediately marked them as outsiders despite their advanced language skills. Nonetheless, the lack of *cultural affinity* did not prevent the students from *cross-identifying* with China in narrowly ideological ways – exemplified by what they took away from their compulsory attendance of the Beijing Queer Film Festival.

An underground event held inside the Dutch embassy, the Beijing Queer Film Festival was a scheduled course activity intended to give students a taste of the uncensored texture of contemporary life in China. A few students were made visibly uncomfortable by the event and complained about the course's 'overfocus on gender', while at the other end of the spectrum a few others seemed to be especially moved by the artistic perseverance of the queer filmmakers. In fact the majority of students took a generally positive attitude to the event, but tended to assimilate it as corroborating evidence of the Promethean possibilities for shaping one's identity in postsocialist China. The heroism of queer survival became analogized in the students' minds to architectural monuments of 'Asia on the rise' such as the Water Cube and the Bird's Nest built for the 2008 Beijing Olympics or the Oriental Pearl Tower in Shanghai, which were compared to Singapore's glittering Marina Bay Sands casino hotel. Student post-trip reflection projects gravitated almost entirely to two themes: observations of how much and how fast China was changing, and reflections on how the author's own identity had changed as a result of the encounter. The continuity between these two themes suggests that Sinitic identification may have mutated into a celebratory discourse of boundless self-entrepreneurship. Insofar as Sinitic identification may no longer rest on the essentialization of cultural tradition (as it did during Singapore's promotion of Confucianism in the 1980s), it is not so easily dislodged through the usual representational recourse of opening the canon.

Student views of the contemporary 'Chinese' or 'Singaporean' self were also to be seen in their responses to the course's pedagogical experiments. For their post-trip assignments, all but one of the eighteen students chose to do a creative project, which they later presented at a symposium attended by the larger Yale-NUS community. The final products were an impressive array of works that included video essays, documentaries, original screenplays, short stories, poetry, a fictional magazine, and even handicrafts that reflected on the course materials in surprising and imaginative ways. While the course was successful in eliciting creative responses from Yale-NUS students, it was less clearly successful in teaching what we might traditionally think of as critical thinking.

In an effort to implement the 'liberal arts pedagogic techniques' that had been emphasized in the New Haven training workshops, MCLF was designed with an eye towards promoting self-directed study, multidisciplinary dialogue and 'experiential learning across boundaries'. Yet final course evaluations reflected a large degree of student dissatisfaction with the course's 'student-centred' classroom. Students wanted less time allocated to peer presentations,

fewer classroom activities without immediately observable takeaways, and fewer lectures that deviated from Powerpoint slides. They wanted more professorial framing of texts before being asked to exchange views with their peers. As a criticism voiced by students who were highly self-directed when it came to creative self-expression, the desire for greater structure and guidance when it came to the practice of literary analysis suggests that *expectations* of creative license and critical independence do not necessarily go hand in hand. It is not surprising that talented creative writers should have difficulty composing strong analytical papers, which was as true of this group as of any North American class. What was perturbing was just how many students considered the analytical paper an archaic exercise that might inhibit their growth as independent thinkers.

The pedagogic experience of MCLF suggests that much of the faculty discussion during the incubation phase about the 'disruptive' value of a 'liberal' education model that encouraged self-expression – for example, by replacing the traditional expository essay with blogging and other low-stake writing exercises – may have been misplaced. Contrary to stereotypes of Asian (and perhaps especially Singaporean) students as unthinking, rule-abiding robots manufactured by an exam-based meritocracy, these students evinced an enthusiasm for self-expression of a piece with US millennials raised in the Internet age. At Yale-NUS college as a whole, the number of humanities majors lags behind the number in the life sciences, economics, global affairs and PPE (politics, philosophy and economics, which is modelled on a similar program at Oxford), not to mention double-degree professional programmes. And within the humanities division at Yale-NUS, the 'arts and humanities' major (which encompasses a studio component in dance, theatre, art and music) has a substantially larger following than the other three humanities majors of literature, philosophy and history. Why might this be?

It is important to bear in mind that Yale-NUS students are a self-selected group of individuals who have been sold on a liberal arts education not *despite* New Economy discourse but *because* of it. Certainly, as represented in the college's official literature, those who have chosen to attend the new liberal arts college over other local options – especially the inaugural cohort who made the decision to enroll in a start-up institution and bank their future on a mere vision – are in a sense already risk-takers. In its selection process, the college advertises the use of a holistic admissions method in which exam scores are only one of the performance metrics used in order to recruit a class of innovative personalities.[15] Measured in terms of entrepreneurial track records, the students are extraordinarily accomplished: before even being admitted as college freshmen, one student had invented a face-recognition software, another had published a novel with Harper Collins, another had founded an NGO, and another had written and directed a

play. These signs indicate that Singapore leaders' hope to promote domestic 'creative industries' through the establishment of a liberal arts college may have a good chance of panning out. But whether nurturing precocious and creative minds through 'liberal arts practice' will lead to a diversification of political viewpoints, including those critical of global capitalism, is a different question – and one that is relevant as much to the future of US higher education as to Singapore's.

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