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“A Singapore Ramayana: Academic Freedom and the Liberal Arts Curriculum”

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A Singapore Ramayana: academic freedom and the liberal arts curriculum


Could Singaporeans of the future do a better job at making democracy a reality than America’s elected leaders have done for the past half-century? Maybe, if one of the most important literary works of premodern India is taught again at the recently created Yale-NUS in Singapore.

In August of this year, I was seated in a reception hall in the National University of Singapore (NUS), listening to Pratap Mehta, an influential voice in Indian higher education, reflect on the successes and failures of the recent endeavors in the subcontinent to promote the liberal arts at the undergraduate level. At dinner the evening before I had mentioned to the speaker that the humanities faculty at Yale-NUS had decided to teach the Indian epic known as the Rāmāyaṇa as the inaugural text in our Literature Humanities core curriculum.

Yale-NUS is a new liberal arts college in Singapore, created by the two institutions that bear its name. It is scheduled to convene its first class of students in August 2013. In August of 2012, the humanities faculty had just embarked on the work of planning the college’s core curriculum. During his presentation to the college community, Mehta noted that the Rāmāyaṇa, one of the most important texts of premodern India, is missing from general education curriculums in Indian institutions of higher education. Even when the text is taught, it is largely as an expression of Hindu values rather than as a contribution to world literature.

Instead of being taught as a literary text, the epic is made to serve agendas promoting violence. The pattern began in 1992 with the destruction of Babri Masjid, a mosque constructed in 1527 by the first Mughal emperor (Babur), and currently regarded by Hindu fundamentalists as the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram, the epic’s protagonist. The initial violence leading to the destruction of the mosque was followed by riots in Gujarat and Mumbai that resulted in the deaths of many thousands of Muslims. Less violently if no less ideologically, the national discomfort with the Rāmāyaṇa as a literary text erupted in 2011, when Delhi University’s academic council voted to remove A. K. Ramanujan’s essay, “Three Hundred Rāmāyaṇas” (1991), from its undergraduate history curriculum.

While Ramanujan’s poetic reflection on the epic’s diverse legacies received the bulk of the negative
attention, those who advocated for its removal were really objecting to what Vinay Dharwadker has called “the actual history of the story of Rama in the world” [14]. The academic council’s vote exposed a nationalist discomfort with the many retellings of the Rāmāyaṇa story in Balinese, Bengali, Cambodian, Chinese, Gujarati, Javanese, Kannada, Kashmiri, Khotanese, Laotian, Malaysian, Marathi, Oriya, Prakrit, Sanskrit, Santali, Sinhalese, Tamil, Telugu, Thai, and Tibetan, each of which represents Ram differently, and less reverently, than in the modern Hindu imagination. The Rāmāyaṇa’s tumultuous life in contemporary India is a case study in how an epic that has inspired more retellings in more languages than any other work in world literature can be domesticated for narrowly nationalist and sectarian ends, and how institutions of higher education can be complicit in that process.

Mehta’s vision of institutions of undergraduate education as places where foundational texts that are underappreciated and misapprehended by their own cultures can be taught as works that speak to a global humanity crystalized for me the importance of the Yale-NUS initiative. His remark helped me to see how, in creating something very old, those of us involved in the creation of this college are also creating something new. Even though many of the works in the year-long Literature Humanities course we are currently designing have originated in forgotten times and places, these texts will teach students about ethics, love, passion, freedom, and the basic liberal arts imperative to follow one’s dreams.

While right-wing Indian politicians seek to purge the Rāmāyaṇa of its non-Hindu content, the Yale-NUS curriculum aims to highlight the text’s literary heterodoxy. More broadly, our curriculum suggests that most powerful literary texts call on readers to question normative distributions of power, including those governing the world today. Alongside the Rāmāyaṇa’s exposé of the paradoxes of kingship in an inconstant world, our literature curriculum examines Odysseus’ wanderings, Don Quixote’s quest to resurrect a dying civilization, Medea’s attack on women’s oppression, the inversions of gender and sexuality that drive a Persian retelling of the Biblical narrative of Joseph, the descent to madness in Lu Xun’s modernist short stories, and the double-edged critique of colonialism in Tayeb Salih’s A Season of Migration to the North.

Notwithstanding their diversity, these works from India, Africa, China, Afghanistan, and ancient Greece resonate across the boundaries of culture, language, nation, and religion that all too commonly divide literatures from each other.

The goal of the curriculum planning that the Literature Humanities committee has been engaged in since July of this year is not simply to revise the literary canon. At least as importantly, we want to revise the meaning of literature in students’ everyday lives. Beyond simply reading texts closely and passionately, we want students to live them, to read works originating in distant and unfamiliar places and which speak of value systems they have not yet encountered in the belief - shared by many of my colleagues - that such texts can transform some portion, if not the entirety, of our lives.

Are these goals too lofty to be realized? Will students be left in limbo, lacking marketable skills and direct paths to lucrative salaries after graduation? A recent correspondent helped me to answer these questions for myself. A student at a Singaporean junior college (the term assigned to pre-college institutions comparable to high schools in the United States) wrote me to ask what she had to do in order to read Dostoevsky in the original. She was worried that such a feat would not be possible, given the limited exposure to Russian available to her in Singapore’s institutions of higher education.

Notwithstanding its importance for literary history, Russian is not currently offered at Singapore’s most prestigious university, the National University of Singapore. Nor are copies of his novels available in the university’s library in their original language. The language of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy is not regarded as a strategic language on the order of English, Japanese, and Chinese, in all of which the state has invested its resources. But this student was not going to allow her reading options to be constrained by the state’s political priorities. Dostoevsky spoke to her of the meaning of existence, as he did to me when I first entered college and decided to major in Russian literature, without having the slightest idea of how this choice might translate into a career. For this young Singaporean student, Dostoevsky’s poetic power trumped the more pragmatic attractions of strategic languages.
Thankfully, Russian is no longer a language of empire. But even while its strategic value has plummeted, Dostoevsky still changes lives. This courage to think beyond the present and to work towards richer and more aesthetically diverse habits of mind are the values that a liberal arts education seeks to cultivate. For my young correspondent, Yale-NUS symbolized the kind of education she had dreamed of having, but which had remained out of reach to her in Singapore. Our core curriculum aims to make this kind of education - which places human values above cost-benefit analysis - available to students who otherwise may never have encountered it.

Given the potential long term impact of our mandate to reinvent the liberal arts in Asia on the way the humanities are taught at the undergraduate level throughout the world, it is surprising that the curricular planning work Yale-NUS faculty have been intensively engaged in for the past few months has received so little attention from media outlets eager to speculate on restrictions to academic freedom in Singapore. The Wall Street Journal [15], the New York Times [16], Time [17], Human Rights Watch [18], Amnesty International [19], and the Association of American University Professors [20] have all raised questions about the state of political life in Singapore. What none of these venues or organizations have paid attention to are the cultural norms that determine the shape of politics in more profound and lasting ways than programmatic statements. Education is the most important aspect of this cultural training, and this is why the bulk of my energies have been focused on creating a core curriculum that will advance academic freedom, in the broadest and richest possible sense of that term.

Far from wishing to sidestep the question of academic freedom in Singapore, I want to draw attention to complex conditions through which - if it is to make an historical difference - this ideal must be realized in the context of actual human lives. A public’s reading practices are an excellent measurement of the extent of that society’s democracy. An educated and informed populace, capable of patient reflection, courageous enough to think outside the status quo, and stimulated by critical empathy for people who do not resemble themselves, is the sine qua non of a robust civil society. By this standard, the much-vaunted North American public sphere appears sorely lacking. I want Singaporeans of the future to do a better job at making democracy a reality than America’s elected leaders have done for the past half-century. I want a Singaporean public sphere that does not labour under the curious divide that marks American political life between an occasionally activist and otherwise inconsequential leftist academia and a conservative and largely apathetic and unreflective majority. This is the task this Yale-NUS faculty member has set herself: to enrich and inspire Singaporean ways of thinking, in the hopes that some of this energy will radiate back to the United States. I personally believe that the most effective way of advancing academic freedom over the longue durée is through texts, ideas, and education rather than by monopolizing the national media’s five-minute attention span.

The compartmentalization of ethical values and practical politics has proven to be a major failing of American higher education, as well as a simulacrum of all that ails the American public sphere. In the United States, high-caliber research is abundant, but has little impact on society at large, which is frequently skeptical of the ultimate value of intellectual inquiry. As I noted when I argued last year against the enrollment craze [21] that is currently impoverishing US public education, the liberal arts are all too often regarded as the most expendable element in public university curriculums. A liberal arts curriculum recalibrated for the twenty-first century and compelled by its geographic location to engage a global world is well-positioned to move beyond this impasse.

Good readers make better human beings. They also make better thinkers, listeners, and leaders. Pace Dostoevsky, beauty will not save the world. But students who have learned to engage with humanistic knowledge will be well-prepared to craft a world less susceptible to the warmongering politics that has historically shaped public discourse in the world’s oldest democracies. If it fulfils its mission, the Yale-NUS initiative will advance the cause of academic freedom by delinking a global ideal from one particular geography. It may also help us realize a world where the Rāmāyaṇa can be taught in any language, anywhere.
Yale’s Singaporean adventure - a victory for the ideals of the republic? [25]

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Rebecca Gould is an Assistant Professor of Literature at Yale-NUS College. She is completing a book manuscript called The Poetics of Insurgency: Sufi Resistance in the Caucasus. Her work is available here: http://works.bepress.com/r_gould/ [27].

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