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Blurring Disciplines, Crossing Borders: Yale helps reimagine the liberal arts, with Asian influences

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Rajeev Patke, a specialist in modern British and American literature, teaches one of the Yale-NUS College's inaugural "Literature and Humanities" classes.

"I want you to be uncomfortable," Rajeev S. Patke told his "Literature and Humanities" students.

It was the second week of classes at Yale-NUS College, the new liberal-arts institution created jointly by Yale University and the National University of Singapore, and Mr. Patke's 15 students were wrestling with the Ramayana. The dense Indian epic was proving polarizing: Half the class considered Rama, the tale's hero, a sexist pig; the rest thought the critics were judging the work, which is thousands of years old, through 21st-century eyes.

Mr. Patke wanted to put the students on the spot, to have them defend their views. He set a chair in the center of the classroom. "Come," he said.

Anshuman Mohan, lanky, with dark curls, approached. "Why not be more uncomfortable?" he said with a shrug. He clambered atop the chair and began to compare Rama to Neo, protagonist of the sci-fi film *The Matrix*.

The scene in Mr. Patke's classroom is in many ways an apt metaphor for this fledgling, high-profile college,

controversial from its conception. Yale professors questioned whether the university should be operating in a country with a mixed record on civil and political liberties. Singaporeans wondered why their university, one of Asia's best, needed to import Western help.

The project is unabashedly ambitious. While a number of American institutions have operated overseas on something of a franchise model, replicating abroad, at least in part, their home campuses, Yale and NUS set themselves a different goal. They would establish an institution that is neither NUS nor Yale, not a research university but a liberal-arts college created for this place and time. They would reimagine an educational model largely unheard of in Asia and under siege in America. They would create a college, in the soaring words of its vision statement, "in Asia, for the world."

Now, with the start of its first classes in August, Yale-NUS is having its standing-on-the-chair moment. Will it wobble, even fall? Or will it make its case for a fresh take on the liberal arts, one that marries academic traditions and blurs disciplinary lines?

In a trickle, and then a flood, the students entered the hall for the morning's lecture. By 9 sharp, notebooks were open; on laptop screens, cursors blinked "Ready, ready."

The same might be said for Yale-NUS faculty members who spent the past year crafting the academic heart of this new college, the curriculum.

It was an intense and not always easy process, say those involved. Working in groups of seven to 10, they wrestled with what to teach and how to teach it. Humanities professors (the college has no departments) embarked on a Great Books club, reading through dozens of major works of poetry, literature, and history from around the world. The sciences faculty, from more than a half-dozen disciplines, sought to agree on an animating central theme.

At one point, Bryan Garsten, a political-science professor at Yale who led the Yale-NUS curriculum committee, asked the groups to draft three alternate syllabi for each core course, to avert early arguments about what material had to be included.

Prominent thinkers in the liberal arts, like Andrew Delbanco, director of American studies at Columbia University, spoke to the faculty. Professors took field trips to institutions that had made teaching innovations: the Claremont Colleges, Franklin W. Olin College of Engineering, even Coursera, the online-education provider.

The goal, says Charles D. Bailyn, dean of the faculty at Yale-NUS, wasn't to invent an entirely new pedagogy but to adopt and adapt the best ideas.

What the curriculum, quite purposely, does not look like is that of either of its parent institutions. Yale has no common set of courses that all students must take. At science-focused NUS, where early specialization is a legacy of its roots in British higher education, coursework in the major accounts for as much as 75 percent of degree programs.

By contrast, Yale-NUS students will earn only about a third of their credits in their majors; 12 of the 32 courses that each student completes over four years will be part of the core curriculum.

The morning's lecture was in one of the four courses students take this first semester. Called "Comparative Social Institutions," it grapples with questions like "Why does inequality matter?" and "What is power?" Today's topic: how society shapes individual thought and behavior.

Leading the talk were a pair of psychologists, George D. Bishop, whose work is on culture and health, and Christopher Asplund, a neuroscientist. Mr. Bishop told the students that Americans and Japanese respond differently to

the prompt, "I am ____." In experiments, he said, Americans have no trouble coming up with all manner of self-descriptions. But for Japanese subjects, the task is a difficult one, until it is made more specific, such as "At home, I am ____." That's because, he said, in Japan context matters; how you see yourself is in relation to the situation and to others. Not so in the West.

The 157 students, who come from 26 countries, nod in comprehension.

Not all Yale-NUS courses deal with issues of cultural difference as explicitly as Mr. Bishop's lecture. But learning about, and drawing connections between, the intellectual traditions of Asia and the West is meant to be baked into the curriculum.

The challenge is to do that thoughtfully and substantively, says J.

Mira Seo, who led the faculty group that shaped the literature-and-humanities core. Diversifying the dead-white-guy canon by, say, merely adding a token Chinese philosopher was insufficient, they knew.

For the humanities professors, that meant reading quite broadly—a scholar of the classics, Ms. Seo had never taught the Ramayana or *Don Quixote*. Both made it onto the first-semester syllabus—the Ramayana for its epic form, *Don Quixote* as the progenitor of the self-conscious novel—along with the *Odyssey*, the Chinese *Book of Songs*, Augustine's *Confessions*, and *Yusuf and Zulaikha*, a Persian love poem. But the group rejected Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, a postcolonial African novel that is a mainstay of many world-literature courses.

"We didn't want to put it on simply because it ticks boxes: African. Check. Islamic. Check," Ms. Seo says. "It's not interesting for us. It's derivative of Western form. It's just not a great book."

In his discussion seminar, Mr. Patke tried to help his students navigate the Ramayana's multilayered text, at once a story of revenge and a moral treatise.

To do that, Mr. Patke, whose specialty is modern British and American literature, pulled examples not from his own field but from recent lectures in other courses. (Faculty are encouraged to go to one another's lectures, even out of their disciplines, and, at least in these first weeks, many do.)

He brought up a point made the previous morning by Mr. Asplund and Mr. Bishop about individualist versus collectivist thought to suggest that culture might affect a reader's perceptions of the Ramayana. And he reached for an argument made by Jeremy Kua, a chemist who has been

leading the "Scientific Inquiry" course: It's important to understand historical context, whether of a text or a scientific theory.

We need to remember, Mr. Patke said of the students in his class, "We're an American, a Swede, and a bunch of Singaporeans reading a book written for ancient India."

Another element that planners wanted to ensure was in the curriculum: controversy.

One of the sharpest critiques of Yale-NUS has been from those who worry that Singapore's limited protections of free speech would undercut the very essence of a liberal-arts education. Those fears were stoked last summer when Pericles Lewis, the college's president, told a *Wall Street Journal* reporter that, in accordance with Singaporean law, students would not be permitted to hold political protests or form partisan political societies. (He has since said political debate on campus will be encouraged.)

Faculty members passed a statement calling free expression "a cornerstone of our institution." They wanted to be certain that subject matter described by Mr. Bailyn, the dean, as "fissile material" would be included in course content. "Part of the push for that came in fact directly from wanting to make sure that what we were saying about the freedom to deal with these issues really was going to come true," he says.

So when discussing behavioral genetics in his lecture, Mr. Bishop offered up, as an example, that biology might mark people as being homosexual from birth. (Homosexual behavior remains a criminal offense in Singapore, although there have been no convictions under the law in recent years.) "Religious conservatives don't like the idea" that you can be born gay, Mr. Bishop remarked, before moving on.

In Jay L. Garfield's "Philosophy and Political Thought" class, the debate was about the importance of order to a society, a central tenet for classical Chinese philosophers like Mozi, whom they were reading. The professor prodded: How far is too far in pursuit of order? What if every person was outfitted with a video camera—a deterrent to crime, yes, but at what cost to personal privacy?

Rio Hoe, a Singaporean student who speaks with a lawyer's precision, jumped in: China has a turbulent history of division and reunification, he noted. "It's part of the culture to desire order."

Others reached for personal experience to buttress their arguments. Ling Xi Min recently completed his mandatory military service in the Singaporean army. As a sergeant, he said, he found that strictly enforcing rules didn't work well.

Better to have a "shared vision" with the soldiers he commanded.

Yale-NUS planners had hoped for such free-flowing discussion. But until the start of classes, even some faculty members wondered whether liberal-arts education, with its emphasis on argument and broad inquiry, could work in a place with a much different approach to learning.

Singapore, like many of its Asian neighbors, has long prized a fairly narrow sort of education: specialized, rote, lecture-heavy, teacher-centric. Although Yale-NUS recruited globally, more than 60 percent of the 157 students are Singaporean; an additional 17 percent are from elsewhere in Asia. (About 10 percent are Americans.)

"I thought, 'Am I going to have to prepare 20 discussion questions to get us through each class?'" says Andrew M. Bailey, an assistant professor of humanities. That would be no small task—for every hour of lecture each week, students spend three more in small-group seminars.

It hasn't proved necessary, he says. "It's a nice discovery that you can really trust your students."

On another afternoon, Mr. Bishop, who taught at the National University of Singapore for more than two decades, was deep in conversation in a sunny nook near the Yale-NUS elevator lobby when he was suddenly interrupted by a student. She wanted to clarify a point from his earlier lecture.

"Well, that's never happened before," he said.

Still, for some students, Yale-NUS remains an adjustment. "A huge culture shock," says Daniel Chia Jun Weng, an animated and earnest student from neighboring Malaysia. "We're reading original texts, real books. Back in my old school, it was only textbooks."

The relationship between faculty members and students is much more informal, he adds. "I still call them 'professor,' even though they ask that we call them by their first name. It's about seniority, respect."

Yale-NUS administrators acknowledge that the inaugural class comprises students willing to take a chance on an untested institution. (It's also academically strong: The college received more than 11,400 applications and accepted just 4 percent, although the pool may have been somewhat inflated because applicants to Yale had the option to send applications free of charge to Yale-NUS, too.)

There are students like Nia Lambert, who taught herself Japanese and Korean back in Alpharetta, Ga., and Mr. Mohan, who stood on the chair to talk about Rama and

compares Yale-NUS to Google. "It's like being in the magic 200," he says of the company's first employees. "It's about being a pioneer."

An unanswered question is whom the college, which plans to eventually enroll about 1,000 students, will attract in one year, or in five. Yale-NUS intends to prove itself as the right model to prepare a new generation to succeed in an economy that increasingly values the innovative, the intellectually agile. And academically stellar but risk-averse students (and their parents) may buy into the notion of a liberal-arts education. But can they match the pioneering spirit of the inaugural class? Could Yale-NUS lose its start-up edge?

It's hardly the only unknown. Yale-NUS is like a promising novel with only the first few chapters polished.

It will be another year before the college will be able to move into its permanent facilities. For now it operates in temporary space on the NUS campus, in the shadow of construction for its future home. The faculty handbook and the tenure-and-promotion policies are still being hammered out. With about 50 faculty now on board, hiring is only half-complete.

The curriculum, too, remains a work in progress. Although the list of majors has been completed—including environmental studies; philosophy, politics, and economics; and urban affairs—the substance of each program and the courses it will include still must be fleshed out. In part, that's a deliberate decision, as needed faculty members are still being appointed. But both students and graduate schools are doubtless eager to know the substance of a Yale-NUS degree.

Even the core curriculum will come under review. The selected readings and themes may change from year to year, and the core is to undergo a substantive assessment in its third year.

Yale-NUS is also feeling out its relationship with its parents. Certain ties bind: About 25 Yale faculty members are expected to spend time in Singapore this academic year. Appointees from both institutions make up the governing board of the new college. And Yale-NUS degrees will actually be awarded by the National University of Singapore.

"We expect we'll become increasingly distinctive but, I think, remain very close to both of our parent institutions. Like any happy family," says Mr. Lewis, the Yale-NUS president.

Still, with adolescence come growing pains. Already at least one faculty member has left, objecting to the "paternalism" of Singaporean rules governing how professors must account for the research funds they spend. The professor, Keith A. Darden, says there was too much NUS, not enough Yale. The Singaporeans "had a hard time understanding that the liberal arts is more than the curriculum," says Mr. Darden. He is now at American University, in Washington.

For others, it's worth the continued effort. Derek Heng was teaching at Ohio State University when he accepted the offer to return to his native Singapore.

"I thought," says the associate professor of humanities, "I can stand at the sidelines and critique the whole project, or I can become involved."

A Liberal-Arts Experiment in Singapore: a Timeline

January 2009

Tan Chorh Chuan, president of the National University of Singapore, and Richard C. Levin, then president of Yale University, meet at the World Economic Forum, in Davos, Switzerland, and begin discussing the idea for a joint liberal-arts college. Over the next two years, Yale administrators and senior faculty members travel to Singapore and hammer out a deal.

March 2011

Plans to establish Yale-NUS College are announced.

February 2012 Yale-NUS begins accepting student applications. **April 2012**

The arts-and-sciences faculty of Yale College passes a resolution expressing "concern" about the new college and about Singapore's record on civil and political rights.

May 2012

Pericles Lewis, a professor of English and comparative literature at Yale, is named president of Yale-NUS. Other top administrators are also appointed.

June 2012

The first Yale-NUS faculty members are hired and begin work on the curriculum.

December 2012

The American Association of University Professors issues an open letter raising concerns about academic and personal freedoms at Yale-NUS and calls on Yale to release all documents related to the new institution.

July 2013

Yale-NUS College's first class, comprising 157 students, arrives for orientation.

August 2013

Classes begin.

January 2015

The permanent campus, in Singapore, is scheduled to open.