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**Thoughts from Overseas:  
American Literature and Southeastern Asian Politics  
By Dr. Shudong Chen**

Now it often seems to be quite “politically correct” or even fashionable overseas to dismiss anything American as “arrogant” and “ignorant.” Is it, however, also “intellectually correct” to do so -- without being equally “arrogant” and “ignorant”? Despite its unpopular foreign policies, America, nonetheless, is still the indispensable source of reference, especially for young nations, such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Brunei, on many issues, such as the ones regarding



Shudong Chen with the Director of the National Museum of Brunei

modernity, multiculturalism, and nation-building, particularly in terms of such fundamentals as choice of national language and cultivation of national literature that embodies *and* enlivens national spirit, aspiration, and worldview. My recent trip in three southeastern Asian nations: Singapore, Malaysia, and Brunei, was, indeed, very much like a great journey through the rich *text* of American literature. It is American literature that helps me better understand all these exciting but also often quite mind-boggling multicultural societies *behind*, *beneath*, and *besides* all their much talked about, wonder-making economic growth towards modernization.

First of all, America history, particularly its literary history, does help me to see *how* crucial it really is to balance economic development with a long term plan for national literary creation and education indispensable for these multicultural societies to continue prospering with a gradual but fully cultivated, consistent, coherent national/cultural identity, a live sense of *togetherness* not simply of being jumbled together, a colonial legacy. Economic growth thus should not be prized at the expense of such a long-term plan. Like America, once so bent on its utilitarian principles, single-mindedly pursuing wealth and prosperity, that it even initially rejected the Statue of Liberty, a great gift from France, on the ground of being too costly to install it, Singapore, Malaysia, and Brunei are, now, more or less on the same track. “Growth, growth, growth, and growth [nothing else or at any costs]!” The very mood, mode, and momentum for economic growth is perhaps truly expressed with this simple slogan from Mahatir, the former prime minister of Malaysia, the architect of Malaysia’s miracle economic turnover, as well as various social problems, such as corruption and renewed ethnic and religious tensions among the Muslim Malays and other components of this multicultural society. Despite its economic growth, from *Malaya* to *Malaysia*, there is still a long, long way to go. But whether the journey or transition would ever be successful, it depends very much on whether and how a strong and coherent national and cultural identity can be cultivated and endeared to all the ethnic

groups, or ideally the “Malaysians,” through a certain well-balanced and implemented literacy and literature education.

With useful reference to what happened in America, we can clearly see how crucial such a balance for literacy and literature education really is for any young nation with a multiethnic background, simply because it is a crucial benchmark regarding how “mature” or independent the nation truly becomes. Don’t we still remember what Emerson tried to argue: that America would never be truly independent if it still had to depend on the old Europe for its own literary expression and artistic voice and vision? But such a balance is yet to be realized in these nations, at least in terms of what I have observed. Wherever I went, I often asked questions about the literary and artistic developments, especially when economy, plus social and political infrastructures, became such an over-dominant subject that seemed to define Singapore, Malaysia, and Brunei *per se*. When I asked our well-informed, prominent speakers to mention one or two novelists or poets of national status *beloved* to people of all ethnic groups, it usually turned out to be a very difficult moment, for them. They knew more of Shakespeare or Milton, or some very local, ethnically specific literature, but *no* “national” authors. There is something apparently missing – a sense of *togetherness*, a coherent national consciousness and cultural

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identity consolidated in a significant body of national literature and art that confirms that any given nation has an inexhaustible well of wisdom, inspiration, a unique repertoire of national aspiration, voices, and vision. Such a body of literature is crucial to a true multicultural society to develop and mature because together without togetherness, like “a tray of sand,” does not last, as *sum*, as Rousseau suggests in *Social Contract* does not equals to *total*.

With useful reference to American history, we may also understand that this literature issue is also the language problem that confronts these young nations in terms of which language to adopt as a national language endeared to all ethnic groups. Yes, this is, indeed, a crucial question, which can be easily translated into “To speak Chinese, English, and/or Malay, this is great problem.” Like Americans, who finally decided to adopt English, the language of the enemy then, as its national language, instead of its initial favorites, i.e., Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, ones that best represented the New Republic’s cultural heritages and political aspirations, these three nations have similar problems with their choices of official language. To have adopted English as Singapore’s official language is, as some presenters argued, the wisest choice ever made by the former Premier Lee -- of course, from the point of view of economic growth. But it may not necessarily be the case from cultivating a national identity and pride and sense of togetherness. As the language of a former colonial master, English, while bringing people together on daily business, is not, nonetheless, a language of heart or of *daily business* in the most private sense. Instead, it has such a lofty or sublimely alienating impact on people. Catherine Lim, a noted Singaporean author of Chinese origin and political activist, originally

from Malaysia, literarily told us how hard it was initially for her even to imagine writing about her “fussy Chinese” stories in English, such a lofty language of Shakespeare, Milton, and Jane Austen. But, however much Lim may have overcome her initial awe and successfully found her own voice and vision in the master/ed tongue, whether English would eventually become a language of heart or emotion for *all* Singaporeans, which is a great *must* for a genuine national language to *be*, is still a big question. Regretting or lamenting, Malaysia, meanwhile, is still debating and exploring the possibility, as well as the necessity, to bring back English as the national language, to make itself as much linguistically *accessible* and *available* both domestically and internationally for the obvious financial and economic advantages that Singapore, its chief rival and former “Malaysian,” has been enjoying so much as one of the English-speaking modern nation-states. It is also because English is literally the de facto national language, no matter how Malay remains as the official one, which is, on the other hand, not the tongue of heart for many ethnic groups other than Malays.

What is even more significant with regard to my understanding of the very importance of literature, particularly American literature, especially in terms of my very focal research interest for the trip – multiculturalism as a critical response to modernity. If modernity could ever be so defined in terms of my own observation as well as that of Toulmin and his teacher, Wittgenstein, American literature could help even more. So what is modernity? For me, democratic capitalism, globalization, modernization, westernization, Americanization, Islamic nationalism and revolutions are inevitable responses, both positive and negative, to modernity. They are all, in other words, observable or manifested impacts of modernity, which is, simply put, an overarching ideology, discourse, mindset that is obsessed with scientific models and standardization for clarity, purity, originality, efficiency, transparency, and therefore controllability, and it has no tolerance for ambiguity and paradoxes. It is such a kind of mindset that prevails, as Stephen E. Toulmin describes in *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, often at the expenses of healthy doses of humanism, skepticism and tolerance through ideological indoctrination, abstraction, absolutism, action of intolerance, and even violence. To create such a discourse of modernity that stresses rationalization or systemization for maximum efficiency and controllability, as Toulmin analogizes, it is quite deplorable for us to have simplified “Montaigne” into “Descartes,” reduced “Leviathan” into “Lilliput,” transformed “reasonable” into “rationale,” turned “ideas” into “ideology,” and, for me, sacrificed understanding for knowledge, made Hindus for Hinduism, the co-existing cultures for multiculturalism .... Wittgenstein probably makes the concept clearer when he argues in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* that “the whole modern conception of the world is founded on the illusion that the so-called laws of nature are the explanations of natural phenomena. Thus people today stop at the laws of nature, treating them as something inviolable, just as God and Fate were treated in past ages. And in fact both are right and both wrong: though the view of the ancients is clearer in so

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far as they have a clear and acknowledged terminus, while the modern system tries to make it look as if *everything* were explained.”

Now here is *Moby-Dick*, the great epic of American literature. But very much like the great epic of *Fauste* by Goethe, it does not simply paint a unique picture of American response to modernity in its quest of wealth, prosperity, world dominance, and conquest of nature but also a picture of global significance. So what is there in the great American epic that we can use for the purpose? (1) A multicultural and multinational quest for “successes,” as defined in terms of “modernity,” at the expense of nature or environment as symbolized, respectively, by the loft and aloof Whale, a crew of mixed ethnicity and nationality, and a monomaniac leader, Ahab, who knows that “my soul is mad and mind sane.” (2) An ironically misguided or misled pursuit that culminates as a collective mass suicide or common self-destruction through a monomaniac leader, like a religious zealot or maniac, a maddened mob, and the subdued and suppressed modest voices, visions, and warnings of conscience and reason personified by Starbuck, the chief mate of *Pequod*, who, however, has no other choice but to go along or get along within the overall poisoned or contagious atmosphere of madness. (3) The immeasurable costs on natural and human resources as a result of this ironically twisted epic and apocalyptically collective self-destruction. Thus, as a critical and creative response to modernity mediated by a American genius, such a piece of literature is not only crucial in the 19th century but also *immediately*

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*relevant* today with regard to what happens worldwide -- globalization, Westernization, Americanization ...and, of course, in these three countries as well. They are now all struggling with the issue of national identity and wealth with regard to their common drive to modernize themselves, often, quite ironically in the *model* or *influences* of the U.S., the lone super power, which they do not often see things eye-to-eye with. But how about its literature?

Thus, what has been going through in the U.S., as it is so vividly registered in *Moby-Dick*, should be an invaluable lesson or a serious warning not only to the Americans and but also the entire world community. How could *not* such a body of literature be the crucial well of wisdom for national and international education to cultivate “harmoniously developed personality” (Einstein) or “all-rounded humans” (Plato), not just to manufacture specialized “tools” (Confucius) or to breed “specially trained dog” (Einstein) so warns Einstein as

he emphasizes the necessity of teaching the Humanities? Therefore, suppose we indeed, in other words, want people to become critical as well as creative thinkers, responsive and responsible individuals, who are able to grasp the “ungraspable phantom of life” (Melville) in its broadest and yet most concrete and constructive ways – not someone who can see trees or even the veins of individual wood only to miss the magnificently *live* forest. We need such literature. The eventual success of a truly multicultural society in Singapore, Malaysia, and Brunei, for me, depends, indeed, not just on their economic strengths but on their yet-to-be-cultivated literary voices and visions.