Singapore Management University

Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

Asian Higher Education and the Politics of Identity

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By Lily Kong

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In the last four years, my involvement in university administration at the National University of Singapore (NUS) has prompted closer consideration of issues in higher education in a way that might not otherwise have been. What strikes me most pointedly is that, although the main issues that occupy the gatekeepers, managers, and administrators of Singapore's higher education seem manifold, they may fundamentally be reduced to one key interest, that is, a persistent concern to situate Singapore as an important centre of education and research in the world, or, to put it another way, an indefatigable reluctance to sit in the peripheries. This is evident in a number of ways.

A key effort in the last two to three years has been to capitalise on 'core competencies', identified through strategic planning exercises, so that the university may be positioned as a 'world-class' institution that keeps 'good company', collaborating and networking with other institutions of 'quality'. The aspiration, as identified by the country's political leaders, and repeated by university leaders at various levels, is to become the 'Harvard of the East'. For the other main university in Singapore, the Nanyang Technological University, a similar aspiration holds, to become the 'MIT of the East'. To do this, the universities have an International Academic Advisory Panel, and at NUS at least, faculties and departments have their International Advisory Panels to evaluate and advise on ways forward (not so much to judge as to evaluate and help develop, as those concerned are at pains to point out). Hiring policy emphasises, more than ever before, 'quality' candidates who can contribute to niche areas, with search committees (a recent phenomenon) looking 'worldwide', often in the 'West', for 'the best'. Within the university, benchmarking exercises are underway. Beyond the university, other forms of ranking have kicked in, not least of which is *Asiaweek*'s (1997) exercise of ranking universities in Asia and Australia, on the basis of various criteria, including academic reputation, resources, students per teacher, teachers with postgraduate degrees, and student selectivity.

Singapore is not singular in these concerns. Various Korean universities, too, have engaged in their own benchmarking exercises, mailing out questionnaires to other universities in the region for information to facilitate their comparative efforts. Numerous Japanese universities have invited international panels to evaluate their performance. Some Australian universities have strategically positioned their research to encourage more attention to Asia, part of a 'big Asia push', as one Australian academic put it. Britain has its Research Assessment Exercise (see Lyons and Orme, 1998, Sugden, 1997), and Hong Kong a close equivalent. Several US publications form part of an industry that measures universities against one another on various counts: undergraduate teaching, graduate training, and research (for example, see National Research Council's ranking of universities: http://www.nas.edu). From an overall perspective, Singapore and its Asian counterparts are relatively new kids on the block in this game.

Even as my administrative self encountered these issues and developments, as a researcher, I was engaging simultaneously with multiple theoretical developments and discourses in various areas. My specific interests as a social-cultural geographer predisposed me to engage with theoretical debates about the politics of identity (the constructions of boundaries and communities), the positioning and reinventing of self against 'Other', the processes of marginalisation and centring, postcolonialism and

neocolonialism. In many ways, these theoretical developments, and their more usual applications in contexts such as economy or race and racism, intersect with the ways in which NUS and various other Asian universities are positioning and, indeed reinventing, themselves in the larger contemporary academic world. Issues in contemporary higher education that these universities are grappling with are a microcosm of larger processes and debates in the social, economic, and political world.

The effort to situate NUS in the 'circuit' and to become a 'world class university' and 'Harvard of the East' is, I would argue, partly a reflection of the politics of identity at work, deriving from a marginal(ised) position that sometimes stems from a postcolonial condition. There is a reluctance to speak from the peripheries and there is a concerted effort to catapult out of a marginal(ised) position. Part of this is to be achieved through strategic moves to plug Singaporean academics into the networks of the 'centre'. This is done in various ways, through institutional and structural means, as well as at the level of the individual. One example of the former is a Senior Tutorship scheme in which young first-degree graduates are recruited to an academic career upon graduation. They are sent on full scholarship and salary to top universities, usually in the United Kingdom, United States, or Canada for graduate training before returning to Singapore to serve a bond for a certain length of time (usually five years). Part of the hope is that they will maintain ties with their alma mater, thus widening and strengthening the academic ties and networks. A high level of stringency is effected in the selection of institutions to which senior tutors are sent, not to mention a certain degree of snobbishness. In addition, institutional emphasis on increased use of improved technology has prompted NUS to encourage and facilitate such forms of networking and participation as teleconferencing. Staff are also provided with increasingly improving computer workstations, and options to plug into the world of cyberspace, including opportunities to join the myriad discussion lists that now exist, and to participate in cyberconferences, yet other ways of inserting oneself into the 'circuit'.

Yet, in many ways, such attempts fall short. Although Singapore is fortunate in that funding for research and education has been generous, not all Asian universities have comparable resources for staff development and access to technology. However, even where financial and technological barriers are not a major issue, the question remains as to who actually participates in discussion lists, for example. This is an issue of psychological and ideological barriers. When the discussion list called 'critical geography forum' called for disclosures, for example, there was an amazing lack of representation from non-Western universities. Contributions to the list similarly reflect that bias. Furthermore, the 'geogossip' that Passmore (1998) talks about is so often crucial to the forging of ties and the making of reputations and eludes those not physically in the 'centre'. As he points out, being frequently involved in conferences, exchanging views along corridors, in the coffee room or pubs, or at conference bars "can all hold an almost unrecognisable power in putting in place the opinions and fragments of peoples' lives that go towards making reputations" (page 1334). Who gets invited to conferences, to contribute chapters to books, and even to publish in journals, is often closely tied to whether one is remembered and what kind of reputation one has. Being 'out of the loop' (often old-boy networks) out 'East' or 'South' makes it that much more difficult. In that sense, even with institutional positioning to facilitate the demarginalisation of non-Western-based academics, it is not immediately easy for 'the empire' to 'write back'.

It is not impossible, though, but the move towards demarginalisation may have little to do with deliberate institutional efforts. One key project in contemporary social science centres on self-reflexive ethnographies, particularly within feminist anthropology and development studies, which acknowledge that social science concepts and analytic

categories such as gender, race, and class must not be treated as substantive categories nor a priori theory, but should instead be a matter for historical and place-specific analysis (for example, see Bordo, 1990; DiStefano, 1990; Williams, 1977, pages 80 – 81). At the same time, there have been renewed arguments about the lack of relevance for Third World countries of research agendas and theoretical ideas originating in Western social science (Alatas, 1995) and the acknowledgement of the ethnocentricity of Western concepts. Furthermore, debates within postmodernism about 'the positional rather than absolute status of meaning' have challenged the fixity of conceptual notions developed within Western social science. This is further emphasised in poststructuralist thought (for example, in the works of Foucault and Lyotard) and feminist appropriations of deconstructionism (recognising interpretive multiplicity and indeterminacy of cultural meaning) (Chan and Kong, 1996). These multiple questionings have contributed to calls for and attempts at developing an autonomous social science tradition rooted in Third World contexts, sometimes termed an effort at indigenising social science (Alatas, 1995). These efforts may be pursued at various levels: at the level of meta-analysis where worldviews and philosophical foundations underlying works in the arts and human sciences are unmasked; at the theoretical level, where received theories and concepts are critically evaluated and indigenous ones are generated from local historical experiences and cultural practices; and at the empirical level, where the focus is on problems more relevant to the Third World which have hitherto been neglected (Alatas, 1995, pages 133 – 135). Such an 'indigenisation' project which situates local work and perspectives at the 'centre' (without necessarily 'decentring' the work in Western social science) may negate the marginal position of academics and academic contributions from the non-Western world.

Some of the above may in fact be facilitated by efforts in the Western world, grounded in values that promote affirmative action. In the same way that women and nonwhites, for example, are to be afforded equal opportunities in many universities in the United Kingdom and United States, attention is slowly also being turned to academics from the non-Western world: perhaps a form of affirmative action that extends beyond UK and US boundaries, for example. This may take the form of inclusion of academics from non-Western institutions in activities of the 'centre', through their participation in journal editorial boards and advisory boards, for example. This is a reversal of long-time trends in which journals published in the non-Western world have long lists of 'advisors' and international board members from the West, often as a way of 'legitimising' their efforts. This more recent reversal is unlikely to be a massive turn-around, nor should it be, but whether it is a form of tokenism remains to be seen.

Some of the issues in this short commentary on contemporary higher education concerns in Singapore, in particular, and Asia, in general, may be situated within larger theoretical debates which engage geographers and other social scientists: debates about identity formation, and the politics of identity negotiation and reinvention. Clearly, in some ways, a colonial mentality persists in former colonies, evident in employment policy, for example, which emphasises bringing the best from around the world, often interpreted as the best is West. Yet, at the same time, there is a desire to be located in the centre as well and a reluctance to remain in the peripheries. Asian higher education and all the concerns confronting university administrators and managers reflect larger issues about the place of Asia in the world today and into the 21st century.

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