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American Studies in Singapore

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Is a "Pacific turn" imminent or in progress in American studies? Inasmuch as the Pacific serves as a site both *of* and *for* scholarship, the question might be interpreted in one of two ways. First, has the international community of American studies scholars shifted in its approach to the Pacific? And second, have conditions evolved for American studies scholarship conducted *in* the Pacific? Together, the two questions speak at once to the globalization of American studies scholarship in the wake of the transnational turn, and to the persistence and growth outside the boundaries of the US of the "new intellectual regionalisms" in American studies that John Carlos Rowe has identified within it.[1] From my brief and localized perspective – two years working in Singapore as a cultural historian of the US – I will address the second question – how has American studies been resituated in Singapore – hoping to shed incidental light on the first.

The question of the situation of American studies in the Pacific is at once belated and timely. Since the end of the Cold War, dozens of institutions throughout Asia, including the National University of Singapore (NUS), have established centers for American studies, often with the support of US-based funding agencies such as the Asia Foundation. Like the American studies programs established in Western Europe during the Cold War, many of the Asia-based programs, along with the cultural organizations, academic conferences, and study exchanges that preceded them, were initially established to promote a sympathetic and consensus-based understanding of the United States. Many subsequently evolved a more independent bearing. Even so, until recently there has been less interest in Asia than in Europe in critically examining the institutional history of American studies, including

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[1] John Carlos Rowe, "The New American Studies," in Donald E. Pease and Robyn Wiegman, edss., *The Futures of American Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 167–82, 175.

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its covert funding arrangements.[2] Singapore poses a regional exception in not having maintained an explicit American studies program. (One such program emerged shortly before the millenium but atrophied, as we will see.) Yet that situation seems to be changing, as scholarship on the United States becomes an active concern within the framework of Asian area studies and the culture of the city-state's new liberal-arts college, Yale-NUS.

Given Singapore's long history of close military and economic ties with the United States, it may appear puzzling that American studies did not exist as a formal option for study during the Cold War. Since achieving independence from British rule in 1965, the Southeast Asian island nation has suffered existential anxiety rooted in its small size, ethnic tensions, lack of natural resources, and minority status as a Chinese-majority nation located between two much larger Muslim nations, Malaysia and Indonesia. As Singapore's government suppressed domestic Communist activity in the 1960s and 1970s, the US was perceived as a natural partner. By the end of the Cold War, the United States had become Singapore's leading trade partner. In return, the US received diplomatic backing, military cooperation, and a position from which its corporations could take advantage of the developing markets.

Even so, cultural differences discouraged the establishment of a local American studies iniative. First, despite gaining its independence, and despite the steady growth of American faculty at Singaporean universities, the postcolony remained very much committed to the British system of education. In 1976, one National University of Singapore faculty member suggested that while American subjects had become an implicit part of the curriculum, there existed "concern among certain members of staff that they are being subjected to a kind of intellectual colonialism."[3]

Second, Singaporean leaders proved wary of American conceptions of political and cultural freedom. In the 1960s Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's long-time Prime Minister, and head of its ruling People's Action Party, pointed to student unrest and counterculture in the US as an example of Western decadence that Singapore could not tolerate. Long-haired male youth landing at Singapore's airport were obliged to cut their hair before receiving entry. Cultural differences over crime and punishment erupted into a major diplomatic issue in 1994, when an American teenager living in Singapore named

[2] Whereas scholars began decades ago to explore the CIA's role (via the Congress for Cultural Freedom) in laying the grounds for American studies in Europe, the Asia Foundation's activities are only now receiving substantial consideration. See, for instances, Peter Coleman, *The Liberal Conspiracy: The Congress for Cultural Freedom and the Struggle for the Mind of Postwar Europe* (New York: Free Press, Collier Macmillan, 1989).

[3] John Kwan-Terry, "American Studies in Singapore," *American Studies International*, 14, 3 (Spring 1976), 23–30, 29.

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Michael Fay was charged with committing vandalism. Fay was sentenced to four months in prison, a fine, and six strokes of a rattan cane, an enduring legacy of the colonial system. Unfortunately for all parties, the case became widely publicized in the United States amid its ongoing culture wars, provoking outrage from the American left and approval from the right. Singapore's government faced an unenviable choice between ignoring a crucial ally's demands for leniency and sacrificing the image of unbreachable sovereignty on which it believed its survival as a small nation depended. With its usual pragmatism, the government chose to deliver the lashings but reduce their number. Still, the damage was done. Many Singaporeans resented American interference in their legal processes, and many Americans, otherwise ignorant of Singapore, now associated with it what they perceived as a draconian legal code. The fallout contributed to the temporary displacement of the United States from its position as Singapore's leading trade partner.

It was amid this rare ebb in ties that Singapore's Ministry of Education, along with the United States Information Service and George Washington University, collaborated in establishing the American Studies Centre at the National University of Singapore in 1995. After an initial period of neglect, the program was infused with more resources in 1998 and enjoyed several years of growth, in spite of staffing shortages. An international MA program was established and a conference organized in 1999, attracting over fifty domestic and international scholars. In the 2000–1 year over eight hundred students enrolled in ASC courses.

Despite evident success, within just two years the center lost support and the undergraduate major and graduate program were disbanded. By 2003, only 170 NUS students were enrolled in designated American studies courses. Around 2001, NUS Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences was restructured, and the ASC eliminated. In a 2003 article chronicling the rise and fall of ASC, former center faculty member Joel Hodson noted rumors implicating China's rise: a "China" camp within the Ministry of Education prevailed over an "American" camp. As ASC was eliminated, Asian Studies was elevated from a subject of study to a division of knowledge within the Faculty of Arts & Sciences, placing it on par with the humanities and social sciences. At the same time, the American agencies supporting the ASC offered no further funding.[4] If this episode is indicative, the effect of China's position as a nascent superpower was not so much to eliminate study of the United

[4] Joel Hodson, "A Case for American Studies: The Michael Fay Affair, Singapore–US Relations, and American Studies in Singapore," *American Studies International*, 41, 3 (Oct. 2003), 4–31.

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States as to discourage its interdisciplinary development and subsume it within the rising field of Asian studies.

Given the centrality of promoting American culture as an expression of democratic freedom, it is perhaps unsurprising that no American studies program was established in Singapore until the Michael Fay crisis. Unlike in Western European democracies, where sympathetic governments funded American studies programs amid a background of popular anti-Americanism, Singapore's powerful ruling party saw little need to sell its populace on the alliance, or expose it to a decadent culture.

Exposure came nevertheless, through American GIs stationed in the region, the success of American brands in the city-state's thriving mall culture, and, more recently, the Internet. A study of Singaporean university students conducted a decade ago found high consumption of US entertainment media, which has since become only more prevalent with the expansion of American-based content-streaming services. The same study found, in contrast to research done elsewhere in the world, that greater exposure to American media correlated favorably with attitudes toward the US itself.[5] From the point of view of American interests, American culture has done at a popular level the work that American studies was originally designed to do among Cold War public intellectuals. What one sees today in the windows of local bookstores, where the United States is concerned, are grand narratives that predict and mostly celebrate an inevitable merger with the West (e.g. *The Great Convergence: Asia, the West, and the Logic of One World*, by Kishore Mahbubani, public policy dean at NUS) and biographies of American business leader such as Elon Musk.

"Perhaps the ASC at the National University of Singapore will be revived in the future the next time a major crisis occurs in Singaporean–US relations," Hodson concluded in 2003.[6] Since Hodson's article, there have been no serious complications in US–Singapore ties, nor has the ASC been revived. At a popular level there is little sign of the anxiety or fascination with the United States that attended the postwar development of American studies as a tool of American foreign policy. Two trends, however, have helped develop the study of the United States at Singaporean institutions: a significant expansion of Asian studies, and the introduction, or rather reintroduction, of American-style liberal-arts education.

Both trends stem from Singapore's ambition to reposition itself as a regional knowledge hub. In the past, top students have been encouraged to

[5] Jami A. Fullerton, Matthew Hamilton, and Alice Kendrick, "U.S.-Produced Entertainment Media and Attitude toward Americans," *Mass Communication and Society*, 10, 2 (2007), 171–87.

[6] Hodson, 27.

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study abroad, but in the years since the demise of the ASC, that has changed. Despite its small population of 5.4 million, Singapore has established dozens of public or autonomous universities and partnership programs, a large percentage of them in collaboration with Western, and especially American, universities. Prestigious institutions such as Yale and Duke are eager to build their global "brands" at Asian campuses with generous local funding, while securing their share of top students from an increasingly prosperous region for whom the relative advantage of a Western degree has declined.

Singapore's emergence as a global city and its aspiration to serve as a regional knowledge hub have encouraged scholars to reexamine regional and local history, and, in the process, the American role in making it. Despite the names of NUS's Asia Research Institute (ARI) and Nanyang Technological University Global Asia Research Cluster, both programs are effectively Pacific in scope, as a few examples suffice to demonstrate. Recently, for instance, ARI hosted a conference on The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of the Social Gospel in Asia, 1890–1930, which focussed extensively on American Protestant missionary work in China, the Philippines, and elsewhere.

The funding provided by both institutions has allowed local and visiting scholars to rediscover in local and regional archives the American legacy in Asia. While in residence as a fellow at NTU, Brown University American studies professor Evelyn Hu-DeHart researched the links of the first Chinatown community in Spanish Manila to the Americas. Shuang Shen, Pennsylvania State University Asian Studies professor and ARI fellow, used other local archives to explore the cultural and political agenda of Cold War Chinese-language journals backed by the Asia Foundation.[7] Until recently, research funding and archival access into the latter topic was more heavily restricted, thanks to political sensitivity surrounding the suppression of the Communist threat. Thanks to the development of Asian studies at local institutions, and the slow liberalization of Singaporean politics, however, such scholarly exchanges have brought Singapore to the attention of American studies scholars, who in turn have helped start what are hopefully lasting discussions in Singapore about American policy.

Nevertheless, the prospect for the study of the US under Asian studies initiatives remains hampered by their technocratic focus. To receive funding, most work requires an immediate application – the advancement of heritage work, or the shaping of policy. Most of that heritage work is devoted to post-1965

[7] Evelyn Hu-DeHart, "The Manila Galleon Trade: The Forgotten Silk Road of the Spanish American Empire, 1565–1815," presentation, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 18–20 Nov. 2015; Shuang Shen, "A Cold War Trans-Pacific Cultural Network: A Study of Youlian's History in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia," presentation, Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, Singapore, 15 Oct. 2015.

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Singapore. Few locally based scholars work on topics in colonial or nineteenth-century America, even though the latter period brought the United States to the region as a diplomatic, commercial, and military power. There have been relatively few opportunities for Americanists to collectively reflect on what America meant to the region, or anywhere else, before it became a superpower. Only a handful of Singapore-based Americanists working outside Asian studies, in departments of history, english, and art history, consider domestic and transatlantic American topics, including the Asian American experience.

On the other hand, the study of Southeast Asian diasporas within the United States has received considerable attention from local social scientists. Recent presentations at ARI have examined the "De-ethnization" of Hinduism in the US and Singapore, psychological differences in aging among Americans and Singaporeans, and American and Chinese approaches to conflict management in Singapore. Though such work is far removed from the humanistic approach of most American studies scholarship, it nevertheless suggests a perception of the importance of the United States as a subject of cultural and social comparison. It should also be noted that such work meets a common definition of American studies in Asia, where topics such as contemporary diplomacy and economy are routinely included alongside civilization, history, and culture.[8]

If there is any trend in Singaporean education that may signal a topically broader, temporally deeper, more critical and less technocratic approach, it is the recent introduction of the liberal-arts model. Though the best-known contemporary example is Yale-NUS College, established in 2012, the experiment is not entirely new. In 1928, Singapore's colonial government established a residential liberal institution, Raffles College, in part to preempt a local American effort to establish a similar institution. (Authorities feared that an American college would undermine colonial supervision of tertiary education and steer students toward postgraduate study in the United States.) The Raffles College model was ultimately abandoned shortly before national independence and the arrival of the developmental state, whose education policy prioritized the creation of a trained labor force through the applied arts and sciences.[9]

The decline of British empire simultaneously encouraged the arrival of American studies in Britain and discouraged its development in the former colony, where British culture remained a key part of the curriculum but American ideas could be regarded as "intellectual colonialism." Following

[8] Terry Lautz, "China's Deficit in American Studies," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 12 Aug. 2010.

[9] Philip Holden, "A Building with One Side Missing: Liberal Arts and Illiberal Modernities in Singapore," presentation, Yale-NUS College, Singapore, 14 Oct. 2016.

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the end of the Cold War, Singapore's Ministry of Education began to rethink its stance on the liberal arts. Its "Thinking Schools, Learning Nation" recognized critical thinking as conducive to its neoliberal objectives of creating entrepreneurial subjects. Even before the creation of Yale-NUS in 2012, most of Singapore's universities had begun establishing honors programs modeled on the American liberal-arts college, with mission statements extolling the benefits of critical thinking and global citizenship.

At most Singaporean universities, there remains a considerable degree of sensitivity in the discussion of politics, ethnic and class tensions, and social taboos such as homosexuality (which remains illegal): precisely the topics with which so many American studies scholars currently engage. Though some American critics denounced Yale's collaboration with NUS as an abdication of its commitment to academic freedom, the author's own experience as a former lecturer at both Yale-NUS and NUS suggests that there is significantly greater latitude in the former institution than in the latter for the discussion of politically sensitive topics such as same-sex marriage and American electoral politics.

But if Yale-NUS's campus culture is preoccupied with the same social and political issues as many American college campuses, its core curriculum remains largely oriented toward Chinese, European (especially British), and ancient Islamic, Greek, and Roman traditions. Not a single American-authored work was assigned for required reading in the two-semester Literature and Humanities course the author co-taught last year, nor is American history or philosophy well represented. Effectively, the challenge of establishing a genuinely global curriculum has taken a backseat to balancing the literature of former colonial powers with those of Asia's former colonial and semicolonial nations. In the author's experience, an Arnoldian definition of culture as "the best which has been thought and said in the world" still remains operative within the classroom, even if the world is today understood more capaciously. Though American culture suffuses campus cultural activities such as film screenings and literary readings, the prospect of studying American culture at an American-modeled institution continues to raise the specter of intellectual colonialism.

The difference, however, is that such fears are openly debated at Yale-NUS, whereas they were rarely given public voice at the turn of the millenium, when the ASC existed. Whether those fears will be exorcised is another matter. But from the author's point of view, it is unlikely that students as critically engaged with the United States outside the classroom will long reject its formal study within it. In any case, the example of Singapore reveals that the context for the study of American studies in Asia is very much different than it was during the Cold War or even the Michael Fay years. Whereas US-aligned European and Asian states were inclined to promote American culture and soft power in exchange for aid, alliance, and domestic political cooperation, Singapore

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avoided doing so. Today, as Singapore's academic institutions expand and find a greater degree of independence, it will be up to individual scholars to determine the extent of an "American turn."

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