

A guest commentator:

Yale goes global—university plans “liberal arts college” in authoritarian Singapore

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In his March 31 letter to the Yale community of alumni, faculty, staff, friends and students, President Rick Levin announced final agreement with the National University of Singapore (NUS) to create a new liberal arts college based on the Yale model. The new college will be called Yale-NUS. This is the most ambitious expression of Levin’s aims set out in his 1997 paper “The Internationalization of Yale,” where he stated his goal to “position Yale as a university of global consequence.”

The agreement is the result of Levin’s meeting at the Davos World Economic Forum (where bankers, corporate directors and politicians gather) in January 2009 with NUS President Tan Chorh Chuan. In the intervening period Yale faculty and administration have visited Singapore and developed the direction and curriculum of the new college, which will grant not Yale degrees but NUS degrees. Yale advisers intend to launch a core curriculum that includes selections from “the history of thought and culture of the world,” from Plato’s *Republic* to the Upanishads.

Yale’s liberal arts curriculum has served as the model for many smaller liberal arts colleges in America. The original Yale College’s stated aim was “to fit young men for service both in Church and Civil State,” that is, to be ministers or government officials, and it has trained a good many powerful figures in American business and politics.

The list includes US Presidents William Howard Taft, Gerald Ford, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush; current Supreme Court Justices Sonia Sotomayor, Samuel Alito and Clarence Thomas; US Secretaries of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and Dean Acheson. Significant business figures past and present among Yale graduates include Henry Luce, co-founder of *Time* magazine; Stephen A. Schwarzman, co-founder & CEO of the Blackstone Group; John L. Thornton, former president and co-COO,

Goldman Sachs; Wilbur Ross, investor, steel magnate, member of the Forbes 400; W. James McNerney, CEO of The Boeing Company, and many others.

Yale-NUS is part of the expansion and growth under Levin’s presidency. Levin, himself a PhD in Economics, earns \$1.5 million per year, on the high end of Ivy League presidents. Virtually a CEO of the Yale enterprise, he has overseen the construction of several new buildings on the New Haven, Connecticut campus as well as the acquisition in 2007 of an existing facility seven miles to the west of the current campus.

This new “West Campus” is the former Bayer Pharmaceutical complex of 136 acres comprising 20 buildings, including labs, offices and conference centers. On this spot Yale intends to develop a “transformational asset for the University in both the sciences and arts.” Already it has initiated five new Institutes in science and engineering.

Additionally, the Yale School of Medicine recently collaborated with Gilead Sciences (Nasdaq: GILD), in researching new therapies for cancer treatments. Gilead will provide up to \$100 million over 10 years and will have the first option to license Yale inventions resulting from collaboration.

The Singapore project was approved by the Yale Corporation as the five-year “Yale Tomorrow” campaign comes to a close June 30, with its goal of \$3.5 billion—with a “b”—nearly achieved. The staggering level of gift-giving testifies to the financial success of alumni and admirers. Yale giving is reported by the president to be around \$300-400 million a year, down since the 2008 crash from \$500-600 million per year.

As part of “Yale Tomorrow,” two new sets of

undergraduate colleges will be built in New Haven, and alumni have been frankly solicited to finance/purchase individual components; a dining hall for \$5 million, a café for \$1 million, a fitness center for \$1 million, and so on; the price list is available.

As for costs of the new college in Singapore, Yale spends nothing—the construction and operating costs will be borne by Singapore, whose financial success has made it one of the “Asian Tigers.” Around 1,000 undergraduate students from Asia will pay not Yale’s yearly cost, which totals about \$49,000 for undergraduates, but rather an amount based on US state university tuition, to be determined.

How Yale-NUS will fit with the uneasy society of Singapore worries some Yale people, including those 11 percent who registered their opposition to the plan in an informal poll. How the ideal of academic freedom will function within the harsh laws and capital punishment of the anti-democratic, authoritarian Singapore regime is a significant question. Caning is widely in Singapore used as legal corporal punishment.

The one-family dominated People’s Action Party (PAP) has ruled the country since its independence in 1965. Those who criticize the regime or its death penalty can and have been subject to arrest. Public protests and vocal critics are subject to criminal libel laws.

As the WSWS noted in 2005, “The PAP has ruled through a mixture of electoral payoffs and the systematic suppression of even the most moderate political opposition. Local big business and the major powers have backed the PAP for decades as a guarantor of economic and political stability.... Singapore has retained the notorious Internal Security Act (ISA), instituted by the former British colonial administration, which can be used to arrest and detain people without trial virtually indefinitely on the vague grounds of national security.”

The *Yale Daily News* commented on the issue in November 2010, at the time of the trial and sentencing (six weeks in prison and \$16,000 fine) of British author Alan Shadrake, who dared to criticize Singapore’s judicial system in a book, including its brutal death penalty. Yale provost Peter Salovey apologized for the regime, commenting to the newspaper, “I would have hoped for a different result, but Mr. Shadrake’s book openly challenged the country’s legal constraints on public criticism of identifiable governmental officials and institutions.”

Opponents within the Yale community see a disconnect between Yale’s liberal free speech and assembly traditions, and Singaporean practices, and suggest Yale is “naïve” at best. Yale political science lecturer Mark Oppenheimer observes, “Getting into bed with an illiberal, authoritarian regime is on the face of it a bad idea.”

Yale admits there will be restrictions on expression at its Singapore extension, but claims free speech will actually flourish in the classroom and in scholarly publications. Current plans insist that Yale-NUS will be autonomous, and governed by an equal number of Yale and Singaporean officials.

Yale’s connection with Asia is not new, nor is the recent installation of American institutions there. Among the most prominent of those links is the Yale-China Association. This year marks its 100th anniversary. The Yale-China Association, originally a Christian missionary society, became a significant force in Chinese education with its nursing program, medical colleges and hospitals, and exchanges of teachers and students. Yale-China is separate from Yale University and governed independently, though sharing many graduates.

Other institutions have planted new roots in Asia, some successfully, some not. New York University has gone to Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates; so has Michigan State University, which closed its doors there after two years. Singapore saw the University of New South Wales open and close within a year. Others have located to mainland China.

Yale-NUS intends to welcome its first class in the fall of 2013. The willingness of the university to enter into relations with the Singapore regime and its institutions, which Oppenheimer describes as an act of “corruption,” provides a further indication of the absence of any commitment on the part of the American liberal and academic establishment to democratic principles.



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