International Symposium

Humanities and the Social Sciences and Asia

7 November 2014
Nassim Room (Level 3), The Regent Singapore

Organized By
School of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Nanyang Technological University
in celebration of the School’s 10th Anniversary

Opening Address
Professor Wang Gungwu
University Professor and Chairman, East Asian Institute,
National University of Singapore

PROGRAMME

13:00 – 13:30  REGISTRATION

13:30 – 13:40  WELCOME REMARKS
Professor C. J. Wee Wan-ling, School of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Nanyang Technological University

13:40 – 14:00  OPENING ADDRESS BY GUEST-OF-HONOUR
Professor Wang Gungwu, University Professor and Chairman, East Asian Institute,
National University of Singapore

14:00 – 15:00  FIRST PLENARY PRESENTATION
“A Troubling, Impossible Thing”: The Humanities in the Nation-State
Professor Vicente L. Rafael, Department of History, University of Washington

15:00 – 15:30  COFFEE AND TEA BREAK
15:30 – 16:30  SECOND PLENARY PRESENTATION

*Imagining New “Asian” (Post)Human Sciences:
The Resistible Fall of Humanities in Japan and Elsewhere?*

Professor Uchino Tadashi, Department of Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies, University of Tokyo

16:30 – 17:30  FINAL PLENARY PRESENTATION

*Asia, the Ambiguous, and Ourselves:
Thoughts on the Agenda of Humanising Modernity*

Associate Professor Kwok Kian-Woon, Associate Provost (Student Life), Nanyang Technological University

17:30 – 17:45  CLOSING REMARKS

Associate Professor Joey Long, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University

17:45~  END OF SYMPOSIUM
THEME OF SYMPOSIUM

Since the late 1990s, many East and Southeast Asian societies have been increasingly interested in the broadening of their education systems away from rote learning so as to produce creative, thinking and autonomous students who can better participate in an increasingly globalised world where innovation in the workplace is important. Expression and reflective thought that subjects in the humanities and the social sciences promoted now fit the bill for educational reform in the region. This Symposium offers a platform in which to offer reflections on the importance of the humanities and the social sciences to Asia and in Asia.

OPENING ADDRESS

Wang Gungwu is University Professor and the Chairman of the East Asian Institute at the National University of Singapore. He is also Emeritus Professor at the Australian National University.

He is a Commander of the British Empire (CBE); Fellow, and former President, of the Australian Academy of the Humanities; Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Science; Member of Academia Sinica; Honorary Member of the Chinese Academy of Social Science. He was conferred the International Academic Prize, Fukuoka Asian Cultural Prizes. In Singapore, he is Chairman of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies; Chairman of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at NUS; Vice-Chairman of the Chinese Heritage Centre; and a Board Member of the Institute of Strategic and Defence Studies at Nanyang Technological University.

He received his B.A. (Hons) and M.A. degrees from the University of Malaya in Singapore, and his Ph.D. from the University of London (1957). His teaching career took him from the University of Malaya (Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, 1957-1968; Professor of History 1963-68) to the Australian National University (1968-1986), where he was Professor and Head of the Department of Far Eastern History and Director of the Research of Pacific Studies. From 1986 to 1995, he was Vice-Chancellor of the University of Hong Kong. He was Director of the East Asian Institute at NUS from 1997 to 2007.

ABSTRACT AND BIOGRAPHY

Professor Vicente L. Rafael
Department of History, University of Washington

Title of Presentation
“A Troubling, Impossible Thing”: The Humanities in the Nation-State

Abstract

What are the Humanities, and what good are they for us, whoever we might be, today? In this paper, I approach this question in three parts. First, I offer a very partial and truncated genealogy of the central concern of the humanities, namely, what does it mean to be human? Second, I trace the history of this question as it occurs in the formation of the modernizing nation-state in the West and as it spreads, via Western imperialism, to other parts of the world. And third, I locate these theoretical and historical concerns in relation to the role of education and language in forging a national community amid the conditions of globalization and the persistence of ethno-linguistic differences. Working through the universities, the State has often looked to the Humanities (and its related formation, the Social Sciences) as the means with which to humanize globalization and suture cultural differences for the sake of fostering socio-economic development. Yet, the Humanities, insofar as they are immersed in the critical study of the "human" in all its contingent and historically various forms, cannot always be counted on to carry out this task of domesticating differences. If anything, the Humanities at times tend to sustain and elaborate their existence. In this paper, I will seek to map some of these movements and tensions with examples from Singapore and (time willing), the Philippines and the United States.

Biography

Vicente L. Rafael is Professor of History and Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Washington, Seattle. He is the author of several works on the politics of language and translation, media and nationalism, and religion, war and technology in comparative imperial contexts. He is currently at work on a book called "The Insurgency of Language: Wars of Translation in the Philippines, the United States and Elsewhere." His previous books include Contracting Colonialism (1993); Figures of Criminality in Indonesia, the Philippines and Colonial Vietnam (editor – 1999); White Love and Other Events in Filipino History (2000); and The Promise of the Foreign: Nationalism and the Technics of Translation in the Spanish Philippines (2005). Previously, he has taught at the University of Hawai’i at Manoa, and the University of California at San Diego. He has been the recipient of several fellowships and awards from the Guggenheim Foundation, Stanford University, the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), the Social Science Research Council, the Rockefeller Foundation and the University of California at Irvine among others.
Abstract

It is commonly understood in Japan that the long-standing tradition of the liberal arts in higher education has been pronounced irrelevant in the age of globalisation. On one hand, this is the result of the gradual decline of liberal humanism among elites in particularly the Anglo-American “West”: a liberal-humanist’s type of universalism is deemed dead and its death is considered historically inevitable and a good thing. What we need now in late capitalism is local and concrete knowledge: we do not need knowledge with no apparent practical use anymore. On the other hand, contemporary top runners in worldwide corporate culture seem not to be interested in acquiring knowledge of no practical use as what matters for them is the specialised knowledge (or perhaps updated information) about how the financial system operates, rather than why it has to operate this particular way, which might be the focus of “irrelevant” liberal-arts knowledge production. This is all to say that the ever-democratising societies of the world tend to see the liberal arts as an outdated Euro-American ideological model, while financial elites simply do not care.

The traditional university system seems at a loss about as to how to accommodate such hostile environments. However, it is obvious that now is the time for some change to occur. Not blaming the conservative and outrageously whimsical governmental educational policies, not blaming the late-capitalist social formation and its neoliberal corporate cultural management of higher education, we in the academy are challenged and need to move, stealthily, creatively and innovatively, not for profit and/or for power, but for our survival.

For a small first step, I suggest that what is necessary is to “undo” the past. In my presentation, I will start by looking back at “the resistible fall” of humanities and liberal arts education in Japan, best exemplified by my own university, the University of Tokyo, where the liberal-arts curriculum, though with not much substance anymore, has been kept intact. Where did we go wrong? Or did we go wrong at all? In critically examining key moments in the past 30 years of our so-called “curricular reformation”, I hope to identify some key issues, both practical and theoretical, to “undo” the history of failure; and I would like to introduce the utopian project I am now involved in, the Integrated Human Sciences for Cultural Diversity Graduate Program, in which liberal-arts education is updated and modified as a Graduate School concept for the 21st century.

Biography

Uchino Tadashi is Professor of Performance Studies at the Department of Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, the University of Tokyo. He received his MA in American Literature from Graduate School of Humanities (1984), and his PhD in Performance Studies from Graduate School of Arts and Sciences (2002), both at the University of Tokyo. He is a leading performance studies scholar, whose disciplinary and geographical border-crossings between the academy and the art community, between Japan and the US, Japan and Europe, and Japan and other parts of Asia, including India, has been critically acclaimed in various interdisciplinary quarters of academics, artists and activists. His publications include The Melodramatic Revenge: Theatre of the Private in the 1980s (in Japanese, Tokyo: Keiso Publishing, 1996), From Melodrama to Performance: The Twentieth Century American Theatre (in Japanese, Tokyo: U. of Tokyo P, 2001), Crucible

Twice a recipient of the Fulbright Grant (1986-87 and 1997-98 at the Department of Performance Studies, New York University), Uchino has served in many Japanese academic societies in various capacities, and is currently a board member for the Society of Studies of Culture and Representation (2006-), while also writing performance reviews for both academic and popular media in Japan and abroad. He was a contributing editor for TDR (The Drama Review, The MIT Press, the USA) for the past 15 years (1998-2013) and is currently an editor for Performance Paradigm (Australia), Situations (South Korea), Dance Research Journal of Korea (South Korea) and Pacific and American Studies (Japan).

His expertise is widely recognized in performance communities in Japan, and is a member of the board of directors for Kanagawa Arts Foundation and Arts Council Tokyo, the board of trustees for the Saison Foundation, and the selection committee for Fukuoka Asian Culture Prize. At the University of Tokyo, he served as a director for the Admission Office (PEAK, Programs in English at Komaba, 2010-2013) and a chair for the Department of Culture and Representation at the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences (2011-13), and is now a coordinator for the Leading Graduate Program (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) of Integrated Human Sciences for Cultural Diversity (2013-).
Abstract

The commemoration of the first decade of NTU's School of Humanities and Social Sciences provides an occasion for a self-critical rethinking – but also a self-committed reaffirmation – of "our" intellectual vocation. While being part of "global knowledge production", the humanities and social sciences, compared to the natural and applied sciences, cannot but be distinctively more "worldly", more existentially and intellectually situated in time and place, in specific times and places – in relation to peoples and “our” intersecting histories and traditions. Over the years, in the course of grappling with matters of scholarship, teaching, institution-building, and public life, I have oftentimes asked two questions of myself, colleagues, students, and participants in civil society: What are the stakes? And for whom? In this presentation, I offer some thoughts on the humanities and social sciences in relation to "Asia" as a region and "Asian modernity" as a central and overarching problématique. In examining the thinking of important "Asian" intellectuals on the ambiguities of modernity, I address the larger question of what constitutes a compelling intellectual agenda of "humanising modernity". In so doing, I am guided by Edward Said's claim that humanism is "the final resistance we have against the inhuman practices and injustices that disfigure human history". I conclude with a few reflections on the complex relationship between interpreting and changing the world, between intellectual life and social transformation – and its implications for contemporary scholarship and learning in the humanities and social sciences.

Biography

Kwok Kian-Woon (Ph.D, University of California at Berkeley) is currently Associate Provost (Student Life). He served in the leadership of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences since its inception, first as a member of the Task Force for the establishment of the School (2003) and then as Vice-Dean (2004-2007), Associate Chair (Academic) from 2007 to 2011 and as Head of the Sociology Division (2004-2013). He was a member of the Blue Ribbon Commission on Undergraduate Education (2007-2008) and a co-author of its report, which served as a guide for changes in undergraduate education at NTU. He served as the first Chair of the NTU Senate from August 2008 to October 2010.

He was a Fellow in the Asia Leadership Program in Japan in 1996 and a recipient of the Fulbright Research Grant at Harvard University in 1998. He has been actively involved in civil society and the public sector, including as Honorary Chairman, National Archives of Singapore, Past President, Singapore Heritage Society, Member, National Heritage Board and the Singapore Art Museum Board, Member, Steering Committee on the National Art Gallery, Co-Chairman of the Steering Committee for the Singapore Biennale 2006, and Member, National Arts Council since 2013 and Member, Centre for Contemporary Art Governing Council since March 2014. He is also a member of the Institute of Policy Studies Academic Panel, National University of Singapore since 2009.
His teaching and research interests relate to the historical and comparative understanding of modern social transformation and contemporary social change. Specific areas include the following: Social and Political Theory; Qualitative Social Research; Social Memory; Culture and Cultural Policy (Arts, Heritage & Creative Cities); Singapore Studies; Mental Health and Illness, and Higher Education in Southeast Asia. He served as a member of the National Mental Health Sub-Committee on Research (2005-2006) and was Visiting Scientist at the Institute of Mental Health (2007-2008), and was a co-principal investigator in the Singapore Mental Health Study – a national baseline study on patterns of mental illness in the country. These patterns were reported in, among other co-authored articles, “A Population-based Survey of Mental Disorders in Singapore”, _Annals, Academy of Medicine Singapore_ (February 2012), which won the Best Publication Silver Award 2012. His publications include numerous co-edited books, journal articles and book chapters on Singapore society, the Chinese Overseas, cultural policy, social memory, and mental health. His co-edited book (with Roxana Waterson), _Contestations of Memory in Southeast Asia_, is published by NUS Press 2011. His current research areas include a study on mental health literacy and a work on Singapore and Asian modernity. He is also a collaborator in an interdisciplinary study on psychological, health and social factors related to working in underground spaces.