

Yale-NUS a timely, visionary initiative

Four reasons why resolution adopted by Yale faculty is disappointing

Tommy Koh

The Straits Times, 15 April 2012

Yale University is a great university. When I was living in New York City, I often commuted to New Haven to teach at Yale. In 1982, I was invited to deliver the Stimson Lectures. In 1984, I was conferred an honorary degree of doctor of laws by Yale. As a graduate of Harvard Law School, I was very pleased to be able to quote President Kennedy and say to my wife that I have the double benefit of a Harvard education and a Yale degree.

I am a proud member of the Yale family. It was with disappointment that I read the text of the resolution adopted by the Yale College faculty on the Yale-National University of Singapore (NUS) College, which will be located in Singapore and begin operation next year. Let me explain why I feel disappointed.

First, the resolution completely ignores the potential benefits of this visionary joint venture, for the two universities, and for Asia and America. The new college will enable the students to read, learn and discuss the great books of the West and the East, the great philosophical traditions of Asia and the West, and the great poets and writers of the two civilisations.

I hope that the college will offer a congenial and inspiring environment for mutual learning. I also hope that the intellectual engagement between American and Asian students and faculty will take place on the basis of equality and mutual respect. The Yale faculty resolution seems to be inconsistent with this spirit and smacks of cultural arrogance and superiority. The message seems to be that the American way is the only way.

Second, Asia is on the rise. It is the home of the world's second (China) and third (Japan) largest economies. India will soon catch up. Asia is also the home of some of the world's most ancient and richest civilisations, such as, the Chinese, Indian and Japanese. Asean is the world's second most successful regional organisation, after the European Union. South-east Asia is a poster child of successful multiculturalism. America's engagement with Asia must reflect this changing reality. It is not a relationship between patron and client, or of a superior and an inferior. It is, with every passing day, becoming a relationship between equals. The Yale faculty should, therefore, be more humble.

After the failure of the attempt to remake Iraq in America's image, American intellectuals should reflect deeply on that experience. One lesson learnt should be that while America can and should help, it cannot prescribe the future for other countries.

Third, NUS and Yale share many common values and ambitions. They are both dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge. They believe in academic freedom. They

subscribe to the internationally recognised human rights, both the civil and political rights as well as the social, economic and cultural rights.

In Singapore, unlike the United States, racial and religious harmony are prized above the freedom of speech and freedom of the press. If there is a contradiction between them, the US would give primacy to the freedom of speech and freedom of the press, whereas Singapore would give primacy to racial and religious harmony.

This does not mean that one side is right and the other side is wrong. What it means is that we are different because of our different histories and circumstances. It is not fair for the Yale faculty to criticise Singapore for its 'lack of respect for civil and political rights' without acknowledging that it is only 47 years old and that, in that short time, it has transited from the Third World to the First.

Singapore is certainly not perfect, but, dare I say it, neither is America. Singaporeans have enjoyed the right to vote since 1959. When I was a student at Harvard, the black citizens of the American south were still denied their right to vote. Even now, young black men, such as Trayvon Martin, are viewed with suspicion because of racial prejudice.

Fourth, Singapore is seriously committed to upholding the principle of non-discrimination. Any form of discrimination based on race, colour, religion, gender is unacceptable to Singapore.

We have one of the world's most diverse populations. The miracle is that we have learnt to live together in harmony. There are no ethnic or religious conflict in Singapore. Women have gained parity with men.

We are not yet as tolerant as the West towards sexual minorities, but we have to progress at a pace acceptable to Singaporeans. Yale should respect that.

In conclusion, I would say to my friends in New Haven that the Yale-NUS College is a timely and visionary initiative. I am confident that it will be a success and its success will have a strategic significance in the partnership between Asia and America in the 21st century.

The writer, a Singapore diplomat, is Rector of Tembusu College, NUS.