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Change and Continuity in the Singapore Literature-In-English Curriculum

In March 2013, the decline and uptake of Literature as a General Certificate of Education (GCE) O-level subject in Singapore featured prominently in a local newspaper in *The Straits Times* (ST), after Nominated Member of Parliament, Janice Koh, raised questions during one parliament session (Ng 2013). In the Forum section of ST, readers argued for the humanistic value of the subject and its potential for building national identity, for nurturing greater linguistic fluency and for encouraging critical and creative thinking, thereby making Literature an important, if not compulsory, subject in the school curriculum. It was not the first time the decline in the number of students taking Literature had sparked interest in Singapore news. Editorials defending the necessity of Literature have been featured periodically since 1995 when Literature became optional at the O-levels (Ong 2002) and when certain independent schools took the lead in making the subject optional because it was perceived to be difficult to obtain a good grade in (Gopinathan & Tan 2000). This is reflective of the predictable pragmatism in Singapore schools when it comes to subject choice. The relevance of Literature is dependent on its perceived utilitarian value.

In this paper, I examine the underlying ideology sustaining curriculum consistency and change in the Singapore Literature curriculum. Graff (1987) has argued in his study of literacy in the West that a situated and historical understanding of the definition and development of literacy is required for meaningful and critical engagement with the role of literacy in the present and for the future. In the same way, understanding the shifts in how Literature is conceptualised and received in the educational domain against the backdrop of macro-educational change provides insight into why particular traditions have endured, and when and why changes occur. Drawing on national syllabi and O-level assessment papers from 1990 to 2014, I demonstrate how the dominant logic of national interest – in the form of fostering a decontextualised critical

thinking and building a national identity – has guided the evolution of the national Literature syllabus. At the same time, I show that despite the movement of Singapore’s curriculum towards what Kennedy (2013) calls the beginning of a “genuine post-colonial curriculum” sensitive to the local context, the generally conservative Literature curriculum reveals residual British beliefs and values in the kinds of texts chosen and the kinds of sanctioned reading practices evidenced in examination expectations. I argue in this paper that curriculum shifts towards greater criticality in reading and clarity in text choice are necessary for literature to retain its relevance in a global age.

Dominant, Residual and Emergent Forms in Literature Education

Raymond Williams’ (1977) conceptual framework of dominant, residual and emergent forms serve as a starting point for examining the development of Literature as a subject in the school curriculum. Williams’ concepts of the “residual” and the “emergent” within the dominant allow one to make sense of the process of cultural emergence. Culture is not static and unified, and the dominant ideology is a balance between dominant perspectives, traditions and enduring traits that are in fact a form of “predisposed continuity” (p. 116) and newer or emergent ideas. In England, the development of English Literature as a category for study can be seen in the discipline that emerged from Renaissance notions of literacy (i.e., being able to read), and in how it achieved its specialised meaning of printed books of a certain quality in the nineteenth century. English Literature could be seen as an emergent form and an alternative idea to the study of Latin and Greek that was eventually accepted as the dominant idea. The rise of British nationalism and the failure of religion in England were among the reasons that accounted for the

rise of English Literature as the repository of all that was great and good about English culture (Eagleton 1983).

The status of Literature as a subject worth studying required a cultural shift for English Literature from being a discipline on the margins to an essential university discipline. In the mainstream education system, the study of English Literature was align to national objectives, as in the Newbolt Report (Board of Education 1921) which emphasised the central role of Literature in the education of the young in post-war Britain. The development of Literature as a core subject in England illustrates how the school curriculum is a *selective* tradition of what a nation deems necessary for the education of its young to produce a particular kind of citizen. Kliebard (2004) has shown, through a historical examination of changes in the American curriculum, how interest groups struggle to shape what counts as relevant knowledge for each generation of students.

The practice of any dominant ideology, often internalised in institutions and in official and everyday talk, is thus rife with contradictions and unresolved conflicts. Williams explained that by examining the “residual” and the “emergent” within the dominant, one is able to make sense of the process of cultural emergence.

By “residual” I mean something different from the “archaic” though in practice these are often very difficult to distinguish. Any culture includes available elements of the past, but their place in the contemporary cultural process is profoundly variable.... The residual, by definition, has been effectively formed in the past, but is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present.’ (Williams 1977: 122)

The residual form is an active form of the *selective* past that continues to influence cultural process as an effective element of the present. In the context of the establishment of Literature as a subject, the notion of reading particular kinds of texts as a form of polite learning maintained

its importance in the new version of Literature as a subject even though the content of what was to be studied shifted.

In post-colonial contexts, the rise of Literature can be attributed to colonial imposition rather than nationalism, where Literature served as a tool to cultivate a class of educated elite to be able to help the colonial masters run the country (Holden 2000; Viswanthan 1989). However, the dominance of Literature over other languages and literature is not the single unmediated imposition of an undivided imperialistic ruler over submissive colonial subjects. Rather, as Viswanthan (1987) observed in the case of India, the dominance of English Literature (over vernacular Arabic or Sanskrit Literature) is the result of contestations between various interest groups such as the East India Company, the English Parliament, missionaries and the Indian elite class. Although Literature was initially studied for language purposes, the version of Literature that evolved in the 1800s had a strong moralising quality to it. The strategy to convince the natives of British superiority was to promote British interests “through representations of Western literary knowledge as objective, universal, and rational” (Viswanathan 1987: 18). Persuaded of the moral, intellectual and superior value of English Literature, the Indians themselves were complicit in agreeing to submit to the hegemonic imposition as legitimate and inevitable. Paradoxically, the reading of Western texts provided the Indian elite with access to nineteenth century ideas of nationalism and liberalism, which fuelled the fight for independence (Gowda 1958). India’s example demonstrates that the dominant version of Literature in various contexts is the result and subject of ongoing contestations rather than simple unilateral imposition.

In the days prior to and in the early days of Singapore's independence, the study of Literature was largely limited to students studying in English-medium schools. It was viewed as a subject that would complement the technical study of English language by providing students with cultural knowledge of the British Empire, and, as with India, the civilising and imperialistic objectives to cultivate surrogate Englishmen were masked by the rhetoric of universalism (Holden 2000).

This view of Literature as culture-blind was over-ridden in the 1960s and 1970s where it was a matter of "practical politics" for the newly formed Singapore government to "lay the foundations for a Malayan culture" (Rajaratnam 1987: 119). In the "Enright Affair", a series of verbal confrontations between D. J. Enright, who was a Professor of English at the University of Malaya in Singapore, and S. Rajaratnam, then Minister of Culture for Singapore, the notion of a universal culture was rejected in favour of a national culture, specific to individual countries. This nation-specific version of culture in a climate of anti-colonial nationalism and nation-building formed the basis for the relegation of Literature to the backseat as the Singapore government turned to Malaya and later Asia to cultivate an alternative to the imposed British culture (Wee 2007). Holden (2000) pointed out that the version of culture adopted embraced Asian values to the exclusion of Literature, and that a static view of culture as unchanging precludes the "the possibility of literature in English becoming part of an evolving Singaporean culture" (p. 40). In contrast, the English language maintained its elevated position as the language for interracial communication and national productivity (Gopinathan 2003), and the nationalisation of schools in 1987 saw English adopted as the official language of education.

This dichotomy with regard to the role of English language and Literature is seen in the split in the official curriculum, with a separate syllabus for English Language and English

Literature or Literature-in-English (henceforth referred to as “Literature”). Literature, stripped of its cultural and technical function, was reduced to a subject dealing with aesthetics, and, as such, became optional. This view of Literature as optional has contributed to the notion that it is a subject reserved for elite students (ST 1995), resulting in declining enrolment in pragmatic Singapore.

Change and Continuity in Literature Education in Singapore

The Literature syllabus has been more about continuity than change since the first syllabus was written in 1999 by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Singapore¹. While there have been shifts in the curriculum and assessment following major educational reforms, these reforms have not fundamentally changed the aims of Literature education in Singapore. In fact, the 2013 syllabus explicitly states:

The Literature in English Syllabus 2013 builds on the strengths of the 2007 Syllabus to provide teachers with a sense of familiarity while continuing to emphasise key areas important to the teaching and learning of literature. (MOE 2013: 8, emphasis added)

The explicit aim of the 2013 syllabus is to clarify the role and goals of literary study in the Singapore context. Along with the syllabus reviews, assessment is used as a core tool for shaping pedagogical emphasis in classrooms. In the next section, I examine specific assessment changes motivated by two key educational initiatives, “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation” (TSLN) and “National Education” (NE), both launched in 1997, to demonstrate continuities within the Literature syllabus and assessments.

Critical Thinking and Economic Success

One fundamental aim of the Singapore education system has been to prepare Singaporeans through education to meet the human resource needs of the state for economic productivity. While the skills-building rhetoric essential for Singapore's success is not new, TSLN in 1997 saw the shift in emphasis towards from a manufacturing-based to a knowledge-based economy. Singaporeans needed to be equipped with the right skills for knowledge creation, to be at the forefront of a global knowledge economy. In his opening speech at the 7th International Conference on Thinking, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong (1997) declared that "Thinking Schools must be the crucibles for questioning and searching". TSLN emphasised that Singaporeans needed to be provided with the skills to become innovators in order for Singapore to "sustain its prosperity". TSLN shifted the focus of education from content to skills in an ability-driven education system (Gopinathan 2007).

The Emphasis on Skills in Literature Instruction and Assessment

The emphasis on skills is evident in the 1999 syllabus. Curriculum planners from MOE's Curriculum Planning and Development Division (CPDD) explained that one of the critical features was a skills-based approach.

Central to the study of literature is the need to equip pupils with the skills that would help them understand, appreciate and respond to what they read or view, as opposed to merely internalizing knowledge about particular texts. Literature lessons should therefore aim to impart these skills and reinforce them at successive levels in the study of different texts. (Chew & Wong 1999: 92)

More significantly, the O-level examination was tweaked to include an "unseen" component, where candidates had to respond critically to either a poem or short prose extract that they had not previously studied. To make time to prepare for the "unseen", the number of studied Literature texts was reduced from three to two and the context question (which consisted of a

series of short answer questions) was replaced by the passage-based question (which required students to analyse a passage more holistically). The skills-emphasis was reinforced in the 2013 syllabus through specific “Knowledge, Skills and Dispositions” that aimed to make explicit for teachers the expectations of the Literature curriculum (MOE 2013).

The skills- also led to a shift in the way questions were asked in the examination. A comparison of the essay questions (Figure 1) illustrates the shift towards higher-order questions. Questions require students to “describe” and “illustrate” in 1991 but require analysis and evaluation in 2003 and 2013. There is also a greater emphasis on language forms and features and matters of representation in the 2003 and 2013 papers with questions requiring students to discuss how the writer shapes the text and the readers’ response to the text.

[Insert Figure 1. A comparison of the 1991, 2003 & 2013 O-level examination questions.]

Quantitatively, a breakdown of the questions also demonstrates significant increase in questions focusing on style (from 4% of the questions asked in 1999 to 91% in 2013) and analysis (from 48% of the questions asked in 1999 to 83% in 2013) (Choo 2015).

This emphasis on learning a set of decontextualised skills for reading literary texts is not new, and draws on the residual form of New Criticism entrenched in literary study. The acceptance of New Criticism as the dominant framework structuring the O-level assessment and, consequently, classroom pedagogy has much to do with New Criticism’s original appeal to literary rigour, with its “scientific” method of close-reading and explication (Graff 2007), emphasising on aesthetic appreciation of the text. Practical Criticism (Richards 1929) in the New Criticism tradition assumed that one could examine a literary work closely, isolated from cultural

and historical contexts. New Criticism also promised measurability, a seemingly unbiased way to assess the “literary competence” (Culler 1975) of a student who is able to demonstrate a sensitive close reading of the text. Teachers, themselves trained in the New Criticism tradition, approved of the idea of literary study as aesthetic appreciation and decontextualised criticality. The “unseen” paper, as a simplified version of Practical Criticism, aligned with their personal disciplinary understandings of Literature. Moreover, Literature as a skills-based subject is attractive to teachers as it provides an explicit way to measure and scaffold students’ learning of literary competence. Teachers often utilise frameworks such as Bloom’s taxonomy (Bloom 1956; Krathwohl 2010) to help students understand the requirements of O-level examination questions (Loh 2013).

This dominant version of Literature education has resulted in the myth of Literature as an ahistorical skills-based subject. The literary text is viewed “primarily as a resource for the development of the skills of literary appreciation” (Chew & Wong 1999: 92), and not as a cultural object situated in particular contexts of use. This decontextualized skills-based form of critical thinking has been privileged for its perceived replicability, transferability and measurability (Koh 2002; Lim 2013) but fails to capture the discipline’s specific kinds of thinking that can generate productive engagement with text and world. Echoing the calls of international and Singapore educators, Poon (2010) argues instead for teaching Literature with “a critical cosmopolitan perspective” to help prepare students “to negotiate differences in diverse contexts and to participate more fully in a democracy” (p. 36). This kind of critical literacy is especially pertinent in a multicultural and multimodal world where students learn to engage with others both within and beyond the nation, to read both the “word” and the “world” (Freire & Macedo 1987). Despite Literature educators’ calls to include critical literacy (Bean & Moni 2003;

Poon 2010) as a core element of Literature education, this emergent form is slow to take root in the Singapore context as it goes against the grain of Literature as decontextualised texts for close reading and analysis.

Literature and Nation-building

Another key driver for change in curriculum and assessment is National Education (NE), launched in 1997, with the goal of fostering students' sense of belonging to Singapore (MOE 1997). Building national cohesion through education is not new in Singapore (Chua & Kuo 1991), and the renewed emphasis through NE resulted from a fear that the young were insufficiently rooted to the country. NE's aim was to foster "a sense of identity, pride and self-respect as Singaporeans" (MOE n.d.), particularly in the young who may not have sufficient understanding of Singapore's history. That pragmatism is the prime mover of official change is evident by the fact that concrete plans were made for the inclusion of Singapore Literature only after NE was launched, even though several scholars and educators had been mooted for that very inclusion prior to the syllabus reform (Holden 1999; Yeo 1999). Changes to the O-level examination included an option to choose Singapore texts from a list and to make compulsory a guaranteed Singapore text for the "unseen" part of the examination (Singapore Examinations and Assessment Board 2009). From 2008 onwards, a compulsory Singapore poem or extract from prose was included for the "unseen" paper.

Governing the logic of text choice was a Leavisite notion that there was a great tradition of English Literature worth studying, and the reading of such texts could make one a better person (Eagleton 1983). This residual British influence, in the form of a reverence for texts from England and America, remain strong: out of 84 books on the prescribed text list between 1990

and 2015, there were 58 British and American texts, 17 postcolonial texts and 9 Singapore texts (see Table 1 for most popular texts offered). The continuity of curriculum choices is also visible in oft-repeated texts such as Shakespeare's *Romeo & Juliet* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and authors such as Arthur Miller (*A View from the Bridge*, *An Enemy of the People* [adaptation of play by Henrik Ibsen], *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible*) and Anita Desai (*Fasting, Feasting* and *Games at Twilight*). Even with NE requiring the inclusion of Singapore texts, only two Singapore books are included in a list of 13 books in 2014 (SEAB 2014).

[Insert Table 1. Most popular O-level texts between 1990 and 2015.]

Although schools were initially slow on the uptake, more schools are now choosing a Singapore text as their core text (from 18 schools in 2011 to 32 schools out of 70 schools in 2014; P. Lee 2014). Moreover, it can be argued that Literature students are now more exposed to Singapore poetry and prose extracts, even if they are decontextualised, as a result of the compulsory inclusion of a Singapore text on the “unseen” portion of the test paper. However, in a case study of the perspectives of students who had studied O-level Literature, participants shared that the study of “unseen” texts in the Literature classroom did little to contribute to their knowledge and understanding of Singapore Literature (Palaraju 2015). Moreover, including Singapore books on the prescribed list did not mean that all students would study Singapore novels or plays. Schools could choose which texts they wanted to teach, based on their assessment of what would work best with their students. With elective Literature students having to study only one novel and full Literature students having to study one novel and one play, it is

possible that students may not study a Singapore text. This choice has led to an informal differentiation for Literature education in Singapore, with students from elite schools often studying non-Singaporean texts and neighbourhood schools preferring to do Singapore texts because of their perceived cultural relevance. Out of 32 schools using a Singapore text for the O-level examination, 27 were neighbourhood schools (P. Lee 2014). This might reinforce, although unintentionally, elitist perceptions of Literature as the purview of those who are already fluent in the English language (Poon 2007). This is not unlike the English curriculum of USA in the 20th century with standard literary works prescribed for those destined for college, while popular works and “practical” English were provided for the majority (Klieberd 2004: 14).

The importance that is placed in text choice in various countries, including Singapore, the UK, Australia and New Zealand, refutes any attempt to argue for a culture-free version of Literature (Goodwyn 2012). Enduring debates and controversies about literary texts placed on the school curriculum reflects precisely the value of literary texts in shaping the imagination of the nation (Anderson 1991; Corse 1997) and of cultural values. The word “canon”, originating from the Greek word “kanon”, means rule or standard, which is used to refer to the best literary works in any culture; ironically, the boundaries of what counts as best is constantly shifting depending on who is evaluating and from which position one is evaluating (Eagleton 1983). When the national syllabus does not state the kinds of texts to be studied, teachers’ disciplinary traditions and preferences often dictate choice of text (Luke 2004), which in the Singapore case, often constitutes books from the Anglophile canon.

The lack of direction with regard to the role of Literature in NE is visible in the 2013 syllabus, where other than a mere mention that NE (along with other initiatives) are “naturally woven into Literature” (MOE 2013, p. 2). There is no mention about how Literature and NE are

related. The syllabus does not state the range of texts teachers should teach or how best teachers should approach teaching literature for the purposes of NE. It may be argued that the goal of NE is broadly captured under the aim:

Engage personally with a variety of texts and draw connections between self, texts and the world in order to develop intellectual, emotional, sociocultural and global awareness. (SEAB, 2014, p. 2)

However, this broad appeal to the humanist sensibilities of Literature with its ability to cultivate some sort of awareness of the world does not specify what kinds of “intellectual, sociocultural and global awareness” are desired outcomes of studying Literature. How can these be related to both national and global citizenship? What criteria can be used for text selection, and to what purpose should these texts be used? When should students be exposed to these texts? How should they be taught to read these texts? In comparison, the Australian curriculum is more specific in stating the kinds of texts that students should study. The Year 10 range of literary text should

comprise Australian literature, including the oral narrative traditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, as well as the contemporary literature of these two cultural groups, and classic and contemporary world literature, including texts from and about Asia. (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2015)

By stating the types of texts students should read, the Australian Curriculum seeks to diversify the reading diet of its students, and to make a statement about what is important for study, thus signalling the values important for the study of Literature.

In Singapore, the focus on including Singapore texts as part of NE is pragmatically driven, as is with the TSLN focus on critical thinking. Instead of a fundamental rethink of the goal of Literature education, Singapore texts are added to the canon of British, American and postcolonial texts as another option for Singapore students. What needs to be resolved in syllabus revision is the inherent inconsistency between the objectives of NE and the dominant

skills-based framework guiding Singapore Literature education. The 2013 syllabus is silent on values but extends on the skills discourse by specifying the kinds of “Knowledge, Skills and Dispositions” central to Literature education. Yet, if Literature education is about citizenship education, there needs to be clearer discussion of how it can provide the space for non-essentialist, dynamic explorations of what it means to be both national and global citizens. In such a curriculum, an expanded text list would allow all students to read Singapore *and* global literature alongside each other to explore notions of citizenship in local and global contexts (Loh 2009). Understanding the dominant view of Literature education in Singapore explains the resistance to the absorption of other emergent trends such as the inclusion of multimodal or hybrid texts (Lewis & Dockter 2011) or world literature, including translated texts (Choo 2012) into the syllabus.

Conclusion

Curriculum reviews come fast and furious in the Singapore system as responses to both the needs of nation and the winds of globalisation. Yet, rather than being fundamental reassessments of the aims and purposes of Literature education for the 21st century, revisions and changes in the syllabus and assessment tend to reinforce existing views. Educators trained in their specific disciplinary traditions have strong loyalties to particular historical versions of their subject (Luke 2004), which in the Singapore case, includes a blend of New Criticism notions of textual analysis and Leavisite notions of Great Books. As such, there is more continuity than transformation with each evolution of the Literature syllabus and assessment in Singapore. The skills-focus of TSLN has been interpreted to reinforce New Criticism’s decontextualised aesthetic readings. The

addition of Singapore texts as a result of NE do not detract from the emphasis on close reading and great books.

Perhaps an appeal to the utilitarian sensibilities, the governing ideology for curriculum change, might be appropriate at this point: in a global world of increasing flows and need for connection between people and places, Singapore students need to become more flexible users of language and more thoughtful citizens. Equipping Singaporeans to be future-ready means that all students should be taught read both word and world critically. To do that, the curriculum should shift in two ways: Firstly, the curriculum needs to emphasize a criticality that is beyond a technical skills-based analysis of text. While decontextualized close analysis has its place, students need to understand that contexts of place influence both writing and reading of literature. In an increasingly multilingual and networked world, students need to understand that histories and politics of place are embedded in the stories read, and that our own individual readings come with our own histories and prejudices. Secondly, students need to be expose to a greater number of texts that engage with contemporary, culturally-relevant issues pertinent both to Singapore as home and the world as home. Broadening the text list to include greater diversity of texts from within Singapore and beyond Western canonical borders (including translated texts) will allow students to see the world, with all its diversity and complexity.

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¹ Given Singapore's small size, education is centrally controlled by the Ministry of Education and syllabus documents written by the Curriculum Planning and Development division provide direction for text choice and teaching.