

Written Representation 76

Name: Singapore Unbound

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Revitalize the Study of the Humanities: Submission to the Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods

Summary

The meaning of individual facts is always, and already, embedded in narratives. As such, Singaporeans should be exposed to all competing narratives and be trained to discern between them. This training is best conducted in schools through the study of literature and history. To revitalize the study of the humanities prepares all Singaporeans to respond with discernment to “deliberate online falsehoods.”

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A Singaporean citizen, I am the founder and organizer of the New York City-based literary non-profit Singapore Unbound. Our mission is to promote freedom of expression and equal rights for all. We organize the biennial Singapore Literature Festival in NYC and the monthly Second Saturdays Reading Series, both of which bring Singaporean and American authors and audiences together for in-depth conversations about literature and society. We publish works by authors of Asian heritage through our literary imprint Gaudy Boy. Our first title is an American edition of Alfian Sa'at's short-story collection *Malay Sketches*.

I am also a poet and essayist, whose last book of poems was named by UK's *Financial Times* as a Best Book of the Year. My books have been published in the UK, the USA, and Singapore. I read English at the University of Oxford (First Class Honors) and completed my Master in Fine Arts (Creative Writing) at Sarah Lawrence College. I am now teaching English Literature at a K-12 independent school in New York City.

My submission to the Select Committee is based on my experience as a writer and arts activist, as well as a schoolteacher. I have taught for 12 years in my present school. Before this job, I was a teacher, department head, and vice-principal of a secondary school in Singapore for a total of 8 years.

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Because online activities cannot be separated from offline activities, I hope the Select Committee takes a broader view of its terms of reference beyond the electronic means of reading and writing. Looking more broadly at Singapore society, I am troubled by the recent moves by the present government to promote its narrow perspective about the

country while actively suppressing alternative narratives that try to add nuance, complexity, and humanity to the history of Singapore. This relentless twin process of promotion and suppression—through schools, media, and public celebrations—has driven many thinking Singaporeans to the internet to find alternative views and dissenting facts. It is the deep mistrust of Singaporeans toward the country's mainstream media that forces so many to seek online platforms to express and share their opinions.

Among the many instances of official suppression, these three spring to mind:

2014 - The Media Development Authority of Singapore (MDA) banned Tan Pin Pin's documentary film about Singapore's political exiles "To Singapore with Love" from public screenings.

2015 - The National Arts Council withdrew an \$8000 publishing grant from Sonny Liew's graphic novel *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* because its content, said the NAC, "potentially undermines the authority or legitimacy" of the Singapore government. The graphic novel has since won 3 Eisner Awards (the "Oscars" of the comic world).

2017 - The National Arts Council withdrew part of a creation grant from Jeremy Tiang's *State of Emergency*, a novel about Singapore's left-wing history.

"Deliberate Online Falsehoods" is a term of highly uncertain meaning, not because individual facts cannot be verified, but because the meaning of individual facts is always, and already, embedded in narratives. That Stamford Raffles landed in Singapore on 28 January, 1819, can be verified, but its meaning will always be in dispute. There are plans afoot to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the landing next year, plans which would have horrified Singapore's anti-colonial fighters, and which do horrify those of us who see the celebration as a capitulation to neo-colonialism. So whether a fact or an idea is considered a falsehood depends crucially on its function in a narrative.

Our problem, as I see it, is that the ability of Singaporeans to evaluate competing narratives has largely atrophied. Since young, Singaporeans have been imprinted with official images and slogans that all tell the same Singapore Story. The indoctrination continues in school where only one version of history is allowed. The same version is reinforced in the mainstream media after graduation from school. This process creates a very unhealthy culture because it leaves Singaporeans highly vulnerable to misinformation, distortions, and lies.

Singaporeans deserve better. They deserve to know all the competing narratives and they deserve to be trained, from young, to discern between them. In service of the first goal, we should liberalize the media environment, lift state censorship of the arts, and legislate a Freedom of Information Act. In service of the second goal—to re-grow the organ of discernment—we need to revise the curriculum and change the culture of our schools.

To train young Singaporeans to understand and evaluate complex narratives, the most vital disciplines are literature and history. Literature is essentially about complicated and conflicting narratives conveyed in the equally complicated and conflicted medium of words. A novel, if it is any good, must necessarily present different points of view. A poem, if it is any good, must necessarily present different ways of interpretation. It is no surprise that lawyers have been known to attribute their understanding of argumentation to their study of Shakespeare's sonnets. Just as vital as introducing good literature to students is introducing local literature. Students are then compelled to relate their reading to themselves and Singapore. To read Cyril Wong's poetry is to extend one's understanding of socially proscribed affections. To read Sonny Liew's graphic novel *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* is to grapple not just with Singapore history, but with its writing. The genuine study of history, not indoctrination, sends students back to primary sources. It gives students an appetite and a nose for the truth.

Unfortunately our schools have moved away from the teaching of literature and history for narrow instrumental and pragmatic reasons. If history is taught at the upper levels, it is taught, in the form of social studies, as a formulaic set of "thinking skills." It will take a great deal of ingenuity, determination, and effort to bring the study of humanities back. Media literacy training is vital, but it must be backed by a serious program in the humanities. My one specific recommendation is for all secondary schools in Singapore to teach Sonny Liew's *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* (Epigram Books) as part of a course on Singapore history.

After all, Singaporeans must be able not only to discern "deliberate online falsehoods," but also to debate the uses of the term.

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