

## *How Universities Can Help Develop Southeast Asia*

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ON AN OCCASION such as this it seems to me timely and appropriate to ask ourselves in what way a university, such as yours and mine, may be of maximum use and service to our common region of the Southeast Asian communities. To be able to suggest any kind of answer to this question, an answer that may have any merit and validity, we should not proceed without first recalling the basic nature and the specific purpose of a university. We should ever remind ourselves that a true university is not a social club, nor a political party, nor a business organization,

nor a center for sectarian or racial propaganda. It is primarily an intellectual center, a community of men and women seeking knowledge through the instrumentalities and processes of art, philosophy, and science. It pursues its career not to satisfy mere idle curiosity, nor to fill the empty hours of those who can afford to lead a life of ease and luxury, but rather to develop the mind and the spirit of man so that he may understand himself and his environment, improve his capacity to meet the problems of life, and make himself capable of rendering useful service to his commu-

nity and to human race. Thus we come to a university to prepare ourselves for service; for the ultimate purpose of a university is human service. Any departure from that purpose is a corruption of the idea of a university.

The universities in Southeast Asia are mostly young institutions when we place them side by side with the centers of higher learning in Europe. Perhaps the oldest university in this region of ours is the University of Santo Tomas in Manila which was founded by Catholic priests of the Dominican Order in the year 1611. But since the latter part of the last century and during the present century other universities have been established in different countries in Southeast Asia and their influence upon the education of the people has been steadily increasing. The benefits they confer on the individual and the group have been varied in direction, quality, and extent. The effectiveness of their performance and their academic standards doubtless account for such variations. But in addition to these causes, there are other factors affecting their program and work over which they could exercise but slight control. These factors proceed from the social, economic and political atmosphere of the nation where each one of these universities

is situated. This is naturally an unavoidable condition because the school and the university alone and by themselves do not exactly constitute an all-powerful agency that can determine the social temper and mold the national character.

Nevertheless, education is a major social force. To a certain extent it has the capacity to develop characteristics and traits which a nation particularly and passionately desires. Therefore the social preferences and the established character of a people give color and shape to its nature, aim, and direction. A democratic society is likely to produce a system of education that gives emphasis on the development of individual initiative and individual freedom. An aristocratic society may be expected to encourage a system of higher education designed to produce a ruling class. A highly materialistic society promotes an educational system directed towards the enhancement of purely economic ends, technical efficiency and physical strength.

The program of higher education and the mission of a university to advance the frontiers of learning impose on the university the responsibility of keeping the educational system of the country ever dynamic and ever watchful of new and progressive ideas and ever ready

to try to assimilate, and to disseminate them. The successful accomplishment of this task requires a condition in which the free play of the university, on the one hand, and the social organization as well as the political system, on the other, is not only made possible but is actually encouraged as interacting forces.

We are fortunate... that we live in an age of expansion of democratic ideas, a growing appreciation of democratic practices, and a gradual understanding of the basic advantages of a democratic social and political system. It is true that this system today is far from being Utopian. It is likewise true that actual democratic procedures in the political field are still in their early stages in many countries in Asia and Africa today where they are often disregarded as they clash with ancient tribal practices or adverse traditional customs. One significant thing, however, cannot escape our attention, and that is the growing sentiment against any attempt to throw a monkey wrench on the gear wheels of the machinery of democracy even in the newly independent nations that have arisen in the last few years. This sentiment of disapproval against any action that seeks to thwart or to suppress democratic practices is observable even in the

older independent nations where the spirit of authoritarianism and reaction now and then gains adherence from ambitious elements aspiring for special privileges and undue advantages. The role of a modern university is to develop insistently those ideas which encourage the creation of social conditions conducive to a deep understanding of the values of democracy.

This is the challenge to the universities in Southeast Asia. With this statement, it is not meant that European and American universities cannot contribute much towards this end for this part of the world. They have done so and are still doing it. In many ways learning and education are universal in their character and Western universities have been centers of democratic ideas.

**B**UT EVERY COUNTRY and every region have their special problems, conditions, and needs arising from particular features of their histories, their customs, their traditions, their social outlook, and their ways of living. For these reasons, every university in Southeast Asia should feel as its special obligation to perform those distinctive services which no university in any other part of the world with a different social environment and directly serving peoples with distinct

needs and idiosyncracies may be able to perform with a large measure of interest, enthusiasm, and familiarity.

These considerations should convince us of the error or the inadequacy of indiscriminately importing the educational practices of foreign countries in their entirety. We should realize the nearsightedness of a policy that merely copies the pattern of Western educational systems and their specific methods and procedures. The wiser policy to follow, in my opinion, is to adjust the pattern, the process, and the practice of our universities to the distinctive character of each of the countries in Southeast Asia, taking into account our own conditions and our immediate need for mutual understanding and co-operation.

An imitation of Harvard in the Ryukyus, of Columbia in the Philippines, of Sorbonne in Vietnam, of Cambridge in Malaya, of Oxford in Thailand, of Leyden in Indonesia might impress thoughtless people and superficial scholars who think of universities not in terms of agencies for the development of their geographical environment and the cultivation of the national ethos but as institutions isolated from the society in which they are physically located. But a university is incapable of rendering usefulness

to the nation if it stands apart, psychologically, spiritually, and socially, as an ivory tower. The learning a university pursues, the scientific ideas it produces, the researches it undertakes must be useful to the place and the people where it is located, otherwise the university will be a mere luxury or a costly toy. It should be able to draw from the cultural assets of the nation, to develop them to the highest degree of excellence, and to offer them as its distinctive contribution for the enrichment of human knowledge.

In expressing these views, it is not suggested that a university in Southeast Asia should take pains to promote the spirit of ultranationalism. A university never can be an ultra-nationalist; for if it works toward that end it is bound to die as a university. It will be no more than a center of bigotry, encouraging pettiness of spirit, promoting emotional prejudices, and working against the very purpose and aim of a higher institution of learning.

On the other hand, a university in this part of the world cannot afford to neglect the study of the great philosophical thoughts of China, India, and other Asian countries while studying the basic ideas of the West. It cannot afford to disregard the need for a deeper acquaintance with the lang-

uages, the histories, the cultures of the countries in Southeast Asia and other parts of Asia. Such omission is not only wrong but in a sense culturally perfidious. But again, in our desire to develop what is distinctively our own culture, it would be equally wrong to turn our minds away from the great ideas of the advanced societies of the world. That would be fatal.

Most of Southeast Asia lies in what has been described as the underdeveloped areas of the world. The idea of an underdeveloped country is that of a land that has not experienced a satisfactory measure of industrial development and an advanced system of agriculture; and its people do not enjoy a satisfactory standard of living. In a general way, an underdeveloped country is a materially poor country, economically backward, and educationally unprogressive. These are the factors that economic thinkers and Western leaders consider as signs and characteristics of underdevelopment. Perhaps we might question the use of some of these criteria for classifying a country as underdeveloped. At any rate, the degree of development which a people should attain is not easy to define in absolute terms. For each nation has its conditions by which to determine

the attainment of the good life, the life of peace, happiness, material welfare, and spiritual satisfaction. It is the university of the country that should identify the proper standards of development and should devote its energies to helping the people attain the proper conditions of progress and general well-being.

**T**HERE IS NO institution better than the university to develop men and women capable of understanding the use of science and technology in the solution of the agricultural, the industrial, and other economic problems of the country. Poverty is a normal condition in many places in Southeast Asia. Nowhere is the statement that the poor is always with us more applicable than among peoples in this part of the world. This is a serious problem among us. It is not merely economic in its effects but also social and political. To abolish poverty altogether is well-nigh impossible. Its causes are not confined to economic and social conditions but are also traceable to personal and individual habits and conditions. But it is certainly within the realm of possibility to abolish a general condition of abject poverty. Mass unemployment, especially the involuntary kind, is primarily a problem that addresses itself to social leadership, eco-

nomic enterprise and political statesmanship. But these instruments of amelioration could acquire a great degree of effectiveness with the aid of the education which universities provide. The application of the physical and biological sciences in such activities as agriculture, fishing, forestry, manufacturing is rendered highly feasible through experiments and researches in the laboratory and workshops of the university.

The development of trained craftsmen and technicians in polytechnic schools is not easy of attainment without the assistance of the university in the educational preparation of men and women who are to handle or manage the classrooms and students of these institutions. For let us remember that the skills and techniques required for an efficient operation of farms, fisheries, and factories have to change and improve if economic development is to continue meeting the increasing needs of fast growing populations. The university has to provide the kind of men and women that could help turn out workers capable of meeting these changes. For it is not enough for a country to have highly qualified engineers and top-level scientists. An extensive economic development cannot take place without skilled craftsmen and ordinary

technicians. The countries in Southeast Asia are in great need of these classes of workers. Their vast natural resources on land and at sea will remain greatly undeveloped unless well-trained workers are made available for their proper exploitation. Capital investments, whether local or foreign, will not be capable of solving the problems of development without numerous trained hands under the supervision and management of superior administrators.

But we cannot even begin to plan for economic development, for the abolition of poverty, for the raising of our standards of living if the problem of peace and order in our communities does not receive constant attention from those entrusted to perform this duty. This is principally a problem of government. Disregarding for the moment the serious troubles and disorders arising from foreign sources, the maintenance of internal peace within each country in Southeast Asia should naturally be the concern of the police. But experience shows that the solution that the police or other armed forces usually provide is no more than a temporary expedient, uncertain in its effects and doubtful in its efficacy. A more lasting stability and greater assurances of security to life

and property could be expected only through the creation of a preponderant majority of educated persons in every community who understand not only their individual rights but also their personal and social obligations as citizens of a free nation.

Thus, it is increasingly realized by governments all over the world, governments led by men and women who are moved by a deep sense of responsibility, that the tranquility of the nation can be better safeguarded through the inculcation of civic education among the masses and through the advancement of higher education of those who hope to be their leaders. No wonder then that in several countries today, countries that cannot be considered underdeveloped in any sense of the word, public funds spent for education are constantly being increased to figures exceeding even those set aside for military defenses. The leaders in Southeast Asia would be doing work of high statesmanship if they follow the samples set by these countries giving the highest priority to public investments for education.

**9** HOPE THAT this brief description of the problems common to Southeast Asia will give us an idea of the role that the universities in this region are expected to play if they

should faithfully perform their fundamental obligation of serving the individual and society in this part of the world. They might be recreant to their duty if they leave to European and American universities the sole task of preparing men and women for the various fields of activity in these areas. They have to assume the responsibility of producing the type of scholars, scientists, and technicians that can best understand the difficulties of the problems peculiar to this region. To make themselves equal to this important assignment, our higher institutions of learning should improve their performance and raise their educational standards to the highest possible degree. This is the first duty of every university if it is to win the respect of the academic and the scientific world and if it is to attract to its halls the most highly qualified and intellectually gifted men and women in the different Southeast Asian countries. For purpose of giving the proper culture and education better suited to their environment, our universities should do what is necessary for keeping our future workers and leaders right here. From the point of view of financial and economic considerations, no country in Southeast Asia is in a position

to support the number of men and women for higher training abroad.

But the work of each university in this respect could be enhanced and rendered more effective by cooperation with other universities. There are different ways by which this could be accomplished. One is through the establishment of a strong, active, and compact association of colleges and universities in the different countries in Southeast Asia, an association with energetic members moved by a vision of a progressive and self-reliant Southeast Asian community. It should plan a program of constant and regular contacts with one another through regional bilateral conferences. It should provide a system of exchanges of visiting professors and advanced or graduate students. It should have a common publication to which scholars and scientists of the different univ-

ersities should contribute the product of their studies and researches. It should provide for an exchange of publications issued by the different universities and of books and pamphlets written by their respective professors. In addition to the association of colleges and universities, mutual cooperation and more effective understanding could be achieved by the establishment and maintenance of one or more associations of individual scholars, scientists, and leaders of the different countries of Southeast Asia.

Through these different methods and devices, we may yet hope for the development of a strong and well-knit community of the countries in this particular region of the world that can be instrumental in raising the standards of living, in strengthening the cause of democracy and freedom, and in promoting peace and prosperity through education.

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### Empirical Guesses

*"He drove straight to his goal," said the political orator. "He looked neither to the right nor to the left, but pressed forward, moved by a definite purpose. Neither friend nor foe could delay him nor turn him from his course. All who crossed his path did so at their own peril. What would you call such a man?"*

*"A truck driver," shouted someone from the audience.*