Arts & Humanities

Classics à la Mode?

Why traditional humanistic education is worth fighting for.

By
Wm. Theodore de Bary '41CC, '53GSAS, '94HON
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The question of how to reconcile the needs of liberal education with the outward thrust of major research universities toward the frontiers of new knowledge is one that has bedeviled all serious educators for the past century. When Charles McGrath reported on the state of general education at Harvard in The New York Times' Education Life section on January 8, 2006 ("What Every Student Should Know"), he must have realized from the troubled history of the program there how intractable its problems had proven almost since the publication of the Harvard Red Book on General Education in a Free Society (Harvard University Press, 1945). Matters became even more problematic in the 1970s with a reform that loosened up the program to accommodate different methodologies or ways of learning. What emerged was an intellectual smorgasbord without a main course.

The term general education, which had gained currency through President Robert Hutchins's adaptation of the Columbia model to the University of Chicago in the 1930s, was troublesome because "generality" could be taken in two different senses: one, what is common or shared; the other, what could be generalized ad infinitum through different "ways of knowing." It was of course the latter that became the preferred understanding of departments interested in showing how their own methodologies could be the launching pad for unlimited explorations of scientific frontiers. So pervasive was this trend all over the U.S. that by the 1980s even humanities departments tended to identify themselves with postmodernist conceptual strategies in special languages incomprehensible to most humanists. Eventually this led to a new fashion in interdisciplinary studies that tried to bridge the gulf in understanding between different departments and their competing

jargons.

The earlier form of what came to be known as general education emphasized commonalities rather than differences. The Columbia program embodied unifying principles that can still be instructive as we work to develop core curricula for the 21st century. As set forth by Mark Van Doren ’21GSAS, ’60HON in his Liberal Education (Beacon Press, 1943), the undergraduate learning process was to be “liberal” in the sense that it liberated the capacities of the individual, enabling one to become a fully developed person through self-understanding, self-cultivation, and self-control. For Van Doren, Jacques Barzun ’27CC, ’32GSAS, and others who led this early initiative in the ’20s and ’30s at Columbia, the key was how this process should focus on perennial issues in civilized life and core values as expressed in the classics.

In their day, a major issue had arisen over what would become of the classical traditions of Western humanities once Greek and Latin (and perhaps Hebrew) were no longer required languages in the 20th century. The obvious answer for Columbia professor of literature John Erskine 1900CC, 1903GSAS, ’29HON was to read them in translation. Erskine did not hesitate to define a classic as a work whose intrinsic value survived translation. Whatever the differences of cultural context or the linguistic nuances that might be lost, the substantial concerns of human life could be recognized, both in their commonality and in their diversity. To purists, Erskine asked, “How many people read the Bible in the original?”

Here neither the defining of a canon nor the propounding of eternal verities was the point. Identifying perennial concerns and inveterate human dilemmas was. And the mark of a classic was that it continued to speak to generation after generation. In this sense classics have attained the status of human artifacts simply by their survival. They have become confirmed as cultural monuments age after age.

Although Mortimer Adler ’23CC, ’29GSAS, as professor of philosophy of law at the University of Chicago, packaged the classics as “One Hundred Great Books,” there was no such fixed number in Erskine’s original honors course, which served as the model for what became the humanities course required of all Columbia undergraduates in and after 1937. A key document in this process was Classics of the Western World (American Library Association, 1934) compiled by such distinguished scholars and public intellectuals as Adler himself, Barzun, J. B. Brebner, Irwin Edman, Richard McKeon ’20CC, ’28GSAS, and Lionel Trilling ’25CC, ’38GSAS.

A noteworthy feature of this early syllabus was its open educational horizon. Its proponents thought of themselves as engaged in adult education in general and taught the same classics in downtown New York at the People's Institute at Cooper Union. Classics spoke to working people as much as to Ivy League undergraduates. They could be read and discussed on any level of learning, from high school to continuing education, alongside vocational or professional training. In this way, they could provide general education in the sense of what is "common or shared" — not so much what is infinitely diffuse.

The idea that other civilized traditions could contribute to this process had no difficulty being confirmed by the inclusion of the recognized classics of other major traditions. In the 1960s and '70s, countercultural critics of the Great Books raised the objection that they were just the "leavings of dead white boys." Yet this argument fell to the ground before the obvious fact that each civilization had its own "artifacts" to contribute to the process, global in scope.

At Columbia, no assumption was ever made of the primacy of European classics. As early as 1948, in Asian humanities and Asian civilization courses, the program of study that would come to be called the Core Curriculum had absorbed the recognized classics of Eastern cultures. Some judgement had to be exercised in identifying the major traditions or civilizations to be focused on in these two one-year courses; in our case Islamic, Indian (including both Buddhist and Hindu traditions), Chinese, and Japanese. That judgement, however, was almost made for us, given our assumption concerning the nature of any tradition or canon: that it be self-defining and self-confirming. Thus it was not for us to find counterparts to Western classic models but only to recognize what Asians themselves had long since ratified as classics. Within each major tradition, this dialogue has taken place through a process of constant cross-referencing and back-referencing.

Recently at Columbia's Heyman Center for the Humanities, a project was launched as an experimental model for such a multicultural approach to a core curriculum, global in scope. It takes the form of a junior-senior colloquium, dealing with perennial themes of human life as revealed through major works of both East and West. In the present sequence the theme is the classic one of nobility and civility, issues of leadership and civil society common to all major civilizations. This fits the idea of a core that deals with central human issues that should never be out of sight on any level of learning.

The most recent challenge to the Core Curriculum has come from those who believe that priority should be given to theory — especially to different epistemological theories. But as the German scholar Karl-Heinz Pohl at Trier University has pointed out, most of the theories advanced in the recent culture wars "are matters of fashion and zeitgeist, fluctuating à la mode. . . . If one focuses on the most up-to-date Western themes, China and the other Asian countries will always lag behind, trying to catch up with the hot themes of yesterday, not of today. . . . What now appears to be "haute culture" ends up being "haute couture," a question of style fluctuating à la mode" (The Study of East Asian Civilization, National Taiwan University, 2004). When we speak of great books or masterpieces of music and art, we are talking about works that still speak to us directly and personally across the centuries. They may be subject to interpretation and deeper investigation — indeed they even command interpretation because of their intrinsic importance and perennial appeal — but you do not need an elaborate theory to get something meaningful from them.

This alone, however, is not enough to ensure the survival of the classics in the 21st-century world. Much depends on whether students have access to them in the modern curriculum. Today in the bustling new cities of the Pacific Rim, the surge of a global economy and high-tech culture put all such humanistic learning in jeopardy. Upwardly mobile younger generations are susceptible to the lure of New Age gurus like the elder statesman of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, whose spectacular success in modernization lets him speak with authority even on such subjects as Confucianism. He affirms it as a family system and work ethic that has sustained Chinese life over the centuries but which must now be adapted to modern needs:

> *Fundamental values must be maintained: the emphasis on responsibility for the care and education of one's children, to teach them to be filial, to be loyal to family and friends, to be thrifty and modest, to study, work hard and become a scholar, to grow up to be a gentleman (junzi); they have sustained the continuity of Chinese civilization and saved it from the oblivion that has been the fate of other old civilizations.*

Today, however:

> *The [Chinese] economy is driven by new knowledge, new discoveries in science and technology, innovations that are taken to the market by entrepreneurs. So while the scholar is still the greatest factor in economic*

> *progress, he will be so only if he uses his brains not in studying the great books, classical texts and poetry, but in capturing and discovering new knowledge, applying himself to management and marketing, to banking and finance, and to the myriad new subjects that need to be mastered. Those with good minds to be scholars should also become inventors, venture capitalists and entrepreneurs; they must bring new products to the market to enrich the lives of people everywhere. (The Straits Times, April 22, 2004)*

For Lee, Confucianism has a use as a family or work ethic, but not for study on a humanistic level, which would enable one to engage in public life as an educated, articulate citizen of a democratic civil society.

So powerful is the attraction of this modernized “Confucian” work and study ethic to ambitious young people in East Asia that it is having an effect even in places that had served for the preservation of Confucian culture in exile. New Asia College in Hong Kong and universities in Taiwan, which had prided themselves earlier as diasporic centers of Confucian learning, now feel themselves beleaguered by students bent on global and high-tech success.

Today Confucian teaching is nowhere a part of a general requirement in China or elsewhere in East Asia, nor is there any significant movement to include the study of the Chinese classics as part of a core curriculum. Save for a few excerpts found in high school courses, the classics are studied only by a few majors in the field, as part of a specialized departmental program, not as part of everyone’s general education. Even those who had lent themselves earlier to the Western trend toward general education find themselves desperate to sustain any place for the study of the Chinese classics.

This widespread fact does not lend much support to the idea that traditional values will contribute much to democratization or to any potential modernization. Yet, the issues raised here have their counterparts in the effects of globalized technology on any humanistic education considered essential to reasoned public discourse in a democracy. Lee’s proposal to pursue high-tech training instead of studying the great books and classics coincides with a question prominently raised by Andrew Solomon in the op-ed columns of The New York Times on July 10, 2004. He laments the dramatic decline in book reading in contemporary culture and the atrophying of the mind — “The Closing of the American Book,” as he headlines it. Reading books, he

says, “requires effort, concentration, attention. In exchange, it offers the stimulus and the fruit of thought and feeling.” On the other hand, he says:

> *As an example of this, the electronic media…tend to be torpid. Despite the existence of good television, fine writing on the Internet, and video games that test logic, the electronic media by and large invite inert reception. Without books, we cannot succeed in our current struggle against absolutism and terrorism. The retreat from civic to virtual life is a retreat from engaged democracy, from the principles that we say we want to share with the rest of the world. You are what you read.*

Thus the problem of keeping classics, whether one’s own or others’, as the core of any liberal education is a global one, and its solution is unlikely to be found simply in showing respect for local tradition or cultural diversity. Unless the classics of all major civilizations can find a place in a core curriculum that is focused on agreed values that guide the globalization process, it will not meet the most fundamental needs of an increasingly interdependent world.

Wm. Theodore de Bary is John Mitchell Mason Professor of the University and provost emeritus, and was chair of the department of East Asian languages and cultures. His latest book, Nobility and Civility: Asian Ideals of Leadership and the Common Good*, was published by Harvard University Press last year.*

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