

Notes on Why Friends, Why Friendship into Poems

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Abstract

History is especially important in a nation that does not have a long past. For the writer who has to work in cross-cultural terms, the study of English Literature would have stressed the importance of a working history, tapped to provide a sense of context, location and continuity. This is the case with Singapore, which is without a direct historical hinterland. But because it is small, economically strong and politically stable, there is need for the writer to construct missing continuities. This he does by looking not only at the past, but also into the present, its multi-racial, multi-ethnic character. For the present case, friends are both the crystallisation and detailing of this precise historical context, essential for the penetration of both contemporary culture as well as their antecedents. They represent experience as well as repository, a combination that makes them excellent conduits. In the case of Singapore, these cultures mean for the writer specifically the Chinese, Indian, Malay and Eurasian.

Keywords

Friendship, history, nation-making, linkages, colonialism, cross-cultural creativity

Octogenarians who were born, grew up and spent most of their lives at home in Southeast Asia lived, *inter alia*, through colonialism, war, military occupation, liberation, post-war recovery, the traumas that can follow the first flush of sovereign independence, the mobilisation of nationalism as a constructive force, the search for identity, cross-cultural encounters and an accelerating globalisation. Each would have been close, personal, with some of their forces still unravelling. In many areas and instances “post-colonial” – used literally, not theory-loaded – politics has yet to become history. Try to imagine what the totality of these experiences have meant to both nation and individual, how singular and collective expectation, hope and vision were generated, abandoned, modified, renewed and so on, in terms of the means. This leads to question about roots, question about identity.

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Prior to the emergence of international/world languages, i.e. before global colonialism, Literature was – from all major points of view – an intrinsic part of, and closely identified with, a nation's inheritance, life and continuity. They grew together; they changed together, with a unique, intimate mutuality. Secondly, Literature serviced and developed its language – whose vitality and reach were crucial – through the genius of its bards and writers. It was a part of a unique semiotic *satu bangsa, satu agama, satu bahasa*. A neat formulation; a durable state of affairs. But I would like to draw out a fourth pillar, one so deeply implicit that it is assumed: *satu Negara*, without which the first three would not be possible, or safe, or stable. One nation. Together the four constitute a unity that is historical, evolved, continuing, total and comprehensive. They ensure nationality and validate words such as France and French, Japan and Japanese, China and Chinese, Germany and German, Brazil and Brazilian, the Philippines and Filipino, Thailand and Thai, Cambodia and Cambodian. These terms retain their validity despite the fact that there is no country which is 100% homogenous. There are differences of various kinds, ranging from variations in language to different religions. Another example will be the social and economic stratification that we can find in almost every society. But there are those nations, ex-colonies, which are not *satu* because they were created with more than one *bangsa, agama, bahasa*, either because colonial boundaries drew them into a single entity or imported immigrants on a very large scale. Singapore is a classic example. The different groups co-existed, lived and worked under the watchful eye of the colonial masters who controlled. With independence, the dynamics inevitably changed, creating racial and other serious tensions. Unless resolved to the satisfaction of the smaller groups, it leads to conflict which leaves a nation that is divided. The *satu* is legislated, enforced, not evolved to reconcile diversity and difference among the groups. The journey to unity is that much longer and challenging. That was the experience of the older Singaporeans, I among them. What follows is a short account of that journey.

Nations expand when they are strong, and contract – or are subjugated – when weak. That is obvious. But what is less so is the difference between contiguous conquest of distant places, separated by sea and ocean, made possible only by the development of distant sailing as a sustained activity. The Phoenicians achieved this in the 4th and 3rd centuries BC but kept themselves chiefly within the Mediterranean although they sailed beyond the Pillars of Hercules to Cornwall for tin and possibly circumnavigated Africa. The Egyptians under Hapshetsut sailed to Punt. And Cheng Ho, who in the 15th century mounted six expeditions into the Indian Ocean, visiting its major trading cities as well as exploring the East Coast of Africa, had the means but did not develop any long-term outcomes because of constraints placed upon him by the successor

of his patron the Yongle Emperor who had supported him.² It was the Spanish and Portuguese who mounted expeditions that led to colonial settlements on a global scale, starting modern Colonialism. Prince Henry the Navigator invested a great deal in the development of sea-going capacity by improving ship design, charts and other navigational aids. Bartolomeu Dias had been exploring south, past Cape Verde Islands right down into the Gulf of Guinea. In 1492 he rounded the Cape of Good Hope, opening a direct route to India, which Vasco de Gama then reached in 1498. In the other half of the world, Christopher Columbus reached America in 1492. That began Spanish interest in the Caribbean and Central America. The Treaty of Tordesillas, 1494, divided these newly discovered lands and routes between Portugal and Spain along a meridian 370 leagues west of the Cape Verde islands. It explains why Brazil's is Portuguese, and the rest of Central and South America Spanish speaking; why the Philippines was Spanish and Malacca and Macau, Portuguese. Lopes de Sequeira arrived in Malacca in 1509 and Miguel Lopez de Legaspi from Mexico in 1565 when Spanish colonisation of the Philippines began in earnest after they had consolidated their Central and South American power through the efforts of Hernan Cortes and Francisco Pizarro.

These were encounters of starkly different civilisations which differed in virtually all the determinants which mark a society,³ the major ones being Folkways, Myths, Religion, Philosophy, Aesthetics, Language, History, Family and Social structure. It is the content of these that shape both society and individual. It is the difference in content of these that on the one hand define their uniqueness, and on the other separate them, nation from nation. It is these differences – which should never be overlooked, and be kept constantly in mind – that led to the inaccuracies and biases in the depiction of races that the colonisers first encountered. There was the inevitable sense of superiority. We can cite umpteen instances, touching on every area of life. But perhaps this paragraph from Thomas Babington Macaulay formulated in 1835 is enough to show what I mean:

It will hardly be disputed, I suppose, that the department of literature in which the Eastern writers stand highest is poetry. And I certainly never met with any orientalist who ventured to maintain that the Arabic and Sanscrit poetry could be compared to that of the great European nations. But when we pass from works of imagination to works in which facts are recorded and general principles investigated, the superiority of the Europeans becomes absolutely immeasurable. It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say that all the historical information which has been

² For details, see Gavin Menzies, *1421: The Year China Discovered America*.

³ See Edwin Thumboo, "Self-images: Contexts for Transformations." *Management of Success*. Ed. Kernial Singh Sandhu and Paul Wheatley. Singapore Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989. 749-68.

collected from all the books written in the Sanscrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgments used at preparatory schools in England. In every branch of physical or moral philosophy, the relative position of the two nations is nearly the same. ("Minute by the Hon'ble T. B. Macaulay," Paragraph 15)

This evaluation of the classical inheritance of one of England's most culturally sophisticated possessions defines a bias, a conditioning that took years to self-correct. And that even after independence, some would say that the posture of European intellectual and other superiorities persist, though obviously reformulated. It is only now, through the efforts of Asian scholars and institutions has the achievement in various branches of human knowledge been brought into universal notice and given due recognition. Examples would be the work in optics done by Arab/Islamic scientists and the tremendous achievements of the Chinese written up in Joseph Needham.

It is such discrimination, putting down and dismissal, as a result of colonisation that I have added the fourth pillar, *satu Negara*. What I am going to say applies to the four pillars as well as the determinants I have listed. *Satu Bangsa* is very seldom disturbed to any significant scale: the natives retained their ethnicity, partly because they were considered, in the main, as being of a lower order/class and hence, there was little inter-marriage between coloniser and colonised. The British system of indirect rule generally left *agama* alone. In fact, apart from suppressing bloody practices including human sacrifice and cannibalism, the British generally left institutions dealing with spiritual and religious matters alone. When it came to language, English dominated. Native education was seldom officially promoted. Inevitably, there were exception, but these were few and far between. Because of its prestige, more and more of the colonised groups, especially those belonging to the upper-classes, began to have their children undergo an English education. It opened the way to government jobs, and to posts in British multi-nationals, which in Singapore included Gutheries, Harrison & Crossfield. It was a way to prosperity. An English education was by and large held at a premium. The consequences varied from the emergence of the Western Oriental Gentleman, WOG for short, immersed in British culture. Like all colonisers, the British sought various ways to extend their power. Quite often, they put the children of rulers through an education with this result in mind. This form of cultural, psychological and linguistic reshaping led to the creation of special schools. Readers of Kamala Markandia's *The Golden Honeycomb* would be familiar with one fictional account of what this colonial dominated special education meant for the power elite. In our part of the world, it led to the setting-up of the Malay College in Kuala Kangsa in which princelings and young nobility became in part English educated gentlemen who were gradually brought into the upper echelon of Civil Service

in both the Federated and Unfederated Malay States. Thus they worked side by side with British cadets recruited into the Malaysian Civil Service, starting out as Assistant District Officers, gradually moving up the hierarchy, having in the meantime acquired a certain British colonial style, at least in their work. Those with a military bent had their finishing school in Sandhurst.

The nation therefore, was subjugated. Its national power centre was replaced by a colonial one, British controlled and centred on trade, the export of raw materials and the import of manufactures, plugging the colony into the Imperial System. Local developments were centred upon this economy of empire. Examples would be road and railway systems, to open up more and more plantations and mines to provide raw material for Britain. This was the basic System. Other factors would be the development of colonies as part of an imperial network to support the movement of ships and later, imperial air routes.

My insights into these developments came from that education I had outside the formal system. The first instance of this was listening to my uncle who had come from China. He was leftist in his politics, bourgeois in his lifestyle, a combination he could enjoy because he was in Singapore, where the major influence on him was my granduncle, his uncle. He had been expected to develop an interest in the family business but showed no inclination, spending much of his time reading Marx, Engel and Mao, other leftist literature and Chinese Classical Poetry. He never really settled down and remained the exile, returning to China in 1951. These memories occupy my poem "Uncle Never Knew":

Often after rain, he would watch the day dry out.
But if a few fine drops caught the sun and glittered
Against that thinning blue strip of northern sky,
He was back in Swatow. At his table. Preparing
Ink and brush; fingering his father's piece of jade;
Intoning Li Po, Tu Fu, and reading Mao. Sipped tea;
Fed his carps, while waiting for his drinking friend. (19, 9-15)

In the interim, he taught me a great deal about history. The history of China and themes in the history of British Colonialism, which he saw as Imperialism of the worst possible kind, namely the imposition of foreign rule, language, culture and economic practices that benefited them and not the people. This was not surprising as there was nothing socialist about British rule. For me, listening to him was an eye-opener. He made me see that the standard of life that we had enjoyed and were enjoying belong to a class, an English-speaking middle-class that had compromised. It did not change me in any radical way, but it added fresh perspectives, a new set of eyes, an alternate interpretation to the British structured life around me. It was the beginning of that essential

political consciousness which was to expand and turn more sophisticated when I went to University.

By this time, I had perhaps a greater set of questions regarding life and contacts, questions connected to the fact that I was part Indian, part Chinese, and from an English-speaking home. In a sense, I was both double-limited insider, as well as an outsider. And it was the English education that made me the latter, as well as the fact that I was educated in neither Chinese nor Tamil, without which it was impossible for me to enter in any significant way the inheritance they offered. Let me add immediately that I never felt divided or handicapped in dealing with daily life. I had enough. I spoke Teochew, knew its nursery rhymes and enjoyed its music. The Tamil side was far more limited as my uncle and my aunts and my cousins were all English-educated and knew very little Tamil, if any at all.

It was at University that I realised the need for a strong hinterland. I felt that there were serious gaps, because of the interruptions. Apart from the relative hardship of the Japanese Occupation – there were moments of excitement when you were given responsibilities normally beyond your age – life had always been comfortable. But the sense of deficiency was intellectual, the need for ideas and perspectives to connect us young people to what we knew was a crucial unfolding national history. A sense of purpose that was not heroic but necessary. There was enough in discussion and sharing to feed and mature, to stoke the fires of nationalism. I was in search of a better poetry. One better suited to both the pulse of the times and the demands of craft working to be art. There was that close contact with English literature, the close reading of poems and plays, particularly the works of William Shakespeare, John Webster, Christopher Marlow, Ben Jonson, John Donne, George Herbert, Andrew Marvell and Richard Lovelace. And the Psalms in the King James translation of *The Bible*, Francis Bacon's *Essays* and Donne's *Sermons*, not to mention Thomas Overbury's *Characters*. And much else as we moved through English Literature towards the 20th century.

What struck me increasingly was the fact that the text was rich because it encoded a great deal, both directly and indirectly, the middle and foreground, the context *behind* the text. We read Arthur Lovejoy's *Great Chain of Being* and E.M.W. Tillyard's *Elizabethan World Picture* to provide a broader perspective behind the connotes and textures behind the poems we studied. There was that essential hinterland. As I was writing at the beginning of a tradition, a literature and English, I felt the need to construct for my own use a hinterland that took into account my possible inheritances in terms of culture and literature, to give my work a greater reach and resonance. An example of what I'm trying to do can be found in my poems, hopefully as and when the moment in the poem demanded this kind of resonance:

Perhaps having dealt in things,
 Surfeited on them,
 Their spirits yearn again for images,
 Adding to the dragon, phoenix,
 Garuda, naga, those horses of the sun,
 This lion of the sea,
 This image of themselves. (“Ulysses by the Merlion” 69, 42-48)

Chinese, Indians and Malays, i.e. most readers from Southeast Asia will be able to understand the sentiments and perhaps identify themselves with them. As part of this exploration and linkage, I took every opportunity I could find to suggest this cross-cultural sharing and melding. One example would be Hannuman’s place in “Conversation with My Friend Kwang Min at Loong Kwang of Outram Park”:

This jade pomegranate is succulent;
 That ivory boat will always sail to Mogadishu,
 Taking Cheng Ho by our city. In that corner,
 Intimidating himself, a cutish lion glares.
 Half-way up the wall, in porcelain,
 A rare Hannuman. He ravished the gardens
 Of Heaven, covered the gods one week-end,
 Was tamed and sinonised, absorbed, given a role,
 Then adventured home to India in search of texts.
 He scratches still, in kungfu fashion. (21, 13-22)

It was only after I started writing more poems to friends that I realised how, apart from all the personal links and sharing, friends are our special outposts of understanding; they are simultaneously a source of information and commentary – a rare combination – our doors of perception into other cultures, their cultures. This of course was an important but secondary benefit, the primary one being that giving and receiving which makes friendship profoundly enriching, central and archetypal. Nonetheless, the secondary benefit became primary when it came to the writing of poetry as I sought to draw in references inherent and illuminating from the diversity of their cultures

Looking back, it is clear that each phase of one’s life had its quota of friends. Unless circumstances are exceptional, friendships formed in early childhood and the time we spent in primary school tend to lose touch. We retain memories which we cherish and occasionally look back and relive. I still recall Su Hong Wan and Wong Yoon Say, who were with me at Pasir Panjang primary school, just before the outbreak of World War II. Had there not been war, we probably would have gone to the same secondary school, but war has a habit of interrupting and rearranging destinies. I am only in touch with Chua Wah Seng, who I came to know probably in 1937 when my grandmother and I

used to buy provisions from his father's shop at the junction of Mandai Road and the turn off the Singapore Zoo. We became schoolmates and classmates and renewed friendship when his son Chua Tse Wei (Damon Chua) won a playwriting competition, and we renewed friendship after a very long break. At secondary school, my close friends were Henry Chia, Boey Yew Hock, Aziz Karim, Peter Fernandez, A. Mahadeva, Tan Heng Hoe, Gan Poh Guan, Soh Chuan Seng, Goh Soon Kiang and Chew Beng Keng. There were two other groups of friends. The first were those associated with *Youth*, the combined secondary schools' magazine. I was editor for two issues and my schoolmate Henry Chia, business manager. I made three important friends, N. Suppiah, then Head Prefect of Raffles, Wong Kan Seng and Lee Hoe Guan,⁴ a former editor. Among those who lived in Monks' Hill Terrace, I came to know P. Silvadoray, John Rajah, Lim Kwang Hui, Goh Soon Teck and Boey Mun Onn. The years at the University (1953-57) brought a new set of friends, chiefly those who shared an interest in literature and in politics: Ee Tiang Hong, Llyod Fernando, Lim Tiong Kwee, Herman Hochstadt, Wong Phui Nam, Daniel Cobill Pillay, Jeyaraj Rao, K.J. Retnam, Ronnie Stock, Tan Han Hoe, Agoes Salim, Zainuddin Sulong, Rama Subbiah and my three roommates, Razak bin Hitam, Nelson Apputham and Krishna Iyer.

From this list, it is possible to gauge the cultural learning and exchanging. That learning did not stop at the University; they continued through Aziz Karim, a Victoria schoolmate; Rama Subbayah, a friend who was professor of Tamil Studies, University of Malaya;⁵ Yew Kwang Min, part-time lecturer at the University of Singapore, Department of Chinese Studies; Boey Yew Hock; Henry Chia; and Peter Fernandes.

But before discussing how they contributed to my development and understanding, especially the broadening of my literary interest to including translations from Singapore's other three official languages and their culture, in the cases of Tamil and Chinese, their larger hinterland in China and India, I would like to refer to a poem I wrote which stresses firstly the importance of friendship and secondly, the internationality of friends. Friendships are deeply influential. They help us strengthen and refine core values such as care,

⁴ Some idea of how such friendships went beyond first meetings, is the number of times Henry Chia (a powerful swimmer), Hoe Guan and Freddie Lai (who spent his time reading novels while on a Sultan Ibrahim scholarship), spent together. We used to cycle to the Lido, Johor Bahru, to swim. I was a poor swimmer, so when the three of them swam across to the Sultan's bungalow, I stayed on shore to look after out bicycles and clothes. I was perfectly happy as I had a copy of Michael Roberts' *Faber Book of Modern Poetry* with me. It was on that occasion that I committed T.E. Hulme's 36 lines of poetry to memory.

⁵ We became family friends and when he was killed in an accident in November, 1969 while trying to beat the 2-4 a.m. curfew that remained in following the May 13th Racial Riots in Malaysia, I became the guardian of his daughter who was then residing with his wife in Albania, until they migrated to New Zealand.

affection, responsibility, fairness, sacrifice and that essential putting of others before self. Thus we develop a good friendship that refines and develops us, and hopefully absorb what we find ennobling in each other. There is the equation linking two beings who in a way overlap, giving and receiving. Good friends are alter-egos of each other. We provide mutual aid. So special a friend can become that:

He will be one who won't mislead
Even himself; who for good reason
Will procure from the heart of
Silence courage enough to breach
A solemn promise; won't render his
Strength without distress, without
Reflecting on what means; whose ends,
So schooled is he to feel the way
Insouciance most wounds the self. ("Friend" 87, 5-13)

He makes the world for us and so:

... we rely on him
Each morning to bring the sun. (87, 26-27)

In this intimate sense, friends are an extension of family. I had brothers, sisters and cousins. But these friends were either closer to me in age, like Aziz, Boey, Henry and Peter or in the interests we shared, such as Yew Kwang Min and Wong Phui Nam, the well-known Malaysian poet. We shared the best hours of each week, Monday to Friday, in class and after class and often we stayed in each other's homes and with almost all of them shared some fundamental activity apart from the pleasures of an intimate friendship. I learnt the lifestyle of 4 of Singapore's racial groups and it helped me much in subsequent years to understand the challenges of reducing interracial prejudice on the one hand, and developing positive attitudes on the other. I learnt to swim from Henry, to play cricket from Peter and the life of a cadet from Aziz. Boey was an accomplished pianist, having been tutored by Victor Doggett, a well-known piano teacher. He introduced me to Chopin, Beethoven and Tchaikovsky. I used to listen to him play the piano, especially during the times when I stayed overnight. His family was Peranakan, and the times spent with him and his family taught me a lot about Peranakan culture, reinforcing my understanding of it from within the Chinese side of my family, which had a very strong Peranakan presence. All of us cycled, and spent time camping in Mandai during weekends or rented a kolek at Punggol End for a day. We rode across the Straits of Johor to Ayer Biru, which was also a popular picnic spot for groups:

One-day campsters all have left;
Wind blows
Cast-off papers, toffee-wrappers.
Dust shifts into the shed.
Where laughter swayed
Salt hums its song.
By the wishing-well
Shadows crowd.
Murmurs of an hour ago
Have left their voices.
Branches bend and leaf-whispers
Resolve into the foam-lips of the waves. (“Ayer Biru” 113, 4-15)

Equally important, the *neneke*, grandmother in Malay, who rented us the *kolek* for 50 cents a day, asked us to return early for a meal. It was my first introduction to Malay kampong home; I saw how house-proud they are. While they were not wealthy, everything was kept spick and span, from the patterned lanolin to the souvenirs her seafaring son sent back from various parts of the world. It was a preparation for staying with University friends who came from *kampungs* in Malaysia and lovely cool evenings listening to the winds sweeping through the *sawas* and beating off the mosquitos, watching the moonrise and the sound of *Walkin’ My Baby Back Home* on the guitar. Sense and sensibility grew constantly through such experiences.

It was a privilege to share so much of 4 cultures linked by the English language and yet creating a larger network than that language alone could provide. Through Peter I had my first experience of Christmas turkey and also how New Year’s Eve was celebrated with such zest and panache, best exemplified in the Eurasian New Year’s Eve Ball, normally held in the Victorian Memorial Hall. I could add much to show how friends were powerful nodal points of their culture. They were such marvellous conduits, friendly, giving, supplementing, in a way that no amount of reading could ever provide. As they say, it was all life, and genuine and continuous. This is why I was able to write the line: “My neighbour is another language,” to which I will now add, another language and all its content was my neighbour; is my neighbour. I kept up with all these friendships, 3 of which continued at the University where I made new friendships. The earlier ones became more intermittent over the years, but they never fractured or ceased.

These were local friendships, but given the nature of my work at the University which took me overseas, in particular during a spell as an external examiner at the University of Papua New Guinea. At some point it struck me that I had many friends named John. Moreover, they represented a marvellous range of life and experiences:

John Watson, John Tan,
 John Harniman, John Raja,
 John Cawelti, John Waiyaki,
 John Sinclair, John Kasaipwalova,
 Live by mountain, river,
 In the comfort of mythologies,
 Condominium, palm grove,
 Conical house of reeds,
 Hedged by files and duties,
 Separated by auguries, civilizations. ("John" 89, 1-10)

The list of Johns is not complete. Moreover, there have been moments when I've felt that some other Johns are more important to me than those mentioned in the poem, though by saying this I do not mean to reduce the friendship factor of any of the ones I listed. They are real people. The friendship usually started off with work. John Watson for instance, helped launch the famous Heinemann's Series. Working out of his office in Jalan Peminpin, he and Leon in Hong Kong were responsible for an impressive list which enhanced the appreciation of Asian writing. We spent a fair amount of time working on *Gods Can Die* (1977), especially in the selection of the cover. Many hours were spent on *The Second Tongue* (1976), which Keith Sambrook, the poetry editor of Heinemann London, liked very much and wanted to have a reprint when the first edition sold out.⁶ John Sinclair, who was professor of Modern English at the University of Birmingham and who set up and led the *Collins Birmingham University International Language Database* team, came to Singapore in 1973 to help with language matters. We remained very close friends till his passing in 2007. Much of the language work was guided by him with inputs from Michael Halladay and Braj Kachru. The archetypal Scotsman, we used to sing Scottish songs which were taught to me by Seamus Fraser while I was at Victoria School. We read Walter Scott's *The Last Minstrel*, which my father enjoyed in his younger days. Here was an instance of a friend being a conduit to another culture, with its history, in this case one that included British colonialism, thus serving as a reminder of what we went through ourselves, enriching my understanding through comparison. Scottish nationalism is of ancient vintage, as old as the Irish in their resistance to their first phase of British colonisation, its expansion within the British Isles.

The reader will notice that in *John*, these friends shared not only the Singapore experience with me, an experience that was both Singaporean, multiracial, but at the same time international, Asia (Japanese guitars) and beyond. The fellowship was of the spirit and the intellect:

⁶ I didn't go a long with the idea as I hoped that someone else, hopefully, would come with a new anthology which takes into account new poetry.

I know them all, know they
Can meet, be equal,
Cogitate, break bread,
Apportion chapatis over fish-head curry;
Dine subtly
On Leong's special cold dish, pickled cabbage
At the Emerald Room, amidst the Chinese
Orchestra, a taped Claire de Lune
Gently moving into
El Condor Pasa released
By fifty Japanese guitars. ("John" 89, 11-18)

In an important sense, when we meet a person, we meet another culture, another history, his own and his tribe's, when we share and interact. Our cultures are engaged, incidentally, by the way, and all the more interestingly and genuine for that. In the stanza following this, I suggest the wide ranging of conversation, ranging from the poetry of Yeats, Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy which led to Nixon's visit to China, a thawing of relationships which had enormous global impact.

The allusions to Harambee, Arjuna, Samia Gamal suggest that the conversations were topical and often witty. On my part, the reference to Harambee and The Burning Spear, was a direct reference to the Mao Mao rebellion/national uprising in Kenya as well as to the adoption of armed struggle by the African National Congress, especially the founding of its armed wing, making a reference to Umkhonto we Sizwe, that is "spear of the nation." I included "break bread" to suggest a certain special celebration of friendship to suggest there was something approaching the sacramental. On these occasions, there was the spirit of equality, of accommodation, of adding to each other's understanding of issues, without which friendship ceases to grow; becomes maimed. I need hardly add that there are friends who are not Johns, with whom there is the same sharing.

Perhaps the strongest example in my experience was the friendship with Yew Kwang Min, who I've previously mentioned. Kwang Min and his family, chiefly he and his brother, ran the family business which his father had founded. They imported a whole range of antiques as well as current art and craft from China. When I came to know him, the business had moved from Chinatown to Outram Park. It was in effect, the second generation Outram Park, since the first was demolished to give way for the present one. The third generation is in the same spot. For me Outram Park and that general area had memories. In this case, not of friendship but of loyalty manifest in how my father, who had been a member of MAS (Medical Auxiliary Service) evacuated from Mandai to the General Hospital with my mother, my sister, Lena and I. I had watched the Japanese tanks trundle down after the surrender and had to be

hushed as I clapped since the tanks were more interesting than the Brent gun carriers the British had. Moreover, years later, I learnt of the history of the mutiny by the Pathans, who were being sent to Turkey to fight their Muslim brothers. Those guilty had stood against the wall and were shot. The prison had been solid and grim. Kwang Min's shop was an education for me. As a Chinese scholar and someone who was dealing with Chinese artifacts, he was able to explain origin and significance, shape and colour of teapots, of statues, of embroidery; of figures such as the 8 immortals, panels that showed Saints from either the Three Kingdoms or Water Margin. By that time I had read into a fair amount of Chinese history and culture. Loon Kwang was an opportunity to touch, to feel that culture and in friendly instructive surroundings:

Among sensitive vases, silk birds lamenting
 Sullen, fading flowers; and those delicate golden
 Statues caught in some potent gesture.... You are
 Captured by serenity: Kuan Yin upon the lotus.

Conversation fades. Time splits itself.

There are centuries here, in these images.
 Many generations left these contemplations,
 Embodiments of hope, despair. In art. The art
 Of living; mounting better worlds. Man emerging
 From the dark made dreams, tamed nightmares
 Into lovely moving monuments, each a voice stealing
 Upon you, conversing softly out of its secret heart. ("Conversation with
 My Friend Kwang Min at Loong Kwang of Outram Park" 21, 1-12)

I will only make two comments, hoping the reader will respond to the poem. The third stanza sums up for me the great contribution of the major civilisations, that would include the Chaldean, the Egyptian, Indian and as noted here, the Chinese. The key sentences are mounting better worlds and emerging from the dark. For that is the march of civilisation. We know the horror that marks man's progress and how cruelty and destruction, at times wanton and beyond understanding, marked the journey at many points. The present turmoil in the world, death by suicide bombers for instance, are all too obvious examples that the journey is still fraught with dangers, yet at the same time we read of instances where the risen spirit saves and repairs. The second concerns, what for me is a major cross-cultural experience, namely the entry of Hanuman into the Chinese Canon. Hanuman is the Monkey King, he plays an essential part in the *Ramayana*, yet his place is unquestionably secondary. His status as Wukong is far larger, more deeply emblematic. He's far more mischievous Chinese-wise, yet at the same time has a powerful place in the Chinese

imagination. In a sense, his journey completes itself when he travels back to India in the Journey West, as guardian of the monk Xuanzhang.

The novel is a fictionalized account of the legendary pilgrimage to India of the Buddhist monk Xuanzang, and loosely based its source from the historic text *Great Tang Records on the Western Regions* and traditional folk tales. The monk travelled to the 'Western Regions' during the Tang Dynasty, to obtain sacred texts (sūtras). The bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (Guanyin), on instruction from the Buddha, gives this task to the monk and his three protectors in the form of disciples – namely Sun Wukong, Zhu Bajie and Sha Wujing – together with a dragon prince who acts as Xuanzang's steed, a white horse. These four characters have agreed to help Xuanzang as an atonement for past sins. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Journey_to_the_West)

This entry into Chinese Literature, obviously in translation for me, was aided and abetted by other friends such as Wong Yoon Wah, currently Professor of Chinese at the Southern University College, Scudai Johor. This has been the most durable Chinese literary friendship for me. I will not go into how it has been mutually beneficial and will instead say that without him, my understanding and appreciation of the growth of Chinese Literature in Singapore and Malaysian would be more limited than it is.

My education in matters Indian was spurred by Rama Subbayah, to whom I've made reference. I extended the contact I had with Indian presence in and contribution to Southeast Asia. As I said earlier, the hinterland at its strongest would be a combination of geographical as well as a historical-cultural one. In the early years I had hoped that the geographical one would be provided by Malaya. All the discussions at the University centred on the formation of a Malayan Malaysia. We had hopes despite the potential danger of Malaya becoming a Malay Malaysia, which it did, and which carried into the formation of Malaysia which included Singapore, Sarawak and North Borneo. It led to the rise of irredentist Malay feelings and nationalism, and finally to Singapore leaving Malaysia, to develop as a multi-racial, multi-lingual sovereign state with equal opportunity based on merit. I knew by that time the danger of racial and religious tensions, having witnessed the Maria Hertog Riots in Arab Street in 1950. I sought answers to the questions that started to form in my mind. Why did they riot? Because of religion compounded by racism. Why did we have many religions and races and languages? Why were we different? It took time for me to realise that history, our history, had the answers.

That history was early as well as modern. This includes the Indian penetration which started early in the first millennia and whose final push petered out in the 14th century, as well as the European colonialism which succeeded. We tend to forget that history is yesterday's politics whose doings

indwell in events and personages. Because the impact and constructions of early history are absorbed, and far less documented, in contrast, an interest in colonial history is far more easy to understand. And there were its residual institutions. They are part of an operative continuity. After all, the end of colonialism is the beginning of nationhood. But the earlier Indian penetration remains important for its structuring impact, the extent it permanently altered and enriched, chiefly in terms of certain religious, artistic and cultural norms. I will stress another reason, personal, embedded in my thinking and feeling, and in my work as a poet and critic. I realised further in 1956 when completing a BA that included a major in History that I needed a hinterland if I was to have a sense of time and place, of peoples, cultures, a varied and rich heritage to assemble after a fashion and tap, and quarry, and internalise, and feed my thinking and perceptions. There were more doors to open and explore, and to take as necessary. My instincts were largely sound. I am heartened by something I recently read, making a point directly related to the crucial sense of the past.

The reality of the modern republic of Indonesia does not deny the reality of the kingdoms of Majapahit and Mataram centuries ago. Accepting the reality of modern-day Thailand does not mean having to erase the historical reality of Ayudhaya or Patani, and so on. In Myanmar's struggle to identify itself and re-present its history, the reality of other polities and nations within Myanmar should not be forgotten either. That would be a loss to the cultural and historical complexity of the Asean region in general, and to Myanmar in particular. (Farish, "Myanmar struggles with its Plurality")

Of the nations which make up the region, only the Thais are colonial-free. In its present incarnation their nation grew from 14th century Ayudhaya, strengthening and benefiting from a *satu agama, satu bangsa, satu bahasa* society. Her evolution and emergence is in some ways emblematic of the other kingdoms in mainland Southeast Asia, their highest point being the achievements of the Khmer Empire, manifest most enduringly in the Angkor monuments. Their rise and fall, their re-configuring, the chief correlatives of the long south Indian penetration – chiefly cultural and religious – that started early in the first millennia leading to a succession of states and kingdoms. Among them were Funan, Champa, Butan, Dvaravati, Gangga Negara, Kutai, Kalingga, Kadaram, Lankasuka, Pagan, Tarumamagara and Tondo.⁷ Despite descending from Hindu power-centres with which they maintained links, they were politically independent and with their own distinctive identity which incorporated strong indigenous elements. The links with Mother India were fraternal, defined and

⁷ See George Coedes, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, ed. Walter F. Vella, trans. Susan Brown Cowing, Canberra: Australian National UP, 1968 and O.W. Wolters, *History, Culture and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982.

maintained by trade, religion and culture. The only instance of serious military action was the Chola attacks on Srivijaya in the 10th century. It is thus possible to see the pervasive influence – all the more potent for being soft – as creating, adding to and raising various institutions through *rajadharma* (Hindu and Buddhist beliefs, theology, codes and practices, customs and rules governing court life), theory of kingship, architecture, city planning, agriculture, art (especially dance) and the two master narratives, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, that exemplified and codified and taught the substance and spirit of life, from the behaviour of kings to the duties of peasant.

The rise of Srivijaya and Sailendra in Java and Sumatra and their control of surrounding areas as far north as Cambodia, helped to spread and consolidate this Indian-inspired, Indian-tabled cultural unity. These two kingdoms merged in the 9th century and were thus able to dominate Southeast Asia till the 14th century. The narrative is more complicated in Java and the area further east where the islands gained importance on account of their spices. Kediri rose in eastern Java. One of its princes founded Majapahit, the last great Hindu-Javanese kingdom which in mid-14th century controlled the larger part of Java, Sumatra, Malaya, part of Borneo, the Moluccas and the southern areas of the Celebes, thus displacing Srivijaya.

In all these political and dynastic changes, there was a fundamental sharing, a common cultural underpinning, a substrate identity; commonalities confirming the wide and thriving adoption of Indian elements from folklore, mythology, architecture, the sacred places they sought to re-create, the gods they enshrined, toponymic practices, to the presence of Sanskrit words in regional and local languages. This last reminds us that language is central to the life of a people, of a nation, and, equally, in the relationships between nations on all levels of contact. Unlike the languages of European colonialism, it was not imposed. It was part of cultural osmosis.⁸ Perhaps the most compelling examples among many – large and small, concrete and abstract – is how the Sanskrit *bhasa*, meaning language in general, is *bahasa* in Indonesian, Malay and Tausug, *basa* in Balinese, Javanese and Sundanese, *pheisa* in Khmer, *bhasa* in Burmese, and *phasa* in Thai and Lao. It would be equally instructive to trace the influence of *rasa* on the theory, vocabulary and practice of all art in the region. The depth, subtlety and suppleness of this penetration, carried the notion of *alus* – refinement and more – into all levels of society. It came to underpin and interlace religion, metaphysics, the mix and match of form and substance, melding and syncopating moments of art that appealed to two or more senses to evoke complex emotional and intellectual responses. Thus *rasa* generated a

⁸ I am reminded of Antonio de Nebrija's (Bishop of Avila) words in response to Queen Isabella's doubt about the usefulness of a grammar: "Madam, language is the perfect instrument of empire." *Gramatica Castellana*, 1492, Madrid: Junta del Centenario, 1946. 11.

higher meaning in dance, the cosmic import of architecture, the key moments in the life of divinity emblematised in sculpture and sacred chants and music. This ability – almost customary – to draw and so integrate into a single expressive action is exemplified in Arjuna’s “dance” I saw performed in the Karaton of Sultan the third of the five Pandava brothers, he plays a pivotal role in the *Mababharata*, one that accords with his name: “sliver,” “shinning,” “bright.” He is the ideal heroic figure, embodying all the virtues we expect. The perfect warrior. Before the great battle of Kurushetra, Arjuna saw in the enemy ranks:

34
 Teachers, fathers, sons,
 And also grandfathers,
 Maternal uncles, fathers-in-law,
 grandsons,
 Brothers-in-law, and other kinsmen.

35
 I do not desire to kill
 Them who are bent on killing,
 Krishna,
 Even for the sovereignty of the three
 worlds.
 Hoe much less then for the earth?

36
 What joy would it be for us
 To strike down the sons of
 Dhritarashtra, O Krishna?
 Evil thus would cling to us,
 Having killed these aggressors.

37
 Therefore we are not justified in
 killing
 The sons of Dhritarashtra, our own
 kinsmen.
 How, having killed our own people,
 Could we be happy, Krishna?

38
 Even if those
 Whose thoughts are overpowered
 by greed do not perceive
 The wrong caused by the destruction
 of the family,

And the crime of treachery to friends. (*Bhagavad Gita* 72-76)

He had the power to destroy and destroy utterly. But that power was subject to a strong code that distinguished right and wrong, mercy from hatred, right doing from brute action. There is much in the lines that relate directly to the stability of society and the surety of positive living: the value and importance of kinship, veneration for the *guru*, compassion and order. The deep moral dilemma Arjuna faces manifests in its physical impact described in the last three lines. The complex interplay of thought and feeling, the balance of right and questionable action, destruction and the respect for life, namely the density and reach of moral issues, came through the dance. When Arjuna moved to the left, his gestures were soft, the gathering and flick of his sash delicate, in harmony with his facial expression and head movement. It suggested doubt, hesitation, re-thinking. The music was calibrated accordingly, the flutes quivering, the gamelan gently flowing water. When he returned to that still point of his turning world, a pause, a change as a contrary mood, another set of insistencies, took over. A hardness in the face; his arms not hands moved, chopped the air as each step moved into dark spaces opened by the inconsiderate boom of heavy drums. The performance consisted of excerpts. I did not see how this combination of discourses would have handled the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna, with the language and significance of one art form is grafted on to another, as in dance and music whose intricate rhythms are both commentary on and an extension of eye, hand and body language that articulate his moral dilemma, all driven by why should I fight, and fight my relatives, why kill?

Notes do not have a final conclusion. The issues touched on here are so deeply interwoven with each other, including other essential ones I have not mentioned, and on my own growing up. Moreover, all this occurred in the context that is really complex. One merely needs to see the difference between the growth of a poet in a *satu* environment and the growth of a poet in a *satu bangsa, satu agama, satu bahasa, satu negara* situation where the *negara* has had a chequered history. I leave the reader, if he has stayed with me, with a single fact that perhaps sums up an octogenarian *in situ* experience. I sang *god save the king* then *kimigayo*, then *god save the king* again, then *god save the queen*, then *negaraku*, and finally, and I know irrevocably, *majullah singapura*.

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