

► Antisocial Services

Furthermore, Medicare and Social Security constitute a political third rail. Voters tend to compartmentalise, a tendency reinforced by the echo-chamber qualities of the right-wing media. To those at the Republican base, an attack on Medicare is an attack on them, but the connection between tax cuts and the country's dismal public schools, for example, is not made. Instead, these voters support an ideology that promises to 'create wealth' that will mainly be amassed by the well-to-do, by destroying the actual pillars of the nation's prosperity: the public schools and universities, the highways and airports and railroads, the pristine environment and the major effort in the last half-century to eliminate poverty and prejudice.

Yet as all these assets crumble, one imagines that the great American people will hold only one thing responsible: the pesky, evil government, with its forms, regulations and the seemingly endless queues at the DMV. ■

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Education Reform in Malaysia

The Once and Past King

Tessa Dagley

An "historic" hero faces review in the evolution of an egalitarian multi-ethnic society

IN the cosmopolitan entrepôt of 15th century Malacca, a city on the west coast of today's Malaysia, a Malay warrior slew his closest – yet increasingly seditious – friend, to emphasize his own loyalty to the Sultan.

Some 500 years later, this story of Hang Tuah – immortalised in his Hikayat – is causing intellectual, political and ethnic unease in contemporary Malaysia. Having been celebrated in film and taught in schools as the locus of Muslim-Malay mores, the warrior's story was categorically refuted in January by Professor Tan Sri Khoo Kay Kim, historian and Chancellor of KDU University College, as nothing more than a myth.

All Historians Now

In the last year, the Malaysian education system has undergone major review. In April the National Education Dialogue was created to gather perspectives from all levels of society on how to improve teaching and learning. Encouraged by the Minister of Education, and in conjunction with UNESCO, this dialogue aims



Just a story? ■ *Hang Tuah holds childhood friend Hang Jebat after being forced to end his killing spree*

to cultivate a new generation of globally competitive Malaysians.

In the midst of discussions, History, a subject pursued by a very small minority, is enjoying heightened attention. In May 2011, the Ministry of Education declared that it should be a "must-pass" subject in secondary schools from 2013, while scholars and NGOs concurrently launched a campaign for "A Truly Malaysian History". Its spokesman, Dr Lim Tek Ghee, Director of the Centre of Policy Initiatives, called for immediate actions to "ensure a broad and balanced perspective of major civilisations and events", for "accurate historical facts of Malaysia's historical development" and for the "fair recognition to the contribution of all communities".

All this seems reasonable. Nonetheless it raises questions about the inclusion in school textbooks of the Hang Tuah story – a melange of fact and fiction, suffused with the supernatural, and hitherto intrinsic to Malay, but not national Malaysian, identity.

As soon as Professor Khoo aired his views, Facebook and Twitter erupted in furious debates. One tweet pointed out how Chinese-sounding Tuah's name is. Another questioned the written record of Adam and Eve. Academics, such as the National Laureate, Dr Muhammad Salleh, retaliated with assertions that Tuah was an irrefutably historical figure, appearing 128 times in six chapters in the Malay Annals.

Meanwhile, a group claiming to be the Hang Tuah's descendants announced that only they knew the 'real account' of the famed admiral, based on ownership of an ancient Jawi script passed through the generations.

Nation and Narration

After independence in 1957, there was a struggle for post-imperial control in the new Malaysia. The Malays, under the auspices of United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), have been the

dominant political body of the last 40 years, with bumiputera status since the 1970s (after the racial riots of 1969). As "sons of the soil", they have enjoyed advantages in education and politics, to the chagrin of other ethnic groups.

The myth of Hang Tuah, along with his maxim, "Malays will never vanish from the face of the earth", had since gained rising resonance, though the story has provided a moral reference point, teaching humility and bravery. On a darker level, it has fuelled nationalist convictions.

Following the country's Islamisation in the 1980s under Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the Hang Tuah story became ever more sacrosanct in national history teaching. The process of Islamisation – consolidating links with the wider Islamic world, solidifying the predominance of Muslim values in public life, and improving the economic position of the Malays (while, for example, curbing the establishment of non-Muslim places of worship) – provoked the reassertion of racial identity. Paradoxically it emulated the model of colonial Malaya, when the British sought to separate the Malays, Chinese and Indians into distinct groups to cement their own authority.

Even amid recent Bersih (literally, 'clean') demonstrations in Kuala Lumpur in April, where Malaysians of all races demanded electoral reform, the Hang Tuah story was invoked. The opinion of Mohammad Salim, a 51-year old fish breeder from Lingga has been particularly highlighted in the local press. Like other Malays living on the island, he endorsed the race "advancement" efforts of Mahathir and of the present Prime Minister Najib. Salim envies his privileged fellow Malays on the peninsula, and tells them to take strength from Tuah's words, rather than engaging in public protest.

Nationalist Symbols Reconsidered

Does it matter if this warrior - who ►

▶ incidentally doubled as a globe-trotting diplomat – was real or not? The only truth is that no-one knows for sure. What is most fascinating is Hang Tuah's place in the national psyche, not in his Tanjung Kling Mausoleum. In this way, Dr Noor has again suggested that the vociferously partisan are missing the point: as a universal figure only recently claimed by one group for political purposes, Hang Tuah deserves to rise above petty squabbles.

Perhaps a positive consequence of the brouhaha surrounding Hang Tuah has been the stimulation of “scholarly” discussion, as a New Straits Times editorial suggested. After all, this is what history should be about. Hang Tuah does

not need to be consigned to the historical dustbin. Rather, the warrior's symbolism should be incorporated in myriad identities – a reflection of Malaysia's richly diverse culture.

What this case underlines is the need for healthy scepticism – and, fundamentally, the need for society to allow myth to coexist with history. All nations need symbols. But in illuminating the power of history, the Hang Tuah debate ultimately reveals the necessity of dialogue – especially in the quest for educational reform. ■

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remaining human rights challenges of our time”.

There appear, then, to be both an awareness of the problems at hand and the political will to devote time and resources to solving them. Yet there are still misgivings as to how genuine the White House's progressive sentiment may prove to be. Obama's line on his “evolving” stance towards LGBT issues does not sound entirely convincing. His Vice President, Joe Biden, has claimed that a similar change of heart lies behind his recently declared support for same-sex marriage.

The string of fundraising events following Obama's announcement will have done nothing to dissuade cynics, who see the administration as chasing votes and funds for November's presidential election. The night after the announcement was made, Obama attended a fundraising party at George Clooney's Los Angeles home that was reportedly expected to raise US\$15 million (£9.76 million). Whether this is seen as cashing in on a fashionable political stance, or as procuring the necessary monetary support for a radical and progressive position to make a difference in reality, it does not paint Obama's decision in the most flattering of lights.

A Rainbow Nation

In March, an American soldier raised the rainbow flag of the LGBT movement over a military base in Afghanistan. A photo of the event was posted on Facebook, and was almost instantly picked up by anti-LGBT groups and websites. An event that could have symbolised increased military tolerance and progressive feeling instead became the target for homophobic vitriol. In a way, this incident highlights America's greatest problem regarding LGBT issues – that of ingrained prejudice.

Given that homosexuality has only been legal in every state since 2003, America has come a long way. Led by progressive action and declarations of intent from the top of the political establishment, much has been done to aid the LGBT cause through legislation and education. What is lacking, though, is action that truly changes the deep-seated prejudice evident in some quarters.

Dan Choi, an LGBT activist who was himself discharged from the army on the grounds of his sexuality, declared that Manning “is not the one on trial, the United States of America is on trial”. America has undoubtedly taken much needed steps along the path to equality. When Bradley Manning goes on trial, America will discover how far along that path it stands. ■

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Sexuality in America

Manning the Military

Douglas Sloan

Attitudes to homosexuality in the American armed forces and the implications of Bradley Manning's trial

ON the same day that President Barack Obama announced his support for same-sex marriage, an openly homosexual American soldier experienced his 714th day of incarceration. He had not been convicted of any crime. Bradley Manning, the alleged Wikileaks informer, has been in custody since May 2010, and was in solitary confinement for nine months.

What is most striking about the case, however, is the degree to which it has been sexualised. Not only have Manning's reputation and credibility been attacked using his homosexuality, but his defence centres on the assertion that he struggled with gender identity issues. As a result of having to suppress his homosexuality due to the prevailing ‘Don't Ask, Don't Tell’ policy, Manning's defence deems that he was not mentally fit to be given access to classified information, and as such the blame for the leak lies with his superiors.

That homosexuality can be considered a defence in such a case seems to

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undermine both the work done by LGBT rights groups and the progress that the repeal of ‘Don't Ask, Don't Tell’ represents. To view it as a plea of homosexuality, however, is to misunderstand the issue at hand. Manning's defence is more one of aggravated mental disturbance than of sexuality, for all this aggravation



‘Don't Ask, Don't Tell’ ■ *The flag of the United States juxtaposed with the LGBT flag*

was a consequence of his sexuality and the military's reaction to it.

Questions must be asked of an institution that drove a man to such extremes that he would go for a weapons rack during a counselling session, send pictures of himself in women's dress to his commanding officer and potentially leak thousands of sensitive documents. Whether he was responsible for the leak or not, his situation hardly reflects well on the American military.

A Brave New World?

For the Obama administration, this is not the time for embarrassing indictments of intolerance in the military to come to light. Following the landmark repeal of ‘Don't Ask, Don't Tell’, Obama has taken a pro-LGBT stance on the Defence of Marriage Act, the Hate Crimes Protection Act, the Affordable Care Act, and the Employment Non-Discrimination Act. In this light, the administration's support for same-sex marriage seems almost like a natural progression.

Judging by the action it has taken, the administration certainly seems to be trying to promote a pro-LGBT agenda, and the rhetoric of its leading politicians underlines this stance. In a recent statement, Obama promised Americans that “together we can continue to build the more perfect union, in which LGBT Americans have the same legal rights and responsibilities as every American”. Hillary Clinton, in an address to the United Nations last December, described the issue of LGBT rights as “one of the