Towards a Restoration of the Humanities in the Future University: Asia's Opportunity

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Abstract. This paper explores the possible restoration of a leadership role for the humanities in university-based knowledge building and education. Such a global restoration is required in the face of various social, ethical, and human capital dilemmas associated with such issues as climate change, financial market instability, and the exclusion of many people from a privileged, 'high-tech' knowledge society. Although traditional humanities faculties in Western universities have long been in decline, many emerging 'technological' universities in Asia still view a knowledge of the humanities as a prerequisite to and indicator of maturity and a well-rounded education. This paper will investigate the potential roles and interests of re-invigorated humanities disciplines in terms of (a) the formal enterprise of human knowledge building both inside and outside of the Academy and (b) their particular relevance to an Asia-Pacific context as well as to an interconnected, global network society. The paper develops two related proposals. The first proposal is that we might rescue from the 'ruins' of the arguably discredited Western humanities project a more globally convergent foundation for the humanities. We develop this distinction by deploying the universal insights and enduring contributions of two of the most brilliant and perhaps wisest inheritors of the humanities project in the West, Paul Ricoeur and Hannah Arendt. The second proposal that we explore holds that, because emerging Asian universities are not so deeply stuck in the West's out-of-date categories and framework, they may be in a better position to help reinvent the humanities in terms of 21st century possibilities and imperatives that are grounded in the local contexts of the global knowledge-building convergence.

Keywords and phrases: humanities faculties, Asian Universities, dialogical humanism, hermeneutics, 21st century knowledge-building, global knowledge convergence, cross-cultural communication

Humanities: Branches of knowledge that investigate human beings, their culture, and their self-expression. Distinguished from the physical and biological sciences and, sometimes, from the social sciences, the humanities include the study of languages and literatures, the arts, history, and philosophy. The modern conception of the humanities has roots in the classical Greek paideia, a course in general education dating from the 5th century BC that prepared young men for citizenship. It also draws on Cicero's humanitas, a program of training for orators set forth in 55 BC. The Renaissance humanists contrasted studia humanitatis ("studies of humanity") with studies of the divine; by the 19th century the distinction was instead drawn between the humanities and the sciences.
- Britannica Concise Encyclopaedia.

Introduction

Are the humanities a 'missing link' in the emerging universities of the 21st century Asia-Pacific?

The widely reported 'decline of the humanities' in Western universities in recent decades (Readings 1996; Lewis 2006) has two distinct, if ultimately related, central causes. In recent years, the fate of humanities faculties has been particularly associated with what some call 'academic capitalism' and others 'economic rationalism' (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). In other words, as the rationale of university education has become increasingly focused on accreditation, utilitarian or economic purposes, and the employability of graduates, the traditional importance of historical awareness, general knowledge and literacy skills, and various notions of cultural and aesthetic values in Western universities have abruptly waned. Yet many (Gould 1999; Harpham 2005) argue that such a development is itself also a symptom of a more fundamental basis for this decline – the 'postmodernist' undermining or discrediting of the humanities in particular and of the intellectual foundations of the modern university in general.

Although the term has diverse meanings and applications, for our present purposes, *postmodernism* may be generally defined as a dominant movement and perspective in both late 20th century academia and popular culture that has long promoted relativism in terms of rejecting ideas of objective truth and enduring historical narratives and cultural values. This rejection stems from an underlying assumption that, in practice, all human languages and media are distorted or subjective and, thus, are inevitably manipulated by and filtered through human perception, thought, and communication (Lyotard 1984; Jameson 1991). As Shell (1995: 84) put it at a time when the postmodernist backlash was at its strongest, 'there is today an assault on the humanities originating in the humanities themselves'.

Yet, in seeming contradiction to this development, many emerging universities in Asia during the past two decades have developed a new appreciation for the general concept of humanistic knowledge. This appreciation has appeared in a context in which the primary and often specialised (e.g., engineering) focus of Asian universities has generally been on scientific and technological knowledge. Part of the reason for the change lies in how people in the region have accepted the proposition that the presence of humanities programs is an indicator of the comprehensive character and fully developed status of a university, which are attributes to which Asian universities aspire. Yet the Asian interest also, in part, centres on a rather egalitarian and functional, as well as timely, interest in human capital development associated with the pursuit of global competitiveness. This interest contrasts with the more elitist tendencies and classical or historical preoccupations of Western civilisation. Hence, the humanities in many emerging Asian universities are closely aligned with business management, human resource development, language and media studies, and especially with new imperatives in education (including that of generic skill outcomes) that have a basic connection with the original ideals of the Greek *paideia*. Many Asian universities and societies have also arguably been less inclined than have Western universities and societies in recent decades to dismiss the local or global importance of ethics, social relevance, innovation, cultural or community values and organisational policymaking.

In the wake of both the accelerating 'global warming' challenge and the 'global financial crisis', this inclination may be advantageous, as common or cross-cultural humanistic values and knowledge begin to come back into fashion. Such a development has also dovetailed with two further imperatives in the initial decade of the 21st century. Accelerated by the internet and related information and communication digital technologies—in particular, social networking media—a growing international awareness of cultural globalisation or the subtle ecology of endless aspects of human interdependence has developed. Conversely, there have been growing convergent concerns and awareness regarding the inherent fragility and lack of sustainability in the current imperatives of human progress. These imperatives have served to encourage societies and universities around the world to reconsider the crucial importance of the *human* and not just the *technological, commercial and management* aspects of knowledge that are linked in innovative ways and with a range of social contexts to such concepts as lifelong learning and capacity building.

The renewed interest in the concept of a 'humanities' education on the part of some aspiring and maturing Asian universities and societies cannot be explained away as just an attempt to imitate more-established Western universities, or even by reference to an intrinsic interest in an understanding of the liberal arts centered on literary analysis (Paulson 2001; Russo 2005). Certainly, however important

governments consider such factors to be, there is a growing general awareness that international 'university ranking' exercises do not necessarily provide an indicator of all-round, substantive and global efficacy (let alone quality *per se*) in the accumulation of formal knowledge by 21st century academies or institutions of higher education (Lewis 2006; Holmes 2007). Associated notions, such as the concept of 'universities of excellence', have perhaps reinforced the perception that not just generalist or comprehensive universities, but also those universities with a specific 'science and technology' (especially engineering) specialisations, can benefit from key conceptual parts of the knowledge the humanities generate, such as knowledge associated with ethics, quality and social sustainability.

An interesting example is to be found in Singapore, a country and society aspiring to become an Asia-Pacific hub of higher education. In the larger social context of a country that has succeeded in becoming a wealthy consumer society and has long been focused on commercial and technological progress but which is now turning its attention to more 'cultural' indicators of development as an aspiring cosmopolitan, multi-racial society (e.g., as projected by the construction of a state-of-the-art Performing Arts Centre at Marina Bay), one of Singapore's two main universities–Nanyang Technological University (NTU)—has recently resolved to extend or transform its traditional engineering focus by establishing a humanities faculty. Such a development has followed on the heels of a national educational policy focus (for example, 'learning schools, thinking nation') in the past decade that has promoted critical thinking, active learning, and even notions of innovation on the local education scene (Mok and Tan 2004). This development also probably represents an effort to reach beyond NTU's educational catch-phrase of aspiring to produce 'technopreneurs.' As is the case elsewhere in Asia, Singapore's educators are generally finding that policy and theories borrowed from the West and transplanted in a top-down fashion do not always easily and effectively translate into practice. This difficulty is especially acute if sufficient support is not provided for necessary *cultural changes*– including a move away from an examination-based curriculum that many believe undermines such initiatives (Watkins and Biggs 2001; Chan and Rao 2009).

There are probably many *missing links* at work when leaders outline and impose top-down imperatives of policy, theory and, indeed, rhetoric without sufficient connection with bottom-up human needs and aspirations. In the emerging knowledge society of the 21st century, these needs and aspirations are increasingly linked to such concepts as *life-long learning, digital literacy,* and generic *sustainability*. In terms of higher education itself, we think it is promising that there is a renewed interest in both those aspects of the humanities associated with artistic and cultural knowledge and in generic skills of knowledge building; we are also encouraged that such new policy initiatives in the higher education sector are providing a counter-point to the often more "measurable" (but not

necessarily substantive and qualitative) interests in international university or student rankings. At least prior to the exposé Lewis (2006) provided, universities such as NTU in the past have aspired to become a 'Harvard or Oxford of the East'. However, such universities would do better not merely to imitate other institutions, but also to embrace an opportunity to rediscover enduring universals pertinent to the future challenges of sustainability, innovation and social relevance that the global human condition and knowledge ecology confront. That is, they are better served to recover the humanities 'baby' from the postmodern 'bathwater'.

Part A. Recovering the baby from the bathwater: What can we learn from the most brilliant inheritors of the Western humanities tradition (and how and why Western universities 'forgot' that tradition in the 20th century)?

The most brilliant, as well as the most faithful, inheritors of the Western humanities tradition, such as Paul Ricoeur and Hannah Arendt, have generally remained true to the fundamental ethical, educational and social purposes of Socrates, the 'father of Western thought' and the great humanist of antiquity (Richards 2009, 2010a). This fidelity is in contrast to the relativism of the postmodernists and others that has played a key role in the decline of humanities faculties in universities around the world. Although often confused throughout history with the clever and more superficial rhetorical interests of his Sophist contemporaries, Socrates' life and death exemplified his teaching method, which involved guiding human knowledge. His was a fundamentally ethical motivation to openly confront, and to build knowledge upon what might productively emerge from, the missing link between 'what we don't know' and 'what we know' —that is, the gap between *ignorance* and *arrogance* (Arendt 1978). For those such as the Sophists, who tended to overestimate what they 'knew', Socrates' approach offered a lesson in humility that was also the requisite basis for the most productive knowledge building. For those who conversely underestimate what they know, who lack confidence, and who struggle with a sense of passivity or fatalism, the Socratic method encourages active reflection and integrated self-knowledge through focused questioning. This approach remains a strategic method and supportive framework for recognising that an ignored or undervalued experience and understanding can be a powerful and transformative foundation upon which to build further knowledge—and then to have the quiet confidence and self-belief to apply or enact it.

As the definition we provided at the outset of this paper indicates, the West has seen a diversity of emphases and variations on the very term *humanities,* originally derived from the original Greek association of the term with civic education for the young. In modern universities, the concept of the humanities has often been associated with a naïve, out-of-date, and uncritical approach to

knowledge. In particular, the humanities has been associated with a privileged and elitist, as distinct from an exemplary or exemplifying, *canonisation* of literary-aesthetic texts, ideas and thinkers. Socrates was paradoxically condemned to death for ostensibly undermining classical Greek civic education for the young when he was, arguably, doing the opposite. Likewise, many of the wisest humanists in the most authentic, universal sense of the term have been ignored and dismissed over the last century because they have been lumped in with philosophically 'naïve' and culturally elitist humanists. Thus, 21st century efforts to reinvigorate the humanities must embrace a *dialogical* rather than merely *oppositional* view of the relationships between the human *individual* agent and the wider *social* structures and *cultural* contexts that they inhabit.

In the last few centuries, the alternative conception of *social sciences* was invoked, in the image of the *natural sciences,* as a substitute or replacement term for an increasingly devalued notion of the concept of *humanities.* As both Ricoeur and Arendt emphasised in different ways in their prolific and substantial writings across a wide range of intellectual disciplines and traditions, a restoration of the humanities project might begin with a simple distinction between (a) a merely *naïve humanism* deconstructed or opposed by various positions or strategies of 'critical rationalism' and (b) *dialogical humanism* as a transformative stage and perspective of understanding, insight, and applied focus of knowledge by active agents ethically referenced in social contexts in terms of a perpetual tension between self or sameness and 'otherness.' In other words, in contrast with the merely naïve version, a basic social principle of *reciprocity* and the responsibility for personal *self-knowledge* underpin the dialogical version of humanism.

How modern humanities devoured itself (and its resulting devaluation in universities and society)

Ricoeur's (1976, 1981) restoration of a future or 21st century humanities project can be most usefully approached in terms of his well-known summation that Freud, Marx and Nietzsche (and all their modernist and postmodernist derivatives) represent the most well-known, modern masters of a *critical hermeneutics of suspicion* that is often associated with relativism, deconstructive explanations, and a postmodernist perspective. Ricoeur's dialogical humanism, or 'philosophical anthropology' as he often termed it, does not dismiss this particular perspective or critical strategy, but builds on what he characterises as a *provisional* stage and not just a fixed position or perspective. In this way, a provisional suspicion or strategic *distancing* potentially gives way to the constructive *appropriation* or productive emergence of a *dialogical hermeneutics of restoration.* Such a framework anticipates a globally relevant 21st century

notion of human-centred interests and meanings in all enterprises involving knowledge building and also, in all human activity.

Ricoeur's framework provides a way of understanding how a 20th century modernist and post-modernist devaluation of the humanities is really a temporary stage preceding a projected future recovery of a durable, traditional ethics; an enduring cross-cultural wisdom; and a sustainable knowledge ecology that does not merely use rationalism or relativism to ignore how (a) every whole is more than the sum of its parts and (b) how all human communication and interpretation, even in the natural sciences, is context dependent, intrinsically organised by meaningful patterns (including an interplay of generic and specific aspects), and inevitably transformed by natural human languages. Like Arendt, Gadamer and others, Ricoeur also sought to recover from the 'bathwater' a notion of *humanities knowledge* that was not simply reduced and devalued in a merely naïve relation to *science and technology*, as was generally and arguably the case in the second part of the 20th century. However, as Snell suggests, the main enemy of the humanities came from 'within'. Ricoeur's framework also provides a basis for appreciating how the takeover or devouring of modern humanities faculties and university departments by many of his most influential contemporaries (especially the influential fellow French thinkers often loosely characterised as *poststructuralists,* such as Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Baudrillard, and Lyotard) represented at times the kind of arrogant elitism, hegemony, and intellectual 'dead-end' that many such thinkers had themselves sometimes projected onto a naïve (e.g., literary) notion of the Western humanities project.

Ricoeur understood as well as anyone that the unavoidably *interpretive* and not just *descriptive* nature of all human knowledge is always mediated by the grounded, transformative, and contextual character of natural languages that is opened up by the individual acts as well as the social structures of communication and representation. Thus Ricoeur's projected restoration of the humanities defied the modernist and related 'postmodernist' imperatives both to ignore human intentionality, motivation, and agency and to deny the possibility of universal values and truths in either human experience or social, and especially cross-cultural, contexts of communication. His own critical engagements with and 'appropriations' of many of the greatest thinkers of the 20th century from a range of different traditions, perspectives, and areas of knowledge demonstrates such a view. Those engagements included many of his French 'poststructuralist' contemporaries. In practice, Ricoeur demonstrated how dialogue grounded in a 'dialectic' of *critical distanciation* and *transformative appropriation* of 'other' positions and perspectives is the very foundation of *innovative* as well as *disciplined* human knowledge construction. This 'hermeneutic arch,' as Ricoeur put it, represents a process of proceeding from an initial *naïve understanding* to a

(provisional) stance of *critical explanation* and then to a knowledge-building phase, perspective and strategy of *dialogical understanding* (Richards 1989).

After largely going 'out of fashion' in the 1960s, Ricoeur remained focused on the 'big picture', continuing to write such powerful works as *The Rule of Metaphor* (1977), *Time and Narrative* (Vols. 1–3: 1984, 1985, 1988), *Oneself As Another* (1992), and *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004). The last work was completed as he approached his nineties. In this way, Ricoeur himself was 'restored' with critical recognition of how he had outlasted his critics and contemporaries in more ways than one (Andrew 2000). In 2004, at the age of 92, he shared the second John W. Kluge Prize for lifetime achievement in the study of humanity or the human sciences. His short acceptance speech provides a succinct and exemplary introduction to a 21st century dialogical humanities, as well as representing a powerful distillation of a lifetime's work (Ricoeur 2004). It was not just in contemporary philosophy, but also in modern society's sense of an accelerating erosion of traditional or enduring values (as distinct from transitory fashions and illusory desires) that the humanities became increasingly devalued in Western universities generally and depicted as an expression of an out-of-date elitism or collective nostalgia for past traditions.

Arendt's various studies, probes, and essays regarding the human condition and its individual and social fate in the 20th century in many ways complement Ricoeur's work. Her body of work exemplifies a similar dialogical approach to restoring and then transforming for the future an enduring humanities project. For instance, in one of her most powerful works, *Between Past and Future* (1977), Arendt, similar to Ricoeur, challenges the ultimately false or limited assumptions and negatively self-fulfilling prophecies of objectivist and relativist notions of knowledge. As a prescription against such passive, inaccurately neutral, and spatialised models of knowledge, she identifies the provisional self-alienation of the modern individual in particular—and humanity in general—from both the *past* and the *future* in terms of related disconnections between our thinking and doing, our public and private senses of identity and similar opositions. Arendt points out how modern man devalues the past (and any enduring sense of human meaning) by confusing it with a superficially discredited sense of 'tradition' and likewise is disempowered from engaging the future more productively by a failure of individual and collective vision, a lack of imagination, and an associated rhetoric of human language-use that is often reduced to an impotent and false utopianism. Like Ricoeur, Arendt also advocates (in *The Human Condition* 1958) the process of an emergent re-discovery of timelessly meaningful (even 'mythical') action and knowledge through critical reflection that is grounded in the ordinary challenges and interests of an everyday, rather than elitist, mode of human existence.

Arendt was perhaps most famous for her studies of the 'banality of evil' in characteristically modern social tyrannies and mass societies. She derived her own insights from the experience of fleeing persecution in Nazi Germany. However, Arendt (1978) was ultimately optimistic regarding the potential of the 'human mind' to overcome the missing links between 'thinking and doing' and 'past and future.' She believed that active thinking could provide individual and collective threads of 'self-knowledge,' which could break through self-imposed prisons and restraints to achieve or create sustainable futures. Implicit in all Arendt's work is a critical notion that it is the role of a restored, future humanities to assist the human knowledge-building enterprise in its future directions and possibilities for sustainability, innovation and social relevance.

In an increasingly alienated, consumerist, and uncertain or confused modern society, where people either individually or collectively often feel that they have 'lost their way', many of the most famous thinkers and their associated intellectual perspectives of the 20th century were often feted for their implicit and sometimes explicit attack on the Western humanistic project or on associated notions of a transformative concept of human knowledge. Of course, many of these critics, such as the philosopher Foucault, were themselves products of such a tradition and also probably aware of these dilemmas and contradictions. However, unlike Ricoeur or Arendt, they were unable to find a way out of these dilemmas and, thus, manifested a latent pessimism. One should read Ricoeur's (1977) masterful engagement with one of the most exemplary critics of the Western tradition of humanities, Jacques Derrida, and his study of Western knowledge (and languages) as almost literally a 'poisoned' chalice (Derrida 1982) to explore an exemplary practice of 'restoration'. Ricoeur's dialogical deconstruction and appropriation of Derrida was based on the simple, but powerful and subsequently validated, notion (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999) that metaphor is ultimately not a dead 'form' poisoning Western thought, but a cognitive and communicative function of everyday, natural, human language use. Similarly, Arendt's (1958) restoration of the concept of meaningful and reflective human *action* - as distinct from the modern preoccupation with mere *labour* and *work*—represents both a recovery of the constructive element of 'tradition' because it embraces 'science and technology' to work with, not against, enduring or timeless human interests.

Why thinkers such as Ricoeur and Arendt remained immune from the modernist/postmodernist 'virus'

Like Ricoeur, Arendt and other 'dialogical' humanists also generally went out of intellectual fashion in the 1960s, as a plethora of radical relativisms confused them with naïve and uncritically conservative humanists who were associated with elitist ideologies and privileged canons of thought and cultural production (Bloom 1987; Paulson 2001; Russo 2005). Ricoeur lived long enough not only to

outlast such movements, but also to demonstrate in powerfully universal and enduring terms that he and a genuinely global humanities project could not so easily be dismissed. Arendt is also due for a revival for her powerful *philosophical anthropology* and not just for her often misunderstood 'fame' as a political theorist who interpreted the rise of modern totalitarianisms. She is particularly remembered for her influential and even controversial analysis of the Nazi Eichmann as an exemplar of a modern 'banality of evil' (i.e., 'evil' outcomes are the result of ordinary people conforming to mass opinion and obeying orders without reflecting on their actions or their failures to act in terms of personal responsibility).

One might argue that the resilience of Ricoeur's and Arendt's ideas was not just a function of their intellectual brilliance. These ideas were also durable due to their common capacity to bridge, in both philosophical and common sense terms, the early or classical foundations for, the Enlightenment flowering of, and the modern dilemmas within Western thought in general and its tradition of humanities in particular. Both thinkers were endowed with the cross-culturally relevant personal dispositions of humility, compassion, and universal ethical concerns, as well as an incomparable intellectual rigour and the sheer ability to remained focused on the 'big picture'—the courage to remain relatively free from and ultimately undeterred by the transitory fashions, vested interests and various other cultural obstacles contained in the modern age. In contrast to many of their peers, both of these scholars generally remained humble, dialogical, and motivated by a constructive purpose in their engagements with even those past and contemporary thinkers with whom they disagreed.

Thus, while Ricoeur and Arendt also followed the so-called 'linguistic turn' in all the main traditions of Western philosophy and critical thought in the 20th century, both were able to remain free from the crippling relativisms and descriptive notions of knowledge that have beset such traditions and prevented them having relevance for ordinary people or in cross-cultural contexts. For instance, both Ricoeur and Arendt cut across and transcend the postmodernist challenge to the typical linear and hierarchical structures or categories of accumulated knowledge, in terms of a 'paradigmatic' (or associative) as well as 'logical' axis of thinking and language-use. The ideas and perspectives of dialogical humanism similarly reconcile or unite related western and modern notions of a fundamental conflict between *body* and *mind, individual* and *society* (including *psychology* and *sociology*), and *understanding* and *explanation*. There were three common elements to how they and other dialogical thinkers (such as Gadamer) remained 'immune' from the oppositional framework of 'objectivism vs. relativism' (Bernstein 1983). Such an opposition tends to conceptualise language as either irrelevant to or a 'prison-house' of human action, cognition, and social realities.

First, Ricoeur and Arendt fundamentally rejected the notion that a privileged concept of *human reason* is defined by reference to the 'irrationality' of everyday human common sense, interests or needs or of desires and aspirations. Rather, both generally viewed a maturing human 'reason' as consistently grounded in the interplay of all the inherent motivations of body (action), mind (thinking), and social structure or context (application). Second, and likewise, their *dialogical* perspective cuts across the 'false opposition' of the human individual inevitably in conflict with society. Such a perspective recognises that, at a transformative level, there is renewed convergence between individual agency, social values, and related 'structures' of shared or collaborative meaning. Third, both recognised that the functions of *metaphor* and *narrative* (or story-telling) in the most advanced, as well as 'ordinary', human language-use are not merely decorative or inevitably a distortion of thought and communication. In later works, such as the Rule of Metaphor and the Time and Narrative Series, Ricoeur focused on the 'figurative' element of human language-use as the key to the highest yet simplest human aspirations and a requirement for both 'self-knowledge' and communication with others that is grounded in good, not bad, faith. Likewise Arendt, in her final work *Life of the Mind* (1978), also noted how metaphor and narrative are important keys to every individual and social 'mind' discovering and maintaining a convergent *thread of integrity*, however confusing and uncertain things may seem to be.

Possibly the most intellectually important and visionary of all Ricoeur's (1976) almost endless array of innovative insights is his notion that any particular act of human 'discourse' in the wider sense of writing, representing, and acting (as well as 'talking') potentially generates or creates an inherently innovative *surplus of meaning*. This function potentially 'opens up' a transformative relationship with any human structure of knowledge. This insight, therefore, is a powerful recognition and explanation of how all humans in their various every-day contexts are inevitably engaged in inherently innovative and productive 'knowledge building' of some kind, both individually and collectively and in local as well as cross-cultural contexts. This construction is pertains not just in the sense of the continual accumulation of new information, but additionally (in the same way as the human body or, above all else, an energy system) as a strategic focusing of energy, power and purpose. To extend the physical analogy, Ricoeur's and Arendt's general 'immunity' from the forces of modernity and relativism can be attributed to their 'healthy' and constructive (for example, emergent, relevant, and productive) approach to human knowledge building (Richards 2011).

Recovering the cross-cultural and dialogical universality of human knowledge building

In contrast to the 20th century relativists who threw the 'humanities' baby out with the (Western/postmodern) cultural bathwater, the cross-cultural humanists recognised that 'language in use' is not an inevitable means of distortion, persuasion, and isolation. This dialogical view recognises that language is the key to dynamic human constants and connections in various contexts of communication, understanding and ultimately, knowledge construction or building in every sense of the term. For instance, as Smith (1998) has summarised Ricoeur's great contribution to leading human knowledge out of the wreckage of 20th Century relativism, Ricoeur guided the philosophical and historical project of human knowledge development away from the 'epistemological fragility of foundational truth claims' towards the more anthropological and 'common sense' conditions of 'the possibility of actual interpretive practices'. In other words, a dialogical humanities holds that not only is all human knowledge building fundamentally interpretive in nature, but any act of speaking, writing or other communication (including action and visual representation) also potentially 'opens up' language and thought to an interactive and transformative notion of truth. This is an emergent process in a perpetual battle between good and bad faith, as well as between intrinsic motivation and extrinsic forces of appearance in human communication and self-knowledge, both personal and collective.

Although he had little to say directly about the specific cultural contexts of knowledge, Ricoeur's model of how all knowledge is fundamentally open in a *dialogical*, rather than merely *objective* or *relative*, sense to embodied/understood/active interpretation was the key and acknowledged influence on one of the thinkers who had the most influence on the current generation of cultural and ethnological studies (Geertz 1973). Such a model is of particular relevance to directly human-centred or focused research and knowledge and to the concept of 'cross-cultural understanding' (Clifford 1988). In contrast to Ricoeur, Arendt (1977) did very specifically focus on the modern dilemmas in the distinction between humanists' and 'education philistinists' dilemmas that have been increasingly confused as 'culture… is destroyed to yield entertainment' for meaningless and endless consumption (p. 204). Taking his cue from Arendt, Furedi (2004) has pointed out how, 'in an era of the infantilization of culture, treating people as grown-ups has become one of the principal duties of the humanist intellectual' (p.156).

Scholars have long advocated a dialogical framework of hermeneutics as the highest and most relevant framework or methodology of a *philosophy of science.* This advocacy is present even when the philosophy of science is exclusively

focused on the natural, or observed, world and phenomena (Kuhn 1962; Black 1962). Following on Kuhn's work in particular and his recognition of how scientists, as well as all other humans, inevitably work in the context of particular shared 'paradigms' or 'mindsets,' many scientists have come to appreciate that language-grounded 'acts of observations', as well preconceptions of all acts or processes of description and reflection, do not merely reflect an intrinsic 'indeterminacy' in the manner of Heisenberg's 'Uncertainty Principle' (Bohm 1980). Likewise, there has been a renewed interest in how dialogical hermeneutics is of important and perhaps inevitable relevance to the practitioners in and the accumulated knowledge of the natural sciences (Bernstein 1983; Feher et al. 1999; Babich 2002). This interest is exemplified by the works of Gadamer (1975), with their emphasis on how various scientific methods of knowledge building always remain referenced in a potentially open or transformative way by particular assumptions regarding 'understanding.'

The main methodological insight that those who recognise the relevance of dialogical hermeneutics for both human and natural sciences possess is that all human thinking, observing, and representing, as well as communicating, is inevitably and intrinsically 'rhetorical.' This condition exists in a positive and constitutive and not just a negative and distortional sense because of the inevitable grounding of all such activity or endeavors in 'filters' of natural language use. To an internet generation increasingly aware of the irretrievably 'semantic' aspect of both the foundation and ongoing development of the World Wide Web of networked computers and related digital technologies (Berners-Lee, Hendler and Lassila 2001), such a notion would perhaps make sense. All the data, information, and 'knowledge' (and even, some would argue, a global consciousness) linked up on the Web are available to users though the medium, and not just the filter, of ultimately natural, human languages. This understanding constitutes the most powerful way in which dialogical thinkers go beyond *objectivists* (who view language as a mere *window* of human perceptions and action) and *relativists* (who view language and related systems of cultural, ideological and even 'scientific' representations as closed *mirrors*).

As Gadamer (1975) put it so well, both common sense and the highest intellectual aspiration alike achieve a dynamic sense of universal reference for applied thinking, problem-solving and action. At least implicitly, the process of human language-use in various specific contexts is able to bridge 'the universal' (including infinity) and 'the particular' (senses of 'here and now') in both individual and collective human experience and knowledge. This bridging is exemplified by the way in which the basic semantic, rhetorical, and especially *temporal* functions of any sentence—including a 'good question'—at least implicitly, but always inevitably, 'predicates' a *general-particular* as well as *subject-object* connection for any listener or reader, as well as for the speaker.

Part B. What role might a re-vitalised and globalised (including 'Asianised') humanities have in future Asian universities and societies?

Those Asian universities and societies interested in developing a relevant 'humanities' focus in education (as distinct from some merely retrospective and selective cultural history of 'tradition') need not and should not simply try to imitate an out-of-date and somewhat discredited Western version of the humanities. Such terms as *information revolution, knowledge society* and the *global economy*, as anticipated and characterised in the work of Daniel Bell, Peter Drucker and others, reflect new, emerging, and global paradigms for the role of human 'knowledge'. Such perspectives converge with a dialogical and 21st century humanist framework for various kinds of human knowledge building. Asian contexts provide some particularly interesting foci for exploring and reflecting upon some of these developments—for instance, the cultural implications and social possibilities of new information and communication technologies the young embrace (Richards 2004; Richards and Nair 2007). However, it is the various Asian interests in and values of *education* that—in contrast, say, to American liberal arts and literary studies—provide the most promising locus for considering a renewed role for a concept of the humanities relevant to the 21st century.

Asian countries, ranging from Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines through to Korea, Japan, and Hong Kong, are increasingly embracing as educational policy (if not in practice) a notion and aspiration that *learner-centred* encouragement of innovation, an *outcomes* focus on generic skills, and related new *cognitivist* models and *constructivist* theories of teaching, learning, and curriculum development are keys to competiveness and even survival in a future global society and economy (Hallinger 2010). For instance, educational reform for greater innovation and national competiveness constitutes a central plank in the ongoing Malaysian 2020 Vision of becoming a developed nation (Chi 2010). In many ways, an educational context provides an appropriate basis for reconceptualising the role and function of human knowledge building (Weigel 2003). This context contrasts with the privileged imperatives and rarified conditions behind the 'discrediting' of various traditional Western notions of the humanities. Of course, the question of a relevant education for the young was the starting point for the Western concept of humanities; therefore, such a context also represents a return to foundational interests.

There would seem to be a connection between the renewed interest in the concept of humanities in some Asian universities and the now established strategy of many Asian national education and schooling policies to uncritically, ideologically, and not always effectively embrace the modern educational theories of *critical thinking, constructivist learning,* and *creative innovation.* We

should also point out that constructivist learning and 'quality'-focused educational management theories are often not well linked to practice and to changing paradigms of educational design, practice, and assessment in the West, let alone by stressed teachers in some Asian schools in which instructors can do little to change a fundamentally examination-based curriculum, yet are increasingly required to adopt new learning models and theories as part of largely top-down reforms (Educational International 2006).

These developments can, of course, be interpreted in two very different ways. We think it would miss the point to see an emerging interest in humanities as just another, perhaps well-intentioned but possibly ill-fated (e.g., neo-colonial), attempt to borrow selectively from the West and to imitate imported Western ideas and models (Mok 2007; Hoofd 2010). A more balanced perspective might recognise—as Asian educational policy-makers generally do—that what is at stake here are the kinds of generic skills and knowledge (such as *information and technological literacy, communication, collaboration,* and *problem-solving*) which are becoming increasingly important in 'modern' 21st century societies and economies. In other words, a higher education interest in a 'humanities' dimension to formal teaching and learning as well as in related notions such as 'knowledge management' might provide some needed leadership, support, and development work towards a more comprehensive and balanced national and social strategy for both formal and informal education (Richards 2011).

The role of creative imagination, ethics, and cross-cultural understanding in a new global paradigm of 21st century knowledge building, life-long learning, and formal education

In Asia, as elsewhere, there is a significant amount of ambivalence regarding the increasingly ubiquitous references to a concept which exemplifies the tension between the social and accrediting function of education and the more authentic knowledge-building process grounded in generic skills associated with being open to Socrates' notion that the most effective learning stems from the interplay of between 'what we know' and 'what we don't know'. Just as some see the concept of *life-long learning* in terms of a range of aspects associated with what we have above suggested as a 21st century version of dialogical humanism (such as being a reflective practitioner, better linking existing knowledge to new and changing contexts, and being a problem-solver/designer/innovator in a range of different situations), others associate that concept more negatively with a danger of *information overload* and a possible threat of endless evaluation and accreditation. Education in Asia is increasingly seen by all concerned as a battlefield between often conflicting forces of traditional values and 'survival' in an emerging knowledge society and globalised world (Hannas 2003; Mahbubani 2004). This understanding is, in fact, similar to how Arendt (following Kafka)

describes the increasingly inescapable challenge of not only having to fiercely battle but also, simultaneously, to 'mediate' the alternately conflicting forces of both past and future.

The concept of *innovation* is very closely tied with a rhetoric of change in Asian educational systems and societies, in line with the challenges of economic and not just cultural globalisation. Modern notions of creativity (or 'creative imagination' more generally) that are derived from Western traditions—with their emphasis on new and unique forms—are often embraced in theory or in principle, but not so well in practice. Just as he recognised the constitutive role of metaphor in human thinking and communication as a function of performance or use (in context) and not form *per se*, so Ricoeur (1977) also developed a related notion of *creative imagination* which also provides a bridge between tradition and modernity and similarly transforms in a constructive way the tension between *social structure* and *unique performance* or *individual agency*. Such imagination represents an emergent and non-privileged approach to innovation that can be contrasted, for instance, with the 'accidental' or *ad hoc* postmodern concept of *bricolage*, as well as with modern romanticist or elitist notions of *unique form*. As a strategy to embody and imagine new possibilities grounded in past knowledge, this concept exemplifies the most fundamental 21st century generic skill—'design' (Kress 2003). Many Asian educational systems have already embraced as theory and rhetoric the notions of *project-based learning, problem-based learning*, and *authentic assessment.* Such approaches are, indeed, conducive to encouraging creative imagination if designed and practiced effectively.

Educational interest in ethics is strong in many Asian societies and is still typically linked to various traditional cultural contexts. However, much can still be learnt from the dialogical humanists about a *universal ethics* grounded in responsible action, cross-cultural understanding, and an authentically global perspective. In her explorations of 'the banality of evil' in totalitarian systems in terms of an *ethics of personal responsibility*, Arendt identified typically modern tension—including an ethical tension—between the public and private domains, as well as between the modern state and civil society. Likewise, Ricoeur's *Oneself as Another* (1992) suggests a cross-cultural view that ethical senses of responsible conduct grounded in empathy and concern for 'others' precede and can be distinguished from (although they may also support) particular forms of *morality* based on compliance to exclusive social norms. In other words, a universal ethics which overcomes in practice any projections of 'otherness' in terms of race, culture, or religion does not necessarily contradict, but can build on or converge with, different culturally specific notions or values. As Hall, Hofstede and others have outlined, in Asian contexts this understanding of ethics has traditionally included communal rather than individualistic values. However,

a younger generation in Asia, as elsewhere, increasingly feels at home in various globalised sub-cultures, market fashions, and values of personal desires and consumption (e.g., Goy-Yamamoto 2004).

Eastern 'indirectness' vs. Western 'directness'? The improved linkage of style and substance across different cross-cultural paradigms of human communication and critical thinking

Comparisons between Eastern and Western approaches to education and 'thinking' often compare the respective strengths of discipline and collective thinking (East) with the individualistic orientation of more active (i.e., critical or creative) knowledge construction (West) (Ramburuth 2001; Bempechat and Elliot 2002; Hannas 2003; Mahbubani 2004). Similarly, a comparison is sometimes made between more 'indirect' or 'passive' approaches to learning, communication, and knowledge in some Asian cultures and the more 'direct' (i.e., linear and hierarchical) styles and approaches in Western cultures (Li 2008; Richards 2010b). New educational policies in many Asian countries cite Western models as a basis for pursuing and encouraging more active or constructivist notions of learning, including the valued practices of critical thinking and creative innovation. Yet such imperatives and aspirations are often in opposition to perceived values of individualism and directness. In other words, Asian students often lack the confidence to express a personal opinion, develop a critical perspective, or produce new insights because such 'individualistic' tendencies were traditionally discouraged.

Greater confidence in pursuing critical inquiry or in developing innovative solutions to academic problems is clearly a key in Asia, as elsewhere, to increasing the quality of both individual and group knowledge building within schools, universities, and other institutions of formal education. Even if cultural restraints create discomfort for some academics and students with regard to the prospect of directly presenting an argument or individually creating an innovative solution, such conditions do not prevent one from reflecting on and designing meaningful, focused questions suitable to inquiry or problem solving. As dialogical humanists from Socrates through Ricoeur have reminded us again and again, a good question posed to ourselves or to others is the perfect key to opening up and exploring the semantic and epistemological gap between 'what we know' and 'what we don't know'; that is, good questions are useful for engaging in constructive knowledge building.

Ricoeur's framework for knowledge building cuts across such arbitrary stereotypes and self-fulfilling prophecies as *Eastern indirectness* and *Western directness*. In contrast to the conventional Western organisation of learning and categories of knowledge in an alternately *linear and hierarchical* fashion (as well

as the postmodernist collapsing of conceptual hierarchies and deconstruction of fixed categories), Ricoeur's approach exemplifies a transformative notion that critical thinking, explanation, and inquiry of different kinds in all areas of knowledge should not take place in an oppositional vacuum or as a fixed perspective. Rather, in Ricoeur's view, the most effective knowledge building proceeds in terms of the three stages of an open-ended *hermeneutic circle* that includes an *initial 'naïve' phase, a provisional 'critical' phase*, and *a transformative 'applied' phase* based on a very focused and grounded sense of embodied understanding. This circle is really a 'spiral' process, which might also be more amenable to the 'indirect' styles of communication or approaches to thinking and communicating that are often valued more highly in Asian contexts than are more direct styles. Some of the most innovative views of the 'new university' also adapt similar dialogical approaches to encouraging and designing ways of stimulating more-active learning and more-effective teaching of generic skills (M'Gonigle and Starke 2006). Such 'new universities' include higher education institutions that do, in fact, make more effective use of informative and communication technologies for enhanced learning.

The role of language and interpretation in academic learning and knowledge-building

We have already discussed how the dialogical humanism of Ricoeur, Arendt and others is particularly useful in recognising the constructive role of language and interpretation in various forms of human knowledge building. This concept is especially useful in relation to the related processes of 'active learning' and 'active thinking' in scholarly writing and in different modes of academic inquiry. The works of such thinkers provide an exemplary demonstration of meaningful inquiry design, sustained critical rigour, disciplined intellectual (and personal) integrity, and above all else, a commitment to further exploration and to engaging others in dialogue. Transitory fashions and other distractions failed to deter either Ricoeur or Arendt from either their overriding or particular *threads of inquiry*. Both were advocates of the view that everyone become an *active thinker* and that every person has some personal responsibility for self-knowledge (or 'inner dialogue', as Arendt put it) that is an ethical as well as practically relevant foundation for shared human knowledge and dialogue.

Arendt very consciously developed a method of writing and intellectual inquiry as 'exercises in thinking'. Some of these exercises more reflective, whereas others were more experimental. Although she used this method to *probe* and explore some of the more challenging and deeper problems of modern knowledge, that method nevertheless remains particularly relevant to a range of educational contexts. Ricoeur, likewise, would focus on addressing and exploring problems in the guise of posing questions. Both Arendt and Ricoeur demonstrate a practice

of *emergent* knowledge building, wherein integrity, rigour and even an academic value of 'endurance' are important hallmarks of effective thinking. Ricoeur developed an exemplary model of how the most effective knowledge building is constructed around some linkage of the *particular* and the *general.* This linkage extends from the semantic predication of a question, to an 'emergent' and 'dialogical' engagement with *general* topics or problems, and through *particular* examples or perspectives. In the manner of Socrates' pedagogical method opening up the gap between 'what we know' and 'what we don't know', Ricoeur refined this method into a strategy for (a) engaging with, opening up, and transforming *aporia* (or seemingly impossible dilemmas and problems) and the different intellectual perspectives of many notable thinkers in various areas or traditions of knowledge and (b) 'knowledge-building' aimed and grounded (both critically and creatively) in generating a purposeful and focused *surplus of meaning*.

Naturally, dialogical humanism has particular relevance for reviving and improving the concept of 'human-centred research' as distinct from, but not unrelated to, the 'natural sciences' as a timely and relevant priority of the 21st century university. There are two ways dialogical humanism can assist with such research in particular. One way lies in the focused, relevant, and meaningful design of research and inquiry in the context of an authentic problem-solving interest. Such design extends beyond vague, disconnected, descriptive approaches to research, approaches that remain concerned primarily with either identifying mere perceptions, or with somehow measuring the effects of negative self-fulfilling prophecies. For instance, dialogical humanism can readily support and enhance applications of more relevant and appropriate research methodologies conceived to address the rampant failure of much humanistic research to create a relevant, applied, or any kind of problem-solving (or experimental) focus. In particular, dialogical humanism can assist with a more substantial and sustainable approach to deriving meaningful data through a dialogical approach to designing surveys and interview questions that engage with and interpret the underlying preconceptions, assumptions, or 'organising metaphors' of subjects or objects of inquiry.

Another way dialogical humanism contributes to research programs lies its capacity to contribute more effective methodologies of evaluation in relation to relevant and useful focus questions that reflect a problem-solving, or at least investigative, approach to research or other formal knowledge-building designs. In human-centred research (as in the natural sciences), it is not enough to assume as truth or reality some particular opinion. For instance, human motivation (and any discrepancy between what an interviewee or respondent merely says, and what they actually do or really think) can be more effectively interpreted in light

of the various rhetorical indicators by which language-use mediates the gap between thinking and doing or perception and practice.

Perhaps the most significant lesson for universities today is that *descriptive* methodologies of research and academic writing (also, of teaching and learning) are not the most effective approaches to various kinds of knowledge building. Whether one applies qualitative or quantitative methodologies of evaluation, one should still strive to identify a relevant focus question or problem to provide a meaningful and constructive *thread of inquiry* (i.e., a focused research *methodology of design*). Instead of passive and unfocused descriptive approaches, a relevant focus question or problem provides an *interpretive* focus for knowledge building in both the humanities and natural sciences, and in both theoretical and experimental or applied research. This approach is similar to the more-effective models of constructivist learning. Following on how such a focus provides the key to an effective research or writing design, there has been a renewed interest in the concept of a *design-based methodology* of applied and experimental human-centred research that is capable of producing new knowledge in a similar fashion to experimental research in the natural sciences (Design-based Research Collective 2003). The generic academic skills of language-use, interpretation, and inquiry design, therefore, provide a natural context in which a dialogical humanism can provide a powerful reference point and framework for knowledge building in the new university of the 21st century (Light and Cox 2001; Laurillard 2002).

Conclusion

It is timely and appropriate that, at a time when a generally 'humanistic' dimension is needed more than ever to interpret the sum of world knowledge and the general predicament of humanity, there is a renewed interest in the humanities on the part of some Asian universities. This paper argues that because it is presently still difficult, for many reasons, to reinvent or restore a relevant 21st century notion of the humanities in established universities in the West, emerging Asian or other universities contemplating the creation of new humanities faculties have an opportunity to develop a reinvigorated notion of humanities knowledge and education that will be of global importance and relevance. Some have pointed out that such a program could fit with, extend, and support the general thrust of recent Asian educational policy to encourage more-active, critical and innovative learning outcomes and the attainment of a range of generic skills needed to be competitive in the global economy and knowledge society of the future.

The paper further discusses how there is no need to simply invent such a framework in a vacuum when the anticipation of a 21st century model and human centred program of sustainable knowledge building has already been outlined in the dialogical (i.e., cross-cultural or 'universal') humanism of such thinkers as Paul Ricoeur and Hannah Arendt in the previous century. The creation of such a model was ironic, for at that time, their ideas had fallen out of fashion. Western humanities were 'taken over' by modern and postmodernist forces of relativism, as well as by a privileged American literary version of the liberal arts. On this basis, the paper has provisionally explored some of the especially 'educational' emphases, priorities, and connections by which a sustainably human-centred concept of 'humanities' might be resurrected to provide support and leadership for a *21st century of knowledge building*, in all of the various senses of that term.

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