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MALS: A Voyage into Global Insight, Awareness, and Understanding

“Perfect understanding is impossible...the only thing one knows is that one doesn't know...thinking never stops.”

Robert Shapiro

MALS has been many things to me. But if I could sum it up in one word, I would have to say it has been a “voyage” into greater insight, awareness, and understanding of non-Western peoples and cultures. MALS has opened my eyes into seeing concepts, customs, traditions, ideas, and ways of life that I had never fully contemplated. If I had thought about them in the past, it was through the lens of my own Western point of view. Through the enlightening voyage that is MALS, I was able to better visualize, appreciate, and understand the world of non-Western peoples, through the most important lens possible, their own. In this essay, I would like to share with you what I learned on this exciting, global voyage. Remarkably, my MALS courses fell into a chronological pattern that shaped this journey. Each one was a “harbor” of enlightenment, a shining beacon of knowledge. So, please join me as a fellow mariner, as we visit these “harbors” that have given me greater insight, awareness, and understanding of myself and of our non-Western neighbors.

Our first harbor is 18th and 19th century London. Here, through the power of literature, I found myself walking the streets of a city that was shaping much of the world as we know it today. “London’s Fictions: A Cultural History from Defoe to Dickens,” was my first MALS course

and it was the perfect embarkation point for my global voyage. In studying the great writers, poets, and artists of this period, such as Burney, Congreve, Defoe, Dickens, Hogarth, Sheridan, Stevenson, and Wilde, I came to a greater appreciation of Great Britain's remarkable contribution to Western culture and civilization. But, at the same time, through the critical lens of these same writers, I also came to the realization that the Great Britain of their era was, arguably, the unofficial capital of Europe's global empire, the leading symbol of Western expansion and colonization. Through the work of these writers, especially the satirists and social novelists, I pondered the tragic paradox they saw in their nation -- high culture coexisting with brutal power -- and I addressed this contradiction in my paper, "Divided City; Divided Culture: London through the Eyes of Defoe and Dickens." Here, I argued that the British aristocracy, as reflected in the poignant stories of Defoe and Dickens, had turned London into two distinct cities: the "West End" for the rich, and the "East End" for the poor. Further, through the genius of Defoe and Dickens, I argued that the "two Londons" of that era, not only reflected the British aristocracy's divisive, mercantilist view of their own society, but symbolized their view of the non-Western world as well.

Thanks to "London's Fictions," I set sail from 18th and 19th century London with a better grasp of the mercantilist ethos that not only drove the British Empire, but, by extension, fueled the empires of France, Spain, Portugal, Holland, Italy, Germany, and Belgium as well.

Soon, I arrived in my next harbor: Africa, Asia, India, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Rim. Here, through "Contemporary World," my second course, I saw the tragic legacy that colonial

Great Britain and the other European powers had wrought through colonization and exploitation -- unending strife, turmoil, poverty, corruption, and war. It was as if, in a metaphorical sense, these non-Western nations had been "strip mined," not only of their natural resources, but of their human dignity as well. In studying Africa, I was reminded that not only had this continent been plundered of its material wealth by the European powers, it had also been plundered of its native peoples through the evil of slavery. Later in my voyage, through a course entitled, "The Dragon Awakes: Charting the Path of Modern China," I would learn that, in the 19th century, the British government, unhappy that the Chinese people had no demand for British goods, created the infamous opium market in China, exporting the narcotic from its Indian colony. Thus, in the name of profit, I learned that a more powerful nation literally drugged a less powerful nation. Not wanting to be a drug-addicted society, the Chinese fought back in the "Opium Wars," but were soundly defeated. Later, trying to rid themselves of European and U.S. influence, they fought back in the "Boxer Rebellion," but again, they were soundly defeated. In fact, I learned that most of the non-Western nations fought their European colonizers, and most were defeated. But did the West really "conquer" them in all aspects? Did they succeed in "Westernizing" them? I addressed this question in my paper, "Western Ideas: Have They Triumphed in the Third World?" My answer was a resounding "no." The West may have conquered the non-Western nations in terms of the material world, but not in terms of native culture, identity, heritage, spirit, and the will to forge one's own destiny. To support my thesis, I cited, as examples, two important books we read in the course: Matigari by exiled Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong 'o, and When Heaven and Earth Changed Places, by

Vietnamese-American writer, Le Ly Hayslip. In Matigari, an allegorical novel, Ngugi, who suffered under British colonial and neo-colonial rule, exhorts the Kenyan people to continue the fight for true independence. Meanwhile, in her gripping non-fiction account of the Vietnam War, Hayslip, a Vietnamese refugee who suffered under French, U.S. and Communist domination, hopes that the Vietnamese people will someday be free to govern themselves, free of Western or Communist influence.

Armed with greater knowledge of the West's colonial and neo-colonial legacy, I set sail once again. Soon, I arrived in a new harbor: the Middle East, and a course entitled, "The Islamic World: Perceptions and Realities." The course couldn't have been more timely. My own nation, the United States, was now embroiled in two wars in the Islamic world; one in Afghanistan, the other in Iraq. Domestic and international critics were labeling us "Imperial America" and the world's newest "colonial superpower." Like the Vietnam War, our nation was once again divided into two angry camps: the pro-war hawks and the anti-war doves. In class we debated the central question: Is the United States, and the West, a true friend of the Middle East, or an exploitative foe? As the two wars raged, a pattern seemed to emerge as to the root cause of the seemingly endless conflict in the Middle East. I addressed this pattern in a paper entitled: "The Iraq War: Was It Justified?" First, I explored the three reasons our government gave for going to war in Iraq -- weapons of mass destruction, al Qaeda terrorists, and the "liberation" of the Iraqi people. Then, based on my research, I gave what I believed was the real reason -- oil.

Concerned about the West's preoccupation with Middle Eastern oil, and its lag in developing alternative sources of energy, I set sail once again. Soon, I entered a new harbor, one that plays an even greater role than oil in dictating the balance of world power, the harbor of "Global Money." Through a course entitled, "The Global Economy," I learned that three Western institutions, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB), and the World Trade Organization (WTO), literally control the economic fate of the non-Western world. In class, we had intense debates, some of them heated, over the role the West plays in the development, distribution, and control of the world's economic power, especially in the non-Western world. Argumentation was especially intense over the concept of "globalization." Its proponents argue that if all nations, especially developing ones, open their borders to free trade, with little or no government regulation, the world will be a better place for everyone. But in my paper, "Globalization: Prosperity or Exploitation?" I argued just the opposite. I stated that free trade can be a very good thing, but without appropriate government regulation, it can be a very dangerous thing, leading to poverty, crisis, chaos, and ultimately, to global war. I argued that, according to leading economists, such as Nobel Prize-winning Joseph Stiglitz and Susan George, globalization's "all boats will rise" thesis is rarely the case in developing countries, where wealth is merely redistributed to the wealthy few, not the impoverished many. I stated that if we are to rectify the egregious imbalance in global wealth, we must strike a balance between unfettered free markets and government regulation. And, most important, rather than exploit the developing world, we must help it move toward true, representative democracy.

As I sailed away from the harbor of global money, I could see a pattern emerging: we seem to be an increasingly “have and have not” world; the “haves” dominate the West, while the “have nots” dominate the rest of the planet. A question occurred to me: If there is an egregious imbalance in global power favoring the West, including wealth, education, commerce, industry, and energy, is there any other gross imbalance that favors the West? The answer was waiting for me as I sailed into my next harbor: “Global Health.” Through a course entitled, “Global Perspectives in the Biological Sciences,” I learned that we are in a “global war” against infectious disease, especially those bacterias and viruses that can result in devastating epidemics and pandemics. We haven’t been able to eliminate infectious disease, but thanks to modern medicine, we have been able to control disease...in the West. Unfortunately, that is not the case in the non-Western world. Diseases that many of us in the West no longer worry about, such as tuberculosis, influenza, cholera and HIV/AIDs, are wreaking havoc in the developing world. Western governments, corporations, and institutions, except for a few non-profit health organizations, are conspicuous by their absence in assisting the third world. But some heroic individuals, many of them from the West, are stepping up to help. I learned that one of those heroes is Dr. Paul Farmer, an American physician from Boston, who has helped the people of Haiti, a former French colony, turn around the AIDS/HIV, malaria, and TB epidemics in that country. In the course, we were introduced to Dr. Farmer’s inspiring story through Tracy Kidder’s book, Mountains Beyond Mountains. I was moved by the story and wrote an-depth discussion paper on it. Dr. Farmer, through the non-profit organization he founded, Partners in Health (PIH), has successfully helped the people of Haiti, one of the poorest nations in the

world, get control of the TB, malaria, and AIDS/HIV epidemics that were devastating the nation. He has also done the same for the poor of Africa, Peru, Russia, and the slums of Boston. And he has done it all on a PIH budget of only sixteen million dollars a year. To put that in perspective, Boston's two largest teaching hospitals have a combined budget of one billion dollars a year. As I point out in my paper, Dr. Farmer has four keys to his success, keys that we could learn a lot from. First, he aggressively drives down the cost of drugs; he will not deal with unethical drug companies that have inflated, exorbitant profit margins. Second, he strives to make sure people aren't hungry, homeless, or without schools. PIH feeds them, provides clothing, and builds shelters and schools because poverty, he says, is what makes people vulnerable to disease. Third, he only hires, trains and develops indigenous people to work in PIH. Native people, he says, need dignity and income from work, and they will put their earnings back into their own economy. (Only 100 of PIH's 6,500 employees are non-indigenous.) Fourth, Farmer and PIH maintain fierce control -- and independence -- of their funding sources. Donations are only accepted from those philanthropists whom Farmer trusts. This minimizes outside influences with ulterior motives.

As I departed the harbor of global health, I was moved by the work of Dr. Paul Farmer, and other heroic individuals, who, on shoestring budgets, are valiantly delivering health care to help the poor of developing nations. However, they can only do so much to ease the seemingly unending economic, medical, social, political, ethnic, and environmental problems that plague non-Western peoples, especially poverty. Then, a thought occurred to me. How do the "have

nots” feel about constantly being on the world’s economic downside? How do they feel about not being able to shape their own destiny? Are they frustrated? Are they angry? I was about to find out.

Soon, I sailed into a harbor where the waters were turbulent, the rocks were sharp, and the storms were violent. I had entered the harbor of global terror. The course, “Dangerous Minds: Terrorism, Political Violence, and Radical Orthodoxies” gave me invaluable insights into the causes of global terror. I learned that terror groups exist everywhere, including Europe and the United States. But whether the terror is attributed to differences in race, religion, ethnicity, or politics, one thing always seems to be the root cause -- poverty. Thus, it wasn’t surprising to learn that terrorism, like disease, flourishes more aggressively in the “have not” regions of the world. In my research paper, “Kenya and Tanzania: Should We Worry About Terror?” I pointed out that the growing specter of terrorism in Kenya, a former British colony; and in Tanzania, a former German colony, was driven by poverty. Located near terror-ridden Somalia, both nations have become a harboring ground for terror groups including Al Qaeda, which bombed the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya; and in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania in 1998. In addition to Africa and the Middle East, I was astounded to learn that many terror groups operate within Asia, Southeast Asia, India, Pakistan, and Central and South America. It was sad, but not surprising, to learn that the legacy of Western colonialism and neo-colonialism has been largely responsible for the economic, political, ethnic, and social turmoil that breeds global terrorism.

As I departed the harbor of global terror, I reflected that we, in the West, have a moral, spiritual, and economic responsibility to help right the wrongs of our colonial past, if we are to have world peace.

I was now nearing the end of my global voyage, and I was eager to visit the nation that Napoleon once warned Europe to “let...sleep, for when she awakes she will shake the world” (UNCG). Soon, I entered the harbor of the world’s newest superpower: the People’s Republic of China. Through the course, “The Dragon Awakes: Charting the Path of Modern China,” my eyes were opened, for the first time, to the real nature of today’s China and the challenges it faces. Previously, my “knowledge” of China, like many Americans, was largely superficial, gained from the opinions of Western tourists and business travelers, the corporate news media, the commercialized “China Towns” in major U.S. cities, and of course, Hollywood. “Modern China” not only introduced me to China’s ancient civilization, colorful history and vibrant culture, but to its current economic, political, cultural, social and ethnic challenges, and the way it is handling those challenges. The course provided so many invaluable insights into so many important themes, ideas, questions and issues; it is difficult to say what aspects intrigued me the most. However, reflecting on Napoleon’s admonition, I think the most important question for me, and for many Americans, is: How do we, in the West, “get along” with a strong, independent China, a China that, in many ways, is our economic, political, and military equal?

Based on what I learned in the course, I came to the conclusion that our successful handling of three major issues – issues that are critically important to China -- might be part of

the answer. Also, I believe that success with these issues will help us guide China toward democracy.

The first issue is Taiwan. I learned that if we are going to ensure peaceful coexistence with the People's Republic of China (PRC), Taiwan and the PRC must be reunited. The PRC will accept nothing less. As a fictional State Department advisor to the President, I recommended reunification in a fictional white paper entitled, "The Taiwan Strait: Recommended Policy Position Prior to Your Beijing Visit." I pointed out that the U. S. has no diplomatic relations with Taiwan, and that we have a law, the "Taiwan Relations Act of 1979," which recognizes the PRC as "the sole legal government of China"(UNCG). In addition, I pointed out that we had issued Joint U.S.-China Communiqués in 1972, under the Nixon administration, and then again in 1978, under the Carter administration, affirming our policy that "there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China" (UNCG). Thus, I advised the President that the U.S. has a strong precedent for supporting reunification, and that we should work with the PRC and Taiwan toward a peaceful resolution of that goal. Based on studying all sides of the issue, I agree with my fictional, State Department counterpart.

The second issue is "partnering." I learned that although China is a strong competitor, there are two ways to look at this competition. One is the traditional Western way, in which we view China as a "threat," a nation that is not interested in peaceful coexistence, whether it is in trading, diplomacy, human rights, or the environment. The other view, which I agree with, is that although China is a strong competitor, we should view China as a "partner" in addressing

global issues of mutual concern. Like any successful relationship, we need to take a cooperative approach with China. We need to realize that, ultimately, we most likely have the same goals; we just have different ways of approaching them.

The third issue is “identity.” I learned that if we, in the West, are going to peacefully coexist with China, and help it move toward democracy, we are going to have to learn, understand, appreciate, and respect the importance of “identity” in Chinese culture. In other words, we are going to have to learn what it means to be “Chinese.” I learned that the Chinese people, due to the hardships suffered under their Western colonizers, such as the “Opium Wars,” which I mentioned earlier, are in a worldwide “diaspora.” For generations, millions have lived outside of China, mainly in the metropolitan centers of their former colonizers or in other Asian nations. Yet, many have never felt truly at home in the West or in other parts of Asia. Their adopted nations still consider them to be “Chinese,” still consider them to be “other.” The issue is so critical that I wrote a paper on it entitled, “Identity and the Liang Family: The Case for Staying in America.” In my paper, based on a fictional case study, Mr. Liang, the family’s father, is torn between two worlds. He has the opportunity to return to China, where a better job, his relatives, and an accepting, cultural “identity” await him, or, staying in the U.S. where his job is in jeopardy, his talents aren’t appreciated, and he is treated as a non-American, ethnic “other,” even though he is a naturalized U.S. citizen. Reluctantly, Mr. Liang decides to stay in the U.S. for the sake of his children, deciding that democracy would be better for their future. He courageously sacrifices his “identity” needs for them. In underscoring the

critical importance of identity in my paper, I quoted excerpts from an extensive video interview conducted by Dr. James A. Anderson of UNCG with two Chinese exchange students. An Asian scholar and Professor of History at UNCG, Dr. Anderson teaches the MALS “Modern China” course. His interview focused on the cultural differences the students may have encountered in adapting to life in the U.S. It was clear that, although the students appreciated and respected American culture, they preferred life in China in every aspect, especially family life. It was clear that, like the fictional Mr. Liang, who only stayed in America because of his children, “identity” for these Chinese exchange students was paramount – perhaps even more important than democracy at this stage in their lives.

As I sailed away from the “harbor” that is the People’s Republic of China, I felt strongly encouraged about a positive future between China and the West. Based on what I learned in “Modern China,” not only do we, in the West, have a tremendous opportunity to live peacefully with China, but we also have a wonderful opportunity to help guide China toward democracy. Once again, the keys to that success, as outlined above, are clear: support reunification with Taiwan, partner in areas of mutual interest, and understand, appreciate, and respect, the Chinese need for identity.

In conclusion, my MALS “voyage” has been a life-changing experience, one that has given me greater insight, awareness, and understanding of myself and of our non-Western neighbors and friends. With each harbor I visited, I came away with new knowledge of the non-Western world, including its peoples and cultures. And, perhaps most important, I

came away with renewed hope for our planet. I learned that although we may be from different cultures, races, ethnicities and backgrounds, we are all members of the same human family; we all have, essentially, the same human goals, just different ways of approaching them. Thus, with understanding and acceptance of our cultural differences, and with a spirit of cooperation in sharing the abundance of this earth, there shouldn't be anything we can't achieve together, including, and especially, world peace.

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