

A Canon for Whom? A Canon for What?: A Response to Adam Kotsko

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THE QUESTION OF WHETHER A CANON CONTINUES TO BE RELEVANT IS ONE I THINK about a lot, as it relates closely to my experience of studying English literature as an international student in Australia. In his article, in the context of elucidating his institution's commitment to teaching the 'Great Books tradition', Adam Kotsko first problematises the Western canon, pointing out its limitations in representing other cultural traditions and human experiences in the modern, post-colonial world, particularly the experiences of women and racial minorities. He then defends the Western canon by arguing for its merits from three perspectives: pedagogical, academic and social. While I agree with most of his arguments on the merits of the Western canon, I think they miss the real point of contention, which is not what the canon is good for but whether it should be the only learning material for a humanities education program.

I'm not against the idea of a canon. Studying in the Western humanities tradition as an international student allows me to access and compare the canons of two great cultures, one of the West and one of my nation, China. China has its own canon too, and a very exclusive one at that. My life as a reader started with reading classics that are taught within the Chinese tradition. Since age six, my parents gave me the task of getting familiar with a series of ancient Chinese philosophical and literary texts, such as the *Analects of Confucius* (《论语》), the

Great Learning (《大学》) and *A Selection of Chinese Classical Essays* (《古文观止》). Funnily enough, 'A Selection of Chinese Classical Essays' is a modest translation of the book's title. A more literal translation would be 'no need to read other ancient essays after you've read these'. How canonical is that?!¹

As I grew up, I become increasingly skeptical of my parents', and so many others', belief that these books defined what it means to be Chinese and are thus, essentially, must-reads for every Chinese person. Nevertheless, I'm grateful that I've been given the chance to read them at a young age. I would definitely recommend these books to anyone who is interested in studying Chinese culture and history in depth.

Kotsko notes the somewhat paradoxical role that capitalism has played in disseminating the classics to the masses, given the aristocratic and religious attitudes most of these books present. What he doesn't mention is that capitalism has disseminated the classics not only to the working class but also to people of other cultures. It was through the Penguin Classics that I was introduced to Western literature and philosophy. Such a 'canon' gave me a place to start. From *Oedipus* to *Frankenstein*, Shakespeare to Woolf, these books map out a trajectory of Western cultural and intellectual development. Like Kotsko, I loved the idea that there was 'a list of books that could grant me credibility and respectability'. As an international student from a vastly different cultural background with a desire to study in the Western humanities tradition, such a list of books provided me a sense of sureness, of knowing that I was on the 'right' track.

The Western Canon has its merits. But I think this is not the point of contention. According to Kotsko, the Great Books tradition starts from the premise that 'every college student should engage with primary texts of enduring importance' as higher education becomes increasingly specialised. The inevitable question is thus: by what standards can we define a text as 'a primary text of enduring importance'? That it inspired the development of Western culture? Or that it reveals or represents something about humanity, non-restricted to the West?

From my experience, in discussing what qualities make a book great, academics (Western or not) tend to stress literary value and the capacity of a book to have cultural influence, to reflect on the reality of a historical era. Yet, for me, what makes a book truly great is always the power to transcend time, space, and cultural barriers. *Hamlet* continues to be important to me not because it ranks high in the Western Canon, but because it connects to me, because it fills me with

¹ Cucai Wu and Diaohou Wu, eds., *A Selection of Chinese Classical Essays from Guwen Guanzhi*, translated by Luo Jingguo (Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2005). Cucai Wu and Diaohou Wu, eds., *Guwen Guanzhi: An Anthology of Chinese Classical Prose*, translated by Wong Siu-kit (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2006).

passion and dread and sorrow, because when Hamlet ponders the meaning of existence in Shakespeare's language, my heart resonates. Western classics are great precisely because of this power they have. However, they are not the only books that have such a power.

While I haven't encountered many traditional classics in my study of literature, I have read many texts that have been regarded as modern classics, including works by Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, William Faulkner and Aldous Huxley. Many of these books have become very important to me. Some have inspired me to see reality from a different perspective, some have altered my perception of what literature can be.

My interest in themes of alienation, race and post-colonial experience has led me to read many works by less well-known writers who do not fit so easily into the category 'Western'. These books have revealed to me other worlds, other dimensions of human experience, and affected me no less than the Western classics. Reading them always reminds me why I love literature in the first place—to be able to peer into the minds of others, to see beyond the present horizon.

What is the true purpose of gaining a higher education in core humanities disciplines that, from my experience, have taught both canonical and non-canonical, 'great' Western works as well as works of those who live on the margins of Western experience? What do college students really need? A reading list that helps them to better understand the developmental trajectory of the Western world, or one that enables them to see the diversity of cultures and societies as well as the overlapping territories and the internal connectedness that ultimately define us as human beings? What does humanity of the twenty-first century need?

In studying English literature, what have struck me most with awe have been the occasions when I read an English expression and immediately recognise that there's an almost exactly correlative expression in Chinese. I know that this is not the result of the expression's having been translated from Chinese into English but, rather, 'mere' coincidence. 'Constant dropping wears away a stone', for instance, has an exact same expression in Chinese idiom that means persistence will achieve an unlikely object. To 'skate on thin ice' is very similar to a Chinese idiom that describes risky situations. And, in Chinese, 'test the waters' means trying something first before deciding whether to get involved in it as well.

Humans that have lived in different spheres of the earth in different eras of history somehow used very similar metaphors to describe a certain thing or a certain feeling, and they did so without knowing of the metaphor's existence in

other cultures. And this happens not only linguistically, but also in historical, religious and literary discourses and contexts. Washington Irving's short story 'Rip Van Winkle', for example, derives from a European folktale very similar to a third-century-AD Chinese tale. Are not such coincidences the most fascinating and beautiful thing about humanity? Should not such shared experiences be what we seek to explore and understand in this postcolonial world?

Considering debates about the Western canon, it is probably time to imagine an alternative canon which, while acknowledging the importance of white, straight masters, acknowledges that this does not encompass all experience. Recently, I was inspired by an event organised by the ANU Humanities Research Centre, as part of a series called 'Books that Changed Humanity', which focused on the Hindu epic *Ramayana*. When it comes to thinking about a more globally inclusive canon, I believe such events can be a good place to begin. The Western Canon should continue to be an inspiring source for those who want to understand the roots and continuities of Western culture and civilisation, but it should not be the only canon available to us.

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I was born in the Southwest of China, moved to Shanghai when I was seven and have lived there ever since. Now I am a third-year literature student at the Australian National University, with a keen interest in themes of alienation, race and post-colonial experiences. I love theatre and music, write fiction and poetry in Chinese in leisure time and only just started exploring the possibility of writing in English. When I feel stuck in my creative work, I work on translating English poetry and short stories into Chinese, and vice versa.