

**The Trip with the Gangsta Boys,  
with some reflections on the coming Clash of Civilizations:**

**Warren Blake.**

My job involves taking groups of school kids out on adventure voyages in my Schooner to idyllic island groups in the tropic seas. We typically take 12 to 16 students, with one or two of their teachers, for five to seven day trips, in which I try to teach them everything I know about navigation, sailing, snorkeling, kayaking, rock-climbing, and, my life-long interest, the ecology of the sea, of coral reefs, and of the tropic jungle.

Over several decades I have sailed with thousands of these young people, with the result that not only do I feel younger and fitter, but that I also believe I have learned something about what it is to be a teenager. This story then is about two very different groups of youngsters that sailed with me just a few weeks apart, and about their contrasting attitudes to the world, with some tentative thoughts on what those differences imply for the future of Civilization.

This last may read like a pretentious, grandiose, leap into the sphere of the philosopher, but consider who these two groups of kids were:

The first was composed entirely of Singapore citizens, children of the 21<sup>st</sup> globalizing century, by virtue of their place of birth at the hub of Asian development, and heirs in part to the grand old Confucian tradition, by reason of their race, all of them Chinese.

The second were all American citizens, heirs to the unbridled vigor of their young nation, and to the other, older, Anglo-Saxon belief in the freedom of the individual. Thus might the stage be set for a weighing of Values, one of Neo-Confucian collectivism, the other of unrestrained individualism, one against the other.

The first group, 18 Singaporeans, came from a Junior College of high repute. They were all 15 to 16 years old, and included, as usual, more girls than boys. Their College had previously organized two trips in the Schooner, arranging all administration, passports, health records, travel, etc, etc, paying some small part of the expenses, and securing a sizeable Government subsidy for such an educational outdoors experience. In contrast, my subject group had heard about the earlier trips, and contacted me directly, saying, "Captain, we want to go too!" Without any help from teachers they organized their own bus ride overnight from Singapore to Kuala Kedah, and thence a ferry trip to Langkawi, where they met me and "Four Friends." This enthusiastic initiative endeared me to them immediately, and I tried my best to shave my fees to a minimum.

The second group, 12 Americans, also 15 to 16, were required by their expensive international School in an Asian capital to choose from a comprehensive menu of annual adventure trips, and so were hardly "volunteers" in the same way that the Singapore kids were. They were also all boys, a danger signal, confirmed by their accompanying teacher's warning that "These are a rough bunch!" In hindsight, I suspect that one or two of the gang-leaders, forced to participate in some trip or other, chose a sailing trip because it may have seemed a chance to just lie around sunbathing while strapped into their i-pods. The rank and file "gangstas" presumably followed like sheep, with the inevitable exclusion of any non-members or girls. Face to face with an abusive, raging old sea-Captain on a veritable slave-ship, some began quickly to regret their choice.

The Singapore kids were about as pleasant as any I have sailed with, eager to learn about sailing and the sea, informed and concerned about the environment, quite conscious of the consequences of their actions, eager for new experiences, although not terribly brave in facing them, and ever so polite and properly deferential towards their Captain, even touchingly sharing their snacks with me. Having them on board was a great pleasure...and so there is really no great story to tell apart from this. These kids do rank amongst my favourite shipmates.

The American kids were, one might say, another story. They arrived on board in high spirits, in a rolling cacophony of insults and foul-mouthed imprecations. It seemed at first that not one was listening to anyone else, although it later became apparent that there were two self-proclaimed leaders who were accorded some attention by the rank and file. Certainly they showed little inclination to listen to their new Captain, nor to their teacher, Mr. B.

In principle I brook no insubordination on my decks, and any challenge to my authority is summarily disposed of, but on the other hand, I realize that kids are a product of their culture to some extent, a product of whatever discipline their parents, their society, and their school have imposed, so they are not themselves completely to blame. I try not to judge the individual on first impressions. In this way, I believe I have managed in the past to draw some recalcitrants out of their hormone-encrusted carapaces to actually enjoy a voyage on the sea. With this lot in particular, I had been warned, and I vowed not to lose my temper with them, at least in the first few hours.

With a lot of patience, the assistance of the teacher, and continuous shouting to make ourselves heard, we struggled through stowing of bags, safety briefing, toilet training, man-overboard drill and chart work lessons, although there were sporadic, unexplained outbursts of shrill hooting, and apparently unprovoked bouts of vigorous physical struggle, even during the most earnest expostulations by the Captain.

The trip “progressed” slowly into ever more chaos, lack of direction, moral or geographical, and with serious doubts about safety issues. These lads, as a group, lacked any discernible social graces, seemed to absorb little or nothing of my teachings, showed no interest in, indeed no awareness of the scenic beauty of the sea and islands, evinced little enthusiasm for exciting activities, and, perhaps worst of all, demonstrated zero understanding of the necessity for cheerful cooperation in the enterprise of guiding a large sailing vessel safely over the far horizon to her hidden destination...which is, after all, the main aim of these expeditions. Naturally they showed no appreciation of the Traditions, the Romance of Sea-Faring. These were not my favourite set of shipmates.

Before meal-times there would be three or four in the galley, begging our Philipina cook Aida for tit-bits, and reaching for them over her tiny frame, despite her firm denials. Mealtime at the table was just a rugby scrum, with the heaviest, most unscrupulous devouring four or five bowls of pasta each...and afterwards complaining of gross indigestion....with the result that at two meals the teacher and I were forced to resort to bread and cheese, there being no main course left. Naturally our young barbarians showed no remorse, only surprise, when remonstrated with for their greed. They proved reluctant to do any physical work, and were horrified, paralysed almost, by any cleaning work....”stuff my maids do...I have three of them!” proclaimed one large boy of Taiwanese origin, proud of his status in his own domestic, Confucian hierarchy, and unconsciously oblivious to the disdain such privilege invokes in the sea-going, Anglo-Saxon mind. This meant that they were capable of spectacular littering, comfortable in the sub-conscious certainty that there would always be an invisible Indonesian or Philipina lady tending to their every whim. “Spoiled-brat offspring of well-off expat parents!” sneered their less well-paid teacher.

We sailed close past Koh Petra, that most spectacular of the limestone towers of the Thai islets without one of them looking up 1200 vertical feet above them. I suspect that their total lack of awareness of vivid scenery was a feature of their total absorption inwards towards their own little community.

But what was this community? It certainly was a voluble one, with scarce anyone resting silent for very long. This continuous babble, along with the rapid, machine-gun-like delivery, in their own vernacular, rendered their discourse virtually unintelligible to me, and scarcely less to their teacher. I picked up a few phrases, all hurtful invective, such as, “What?...are you retarded, or something?” The state of ill-discipline on board was becoming intolerable. The teacher, no pushover as a disciplinarian on four previous trips, had given up, and retired to the relative harmony of the wheelhouse with his book. But I, the Captain, was becoming unsettled, and my throat raw with shouting to no avail.

On the afternoon of the third day we went on a river expedition to a spectacular limestone cave where we regularly kayak 500 metres though in the dark. Such an expedition requires, for safety, careful planning, detailed briefing, and cheerful, precise following of instructions. I had my doubts whether this particular group had that necessary discipline. I lectured them earnestly that this, probably their first genuine outdoors adventure, was real Man’s business, and that childish, impulsive behaviour would endanger themselves and the rest of the party. We then towed six kayaks up river behind the motor-launch, with two scoundrels in each one.

Of course their natural, animal impulses quickly mastered them. There was a flurry of scuffling amongst the towed kayaks, of attempts to capsize a neighbour, and to splash water on their fellows. This sort of behaviour was threatening the progress of the whole group up river, and would prove acutely dangerous if reenacted in the dark of the cave river passage. They obviously had no idea of what should constitute responsible behaviour...they had perhaps never been taught by their parents that such a concept even exists. I felt that it was beyond my means to list in detail all that was considered responsible behaviour, let alone describe all that was the contrary.

I could think of no further message that might register, except perhaps the threat of violence. I stopped, hauled the kids and kayaks up alongside our motor-launch, bared my parang, a huge, heavy jungle knife, and threatened the chief trouble-maker with a "F...ing beheading!"... as close as I could reach with my whistling blade. Blackbird, a boy of irrepressible, perhaps psychotic energy, and number two Alpha male, froze speechless, for the first time. This had a temporary, soothing effect. How we did not lose any rascals in the cave amazes me still.

*Calm prevails briefly in the strings of kayaks after the Beheading.....*



My influence over them lasted only an hour or two. I can rationalize my wish to be firmly in command on grounds of safety..."everybody must listen to, and obey orders instantly in an emergency!"...but my ego was also under attack. I, the Master, the One who owes obedience to no Higher Authority, was effectively being challenged by a mob straight out of "Lord of the Flies"...or was it something more biologically basic? Was the old grey-bearded Macaque of 67 sea-going seasons in the process of being ousted by some downy-cheeked, pimply, 16 year old upstart monkey and his gang?

Something had to crack. On the morning of the fourth day the wind backed to dead-ahead. Down came the sails and the engines roared to life. Without the shade of the sails the tropic sun beat down on the anvil of the deck. The gang, busy as always in cacophonous rapport on deck, requested that the awning should be raised. I ordered them roughly to put it up themselves (they had been so instructed), and that Jerry, our Philipino Engineer would supervise their efforts. I went back to the wheelhouse. When next I looked, Jerry was struggling alone with the huge fabric in the strong wind. A few of the Boys were watching him with interest, and the rest were, as ever, heads together, engaged in communal rap.

That was the breaking point. I emerged out of the deckhouse on the run, up onto the decktable, whence I leapt down upon the gang with a hoarse roar of outrage. By great good luck the downwards trajectory of 55 kg of aging sea-captain allowed me to grab two shirt collars, one of them that of Troutsky, the leading, most stentorian Alpha male, and to continue near to deck level with two heads converging roughly together. By even greater luck, our combined momentum carried one other boy down to be pinned under us, exactly where I could use the hammer of the two top heads against the third bottom one, all against the anvil of the solid teak deck. In outraged, moral high-dudgeon, I massaged those heads together perhaps a few extra times more than was strictly required for your average lesson in Moral Civics. That massage must have made their eyes water. There was blood on the decks too, from a squashed nose. It was all a matter of a bit of "banging heads together", you might say.

Meanwhile, the rest of that Gang of teenagers all cowered low on the deck in pathetic terror, despite the fact that all outweighed me by at least 15kg each, and were quite well muscled. They kept their

heads down and away from the raging, homicidal lunatic who had attacked them out of the blue for no discernible reason. The looks of fright on their faces were comical.

Having inflicted sufficient physical violence, I gave them several minutes of verbal lambasting in my best, well-practiced, naval invective.

“You pathetic, posturing, little Pimps! You just sit there watching a Real man do a Man’s job! You do not have the slightest idea how to do a Man’s job, you are just blobs of pampered protoplasm! I suppose you have maids at home to wipe your filthy arses! Well, there ain’t no maids out here, and you will learn to cooperate in doing a real job or I will pound you into a bloody pulp! I will flog your backs until there is not one inch of skin left! I will break every bone in your bodies, and tow what remains astern for the sharks! Shut up, Troutski!...we haven’t had a hanging in quite a while...I will enjoy seeing you swinging from the spreaders!”...etc, etc, and so on. “Get off your fat little arses, and help Jerry with the awning!”

“Yes, Captain, yes!” bleated those with sore heads, and all rushed to pull feebly, to diverging purposes, at the great red awning.

The violence resulted in a few more hours of servile suppliance among the rabble. There was to be more trouble to follow, of course.

There was one more occasion where I felt I must offer violence. The group was in usual close, deafening communion at the deck table. Our Aida, a very respectable young grandmother, appeared to serve some choice, home-cooked snacks to the rapsCALLIONS, against my specific instructions, since the boys were supposed to do all the fetching and carrying for her, but I guess this was still considered “maids’ stuff”. While Aida was pleasantly handing out the treats, I heard twice, above the general babble, the F-word loudly rendered. In my extended observation of the ways and works of Man, where I have drunk with mixed assemblies, I have noted that the lower down the social scale the greater reluctance there is to use bad language in front of ladies...a sort of grace amongst scoundrels, you might say. That these little rich kids had not even aspired to that most basic of moral principles infuriated me once again.

I grabbed the handle of the working backstay lever, a heavy, ornate piece of wood that has served me well in past disturbances (see “The Day we boiled the Beer”), and erupted out of the deckhouse again. I secured the group’s attention by a swingeing crash in the middle and then proceeded to whack the edge of the table in front of each rascal, addressing them by name, and promising “real bloodshed before the day is out!” if I heard such improprieties again. I attempted to catch Alpha-Troutski’s hands on the table, but in a remarkable display of cool grace, he edged his hands away just sufficiently without cringing in the slightest. Troutski was trying hard to maintain his leadership position in the face of my onslaughts! After we had all cooled down Troutski remonstrated with me, politely, “Captain, you nearly hit my fingers!...if I had not moved them in time...” I obeyed my instincts and countered, “Damn it! I was not fast enough!” Troutski will make something of himself in later life, if he survives that long.

I was at this point not at all sure that my efforts at discipline were having anything more than a very temporary effect. I was also appalled at the prospects for the future of Western Civilization with this lot representing the cream of the crop!

Slowly, however, both the teacher and I became conscious that the very worst excesses were less frequent, that there was a vague but perceptible cheerfulness amongst the scallywags towards us, and that some of them even seemed a little eager to assume shipboard duties. This last was dramatically proven when we demanded that the decks, littered and sandy underfoot, needed washing down. Eager volunteers grabbed brooms and the deck-wash hose, spent far more time than was strictly necessary in swabbing the decks, and were actually proud of the results.

At one of our tiny, uninhabited islets, one boy, Blackbird, the most energetic, irrepressible one, was last back, by himself in a double kayak, after a long paddle against the wind. He had found the skeleton of a dead dolphin on the beach, and had carefully collected all the vertebrae, ribs, backbone and skull, and had struggled back all by himself as the dolphin’s remains occupied the forward seat. I was pleased to promise to keep the remains aboard the ship and to deliver them to the School Bio Lab on my return to civilization, as it was probable that no airline staff would entertain such malodorous baggage.

We sailed near Phi Phi Island, that legendary den of iniquity, that cesspool of degradation, that fleshpot of earthly pleasures. The lads were unflinching in their efforts: “Please, please, Captain, can we land at Phi Phi, we will behave, we promise!” I believed nothing of these risible claims, and was dead set against this escapade, our aims were to teach them how to live an adventurous life without the dubious “benefits” of civilization, but teacher B demurred, suggesting that they had by now deserved a “little break, just two hours on shore!” I predicted, loudly, for the ears of everyone on board, that “One third of you will end up dead, one third under arrest, and the remainder will all contract foul diseases!” but I was prevailed upon to allow them just an hour and a half for a run ashore amongst the fleshpots. I refused to go with them, professing acute embarrassment at their predictable behaviour. To everyone’s surprise they all arrived without handcuffs or serious injury at the boats on the beach within the allowed time, and carried back with them numerous items, mostly clothes and trinkets which were variously “For my Mom!” “Do you think my sister will like this?” “I got this for my Granma!” They did have ordinary human feelings!

Teacher B. and I read their journals that night. There was a lot of banality, there was one reference to “looking at all the promiscuous Thai women”, one that related, “We saw these cool older dudes, all tattoos and Afros, and we figured they were a bad lot, so we wanted to join them”. Pity about that hour and a half limit!



*Mr. B. and the Gangsta Boys. Troutski in sunglasses...note his gang tattoos. Phiphile in background*

It was on the night of the second to last day, my 67<sup>th</sup> birthday, that I began to realize that I meant a little more to them than a randomly raging lunatic, attacking them out of the blue for no discernible reason.

They knew it was my birthday and produced some touching little presents, and two bottles of cheap champagne. Doubtless all this was at Teacher B’s urging, but it was done in remarkably good grace. There was no way B. and I could consume two bottles of bubbly, so I summoned up glasses, and every man-jack there saluted their captain in repeated, enthusiastic toasts. This was definitely against School rules for such trips...but then we, I included, had broken most of them already, so what the heck?

One of their presents for me was a big bag of choice snacks, “Twinkies” I think. I decreed that in all justice these should go to Blackbird, since I had been secretly filching his own supply, as he had innocently stashed them back in my wheelhouse, away from his grasping fellows, and had amused me greatly in his earnest searches for his missing goodies. In actual fact I had eaten only one or two, but my confession was met with a roar of approval. I suspect I had, by descending to their level, in a manner of speaking, made a step towards being “one of the boys”.

For all the bonhomie of the birthday night, there was still some minor violence to offer. Most of the group had by now, the last day, cheerfully turned to the usual shipboard duties, steering, navigating, setting and trimming sails, etc, except for two lads, Troutski, former Alpha-male, and Muggsie, the large Taiwanese boy. Both of them seemed to feign sea-sickness, despite quite calm conditions, and spent most of the daylight hours asleep, sweating in the deckhouse. Not entirely coincidentally perhaps, these two had previously been the victims of some of my worst excesses. I was not prepared to let them suffer in peace, so routed them roughly out of their bunks at the point of my heavy cudgel and prodded them unceremoniously on deck to clean up the mess left at lunch. They went befuddled by sleep, but Troutski managed a dignified, upright progress, with a slightly pained air of reluctance. He was not prepared to oppose me, but nor was he willing to show subservient acquiescence. My emphasis on prodding Troutski up onto the deck allowed Muggsie to escape down into the galley where I found him begging without dignity for sustenance. Further vigorous prodding and imprecations proved necessary.

Apart from that unpleasantness, further revelations of incipient humanity amazed B. and me. We read their journals in full. As usual with such efforts, even those of the Singapore kids, most were tedious relations of uninteresting activities....sparkling, relevant prose does not spring untutored from the teenaged mind. To our astonishment the writings of Blackbird, a boy who had up to now been quite articulate only in verbal braggadacio, insult and obscenity, now betrayed in writing an ability to observe salient detail, to depict natural surroundings, and to relate his impressions of his comrade’s activities in such a setting. Such budding talent was rare and worth encouraging!

I was still reluctant to say anything nice about any of these lads in the presence of their fellows, so I tackled Blackbird in his group on deck.

“Blackbird, I have been reading your journal! You’re in trouble man! Get your arse back to the wheelhouse!” He followed meekly.

There in front of Teacher B. I warned Blackbird that anything he might say could be taken down and used in evidence against him. He hung his head slightly. I told him that his writing was good stuff, that if he were prepared to do a lot more work to make a coherent story I would help to get it published in one of the magazines that I contribute to, and which allegedly wish to encourage young writers. I mentioned that together we had stacks of good photos with which to illustrate his tale, and that should he wish he could send his copy to me for comment. He brightened considerably and avowed he would like to do just that. It is worth noting here that three trips with the Singapore Junior College also brought to light one budding writer of similar talent, but with greater lyrical passion.

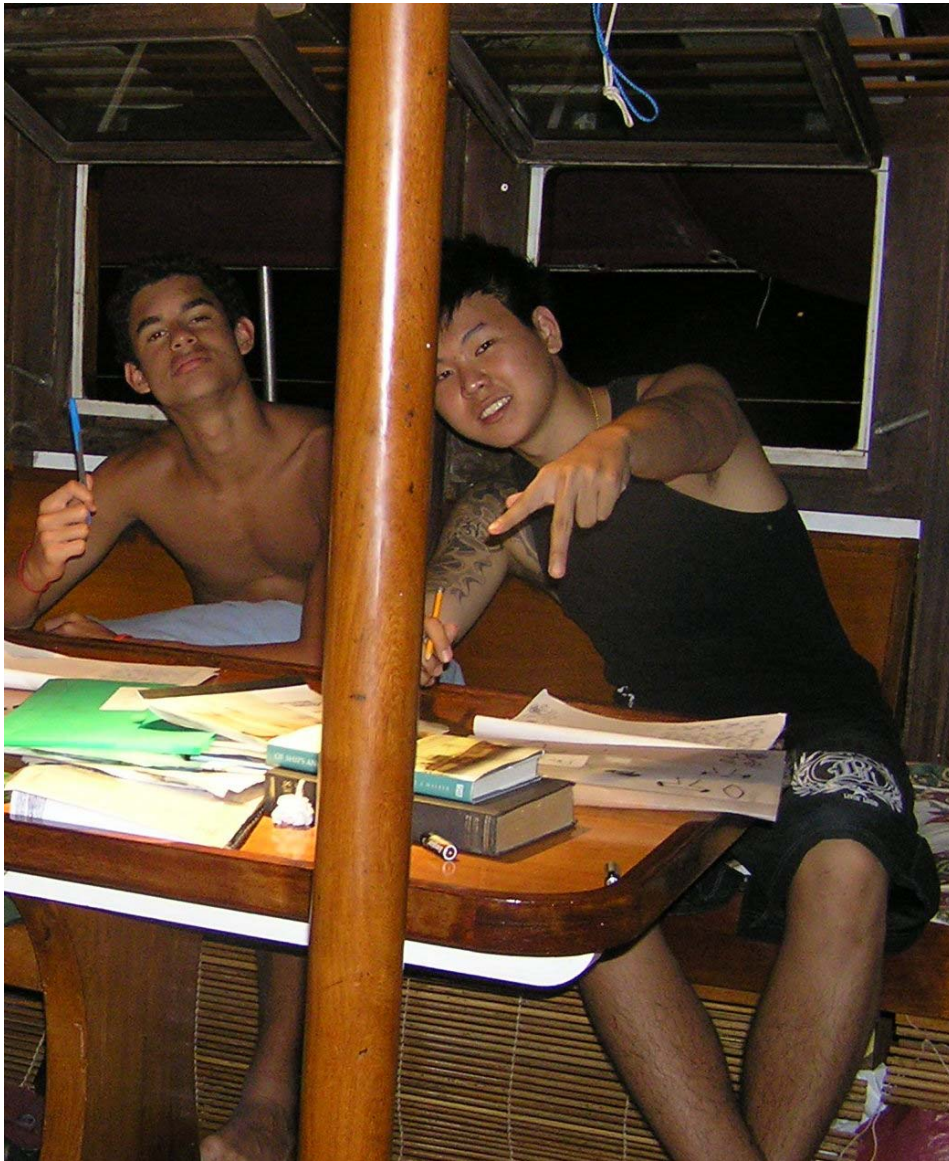
There was another endearing literary angle to the Gangsta Boys. At bed-time, with all of them spread about the main-deck in their sleeping-bags, there would be bed-time stories read out by one of them, usually Troutski, in his role of Big Brother, or as Capo? From my wheelhouse I could catch only snatches of his uninflected monologue, but B. averred it was “cheap pornography”. Later he showed me the book, *“I hope they serve beer in Hell!”*. The author’s blurb on the back cover neatly encapsulated his virtues in the eyes of our impressionable literary connoisseurs:

*“My name is Tucker Max and I am an asshole. I get excessively drunk at inappropriate times, disregard social norms, indulge every whim, ignore the consequences of my actions, mock idiots and posers, sleep with more women than is safe or reasonable, and just generally act like a raging dickhead. But I do contribute to humanity in one way: I share my adventures with the world.”*

This stuff was soft pornography indeed, but the fact that all listened, with minimal, quiet comments, was a great improvement on the usual bedlam, and touching in the family-like “togetherness” it engendered.

On the fifth night Troutski went to sleep immediately after dinner. In retrospect this may have been the first sign that he was quietly sulking, having perhaps been deposed as Gang Leader by his psychopathic Captain, and consequently unsure of his status.

To my astonishment some of the Boys asked me to tell a story at bed-time in Troutski's absence. It is quite possible they were put up to it by their teacher, but they asked in apparent sincerity. I told them an "action-packed" story about my misadventures in Vietnam during the war. (see "*C'est La Guerre!*"). Of course I require, enforce even, complete attention while I tell a story, at least on my own decks, and to my surprise I received it, making me suspect that the normally irrepressible Boys were mostly asleep during my recital, so I finished with "Good night, Lads...if anyone is still awake!" I was surprised when several voices demanded, "One more story, Captain!" I was pleased to oblige.



*Blackbird (left) and Muggsie, who is giving the secret Gang Sign. Note part of his extensive tattoos.*

At the end of the trip it almost seemed that my crazed physical remonstrations had been forgotten...all was cheerful bonhomie. I suggested that some of them might want to give Aida a hug...they had truly enjoyed the food...and they all readily did so. Troutski then proclaimed that he was going to be the first to give the Captain a hug, and approached me with a big grin, followed by most of the others. On shore they all insisted on photos with the Captain, individually and in groups, and for these

they instructed me in their special gang signs, fingers in inverted V's, hands clasped just so to chests. I posed showing the signs, and in a confrontational, kung-fu style, like all the boys.

They were very pleased to have me join in...I was becoming "one of the Boys"!...or one of the Gangstas?...or, just maybe, had I become their new Gang Leader?...not their Captain, and by this usurpation, allowed these young lads to emerge as individual human beings?

My tentative conclusion that I had not completely alienated the Boys' affections, nor utterly spoiled their trip, was confirmed by reading postings on their web-site: "Best trip ever!"..."Good fun!" "hope we can go sailing on Four Friends again" and under "Memorable Quotes:" were repeated verbatim, expletives uncensored, some of my most egregious verbal assaults....no mention of actual physical violence.

So in their eyes, the trip was a success. I must admit they obviously revelled in their "quality" time together as a gan...group. Teacher B. reported that Parents' Evening went well, "the parents were happy their kids had a good time." Regrettably, I was at sea and could not attend...If I could have been there I did plan to take my cudgel along as sceptre of my position.

The trip was not a success in my terms....most of the time was squandered in remonstrance, in hoarse exhortation, with little result, little time left for learning the stuff I try to teach. If we had sailed together for another week, we could have produced a Team of lean, tanned sailors, able to go wordlessly about a Man's job in safety....but is this how Modern Education progresses?...beat the living daylights out of them first, and then, maybe, they will listen? Obviously not! In a completely American...uhhmm... jurisdiction...careful now!...irate parents would have sued the shirt off my back. I hope that in a Singapore judicial context a judge would have dismissed such parental outrage as "trivial!". But how do modern teachers of American students manage, I wonder?

And what of wider considerations? If we can suppose, for the sake of debate, that my Singapore kids represent what is best of progressive, cosmopolitan Asian culture, not a wild claim, and if we can also suppose that my American kids are typical of Western cosmopolitan youth, a possibly unfair comparison; and further, if we can regard a one week trip at sea as a microcosm of Real Life, which I claim it to be, then what sort of general conclusions can we reach?

On the face of it, the Singaporeans win hands down in any form of contest, especially in that which will determine whose culture will dominate the second half of this Century. Just in terms of learning from their experience, these kids started on their first day!...the Americans learned just one, possibly mischievous point: that violence wielded by a dominant male is part of leadership...and very little else! Although, given an extra week....

In terms of cooperating together to achieve the group's aims in safety, an essential attribute of Civilized Society, the Asians made definite progress, possibly being "hard-wired" for such purpose, to borrow a new term in the study of the evolution of behaviour. The Yanks were just a mindless rabble...when something went wrong they all just screamed diverging instructions at other people, none stepped forward and did the right thing. If Troutski was really their "Leader", his mandate did not extend to any useful leadership skills. Given another week under *my* leadership, however...

In the area of making friends and influencing other people...no comparison at all. ...I was genuinely too embarrassed to accompany the Boys on shore at Phi Phi.

Considering intellectual interest in the world of Nature, a similar bleak conclusion is inescapable. The Gangstas did not even *notice*, let alone enquire about, spectacular Natural beauty.

So will Asian cultures come to dominate in decades to come in the sense that Western culture has for several centuries? My experience with these two groups of kids suggests that the American, perhaps Western, Education systems have started to fail miserably, priming their subjects for world-class failure. The Singapore system has been doing something right, but are their kids the standard bearers of Asian, specifically, Chinese culture? A biting comment on that later.

At this point I should nail my colours to my own little staff. After more than forty years of immersion in Asia, with a fifty-fifty set of kids of my own to show for it, I remain a firm believer in the *best* of Western culture, of perhaps more specifically the Anglo-Saxon variant. What do I consider the best?...apart from the obvious historical highlights such as Shakespeare, Newton, Blake, Darwin, and democracy, fair-play, compassion for the underdog, etc, there has been a recent trend, a mere faint dawn of hope on the world scene. I refer to the setting up of various would-be international organizations, such as the tribunals to attempt to bring to justice powerful leaders for unspeakable crimes, such as Milosovic, Pinochet, Radko Mladic, etc, attempts which have actually been endorsed by the UN. In tandem with Western aid that is tied to evidence of good governance, it seemed, for the first time in the history of our species, that there was a small prospect that these Alpha Monkey types, these pinnacles of Evolution in Nature's raw terms, might actually be held accountable by decent people everywhere, those that would wish to rein in brute Natural Instinct in the name of Enlightened, Human Reason.

And what of Asia's contribution to such Civilizing movements? We have just seen Hu Jin Tao, craving oil, offer an interest-free loan to Omar Bashir, dripping blood, to build himself a shining new Presidential Palace in the Sudan. Presidential behaviour indeed!...just what the Sudanese need!...and a severe blow to the faltering emergence of International Accountability. This and other examples of unscrupulous cheque-book diplomacy are, in my eyes, akin to a big strong man elbowing the women and children aside to secure his place in the life-boats. This might save his life, and may not yet lead to

a general breakdown of civil behaviour in the queues stoically waiting their turn, but it is a large, and blatantly selfish step in that direction.

Would my Singapore kids stand patiently on deck in the queue? I like to think they would, especially if I am in command on those decks! But here's the rub: their parents' generation, those presently in politics, business, civil service and in any other positions of power, are at best ambivalent about the virtues of "democracy". In debate with me they usually demur with a "But..." and cite the "instability", the "chaos", the "unpredictability", "the untrustworthy nature" of ordinary people entrusted with a large measure of freedom. The Grandfather of my Junior College kids, the venerable Lee Kwan Yew himself, is on record, in rejecting the jury system, as saying "I do not trust a Chinese to convict a Chinese, nor a Malay to send a Malay to prison". He may be right, he knows his own people, but it is another symptom of the deep vein of paternalism that permeates the elites of all Asian countries.

Here is my chief concern in the Singapore context: should China become the most powerful influence, the enforcer of stability, the arbiter of moral standards in foreign policy, then I fear that a future Singapore elite, my young shipmates indeed, may heave a sigh of relief, and may cheerfully abrogate those parts of the Constitution that demand free elections, that mandate strict equality of all individuals before the law, that protect "individual rights" even at the expense of the majority. The result will be a wonderfully stable, pragmatic, incorrupt and prosperous society, with unbridled *economic* freedom for all, including the unalienable right to bribe foreign officials in order to cut down the last remaining trees of third world neighbours, and to invest overseas in building lucrative pipelines using slave labour.

Will my Gangsta Boys then be in the ranks of American diplomats urging adherence to international moral principle, or of CEO's attempting to follow a code of ethics in business practices? I truly am not sure...are the Boys a modern aberration, a new symptom of a rotting society?...or was it always thus? Was I just as bad at 16, when I fell into scurrilous company? Is the shocking behaviour of the Gangstas an extreme example of a necessary side-effect of that unrestrained freedom that leads to that degree of "creativity" that Asians crave, but have not yet acquired, or that leads to the irritable, Anglo-Saxon belief that everybody, including that unruly foreign lot across the border, should "play the game!" I do not know the answer, but wish I might understand.

As for me, the aging Captain who learned something, I hope, from sailing with those two different groups of young people...well...if an extreme Asian vision of the future that I most fear comes to pass, I hope I am still fit enough to retreat to the mountains of New Zealand to conduct guerilla warfare against our Neo-Confucian rulers. I remain an unrepentant Individualist.

95%