



DEEP LEARNING IN THE UNIVERSITY CONTEXT: CASE STUDIES IN LEBANON AND THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

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The Lebanese and Emirati higher educational landscapes and learning environments are commonly defined by a traditional information transmission approach which is considered the orthodox approach. There have been reforms in the education sector throughout the 20th c. and in the first two decades of the 21st c. However, alternative teaching and learning approaches still need to gain momentum, such as those that aim at developing deep learning. I argue in this paper that nowadays' Southwestern Asian region marked by the digital revolution, continuous wars, and crises, requires more than surface learning. The purpose of this paper is to 1) introduce to what is deep learning and why it is essential in higher education in Southwestern Asia; 2) present my peace education approach that embeds deep learning practices, particularly in Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates, and 3) present a case study at the American University in Dubai - the Peace Art project.

Keywords: Deep learning, Higher education, Peace education, Lebanon, United Arab Emirates.

Introduction

The Lebanese and Emirati higher educational landscapes and learning environments are commonly defined by a traditional information transmission approach which is considered the orthodox approach. 'Traditional' means here a teacher or knowledge centered approach that aims at testing recalling information and producing compliant and punctual workers through the production and dissemination of knowledge via a hierarchical system: the teacher as the ultimate authority figure, who controls subject matters, talks and activities; and the students as empty vessels, facing their teacher.

There have been reforms in the education sector throughout the 20th c. and in the first two decades of the 21st c. in most Southwestern Asian countries. However, alternative teaching and learning approaches still need to gain momentum, such as those that actively engage students in their development and with their unique subjective experiences, and that encourage them to construct their knowledge individually and collaboratively - i.e., approaches that aim at developing deep learning. I argue in this paper that nowadays' Southwestern Asian region marked by the digital revolution, continuous wars, and crises, requires more than surface learning - memorizing facts, selecting the correct answer - as facts rapidly change and what seems to be relevant today may be obsolete tomorrow. Education approaches in university settings that develop higher order skills, encourage critical thinking, and the capacity to be flexible, adaptable, and resilient, are urgently needed.

The purpose of this paper is to 1) introduce to what is deep learning and why it is essential in higher education in Southwestern Asia; 2) present my peace education approach that embeds deep learning

practices, particularly in Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates, and 3) present a case study at the American University in Dubai - the Peace Art project.

What Is Deep Learning and Why Is It Essential in Higher Education?

I recently completed an edX course with Professor Robyn Gillies - University of Queensland, Australia - entitled *Deep Learning through Transformative Pedagogy* (Gillies 2018). The following section is a summary of my understanding of the nature of deep learning as explained in this course while acknowledging that deep learning is a complex and ongoing process that we cannot still fully grasp. In this course, a first distinction appears between surface learning and deep learning. Surface learning is short-term learning, whereas deep learning is long term. Surface learning is a first level memorization process, and deep learning is a consolidation process through the integration of new information into existing and dynamic frameworks. In other terms, for educators, deep learning is described as better connections with others, better engagement, better critical thinking, better applications in new contexts and more creativity.

According to professor John Hattie from the University of Melbourne, one of the leading educational researchers in the field of surface and deep learning whose contribution is included in the course mentioned above, around 90% of classroom teaching and learning focus on surface knowledge and learning. We do need surface learning which is about reproducing content and skills. However, higher education further requires deep learning as it extends ideas - it is about the consolidation of ideas. In other words, according to Hattie, surface learning is about the ideas *per se* or the information; deep learning is about relating and extending those ideas. One needs both.

Even neurosciences explain and prove the difference between surface learning – i.e., proteins are modified in the brain but decay over a short period -, and deep learning - protein synthesize, and the development of new connections and changes in gene transcriptions take place. According to Professors Pankaj Sah and David Reutens whose works are featured in this course, there has been increasing interest in the ways that neuroscientific research can support teaching and learning, and in collaborative dialogue between neuroscience and education since the 1990s - an observation shared by Dekker, Lee, Howard-Jones and Jolles (2012). Neurosciences, for instance, help us understand key brain structures and their function in human learning, such as brain plasticity (Doidge 2007) - brain plasticity is the capacity of the brain to modify its connections or to reorganize itself with lifetime experiences, including through enhancement and inhibition -, and which teaching strategies work and why.

In other words, an understanding of the brain changes that can empower both teachers and students, liberates them from the belief that learning potential is limited by genetic lottery. An understanding of the different memory structures can help them grasp the different types of learning. An understanding of executive control capacities can further teach them about attention, and therefore memory. An understanding of the different circuits in the brain such as voluntary attention and environmental-driven circuits can help us comprehend the fact that if we want the information to be better processed, we need to be well prepared, to be in a ready-to-learn state. Finally, an understanding of the brain as a prediction machine teaches educators and students that learning by repetition and association, and the prediction error, are both fundamental in driving long-term learning.

The *Deep Learning through Transformative Pedagogy* course has helped me put some of my thoughts and practices into words. I had already developed my peace education approach as explained in the following section of this paper, however, studies about deep learning have helped me fine tuning it. When I started the course, I went through an introspection process. I first remembered how I was taught at school - i.e., to memorize information and recite it, such as mathematical formulas, geography lessons, literature and poetry. Then I remembered that back in university when I was studying fine arts and the preservation of religious heritage in Lebanon, I had one professor out of dozens who introduced us as students to the importance of hands-on experiences. We had field trips in our country and elsewhere that helped us analyze information and reflect on it, and we applied what we learned in lectures by restoring

icons from the 16th to the 18th c. I never forgot about these activities and most of my today's skills are partly shaped by them.

Later on, when I became a university professor, I tried to combine surface and deep learning without knowing the theory and the concepts, but based on prior experience and my own quest for innovative ways of teaching and learning about religions. Since that time, I have been giving lectures, but also organizing group workshops; I have been giving assessments focusing on information learnt in class, but also qualitative feedbacks asking students to reflect on their overall learning experience throughout the course; I have been teaching students for instance about the different layouts of mosque architecture, but also by asking them to design and build a model of a mosque based on the information they were exposed to in class and on the previous knowledge they acquired, along with connections that should be made with their cultural reality and contextual challenges. I have organized mindfulness activities prior to introducing my students to Hinduism in the contemporary era, and mandala making workshops to explain the notion of impermanence in Tibetan Buddhism. I have taught students about the ethics of cultural appropriation by first watching a documentary on hummus used as an instrument of war between several protagonists, second through a class discussion on making connections between the hummus case study and the theory/the concepts of ethical and unethical cultural appropriation, third via a hummus laboratory - students were asked to use different senses while having their eyes covered to taste and guess several ingredients -, and fourth with a hummus making workshop in class - students brought their own utensils, made sounds while using the mortar and pestle, filled the space with the smell of garlic, thus claimed ownership of the territory. The theories of surface and deep learning are embodied in these examples and in many more.

I do believe in the necessity of deep learning activities in higher education. Based on my students' evaluations of the courses I taught/teach, most of them have stated they appreciated these activities, as they learned the course material in a much better way. They also have stated they were able to connect whatever they learned to their everyday life, and therefore, the information made sense to them. They were able to value it, and come up with new ideas. I find this positive feedback rewarding. Even alumni students contact me several years later to highlight the activities, workshops and class discussions that had a significant impact on their way of thinking, their gain of new skills, their behavior and their relation to others in the marketplace. What I find challenging though is reaching a balance between the surface and deep learning methods and activities, and that this balance changes from course to another, from student to another. I continuously find myself renegotiating the frontiers, as human learning is a complex phenomenon, in part because every human being is unique and possesses a specific mind mental architecture or a dynamic set of subjective experiences, values, attitudes, and beliefs that can affect learning in a range of ways.

The last finding I would like to share in this paper's section is about the importance of stress-free education environments to reach deep learning. Indeed, many of my students stated both verbally and in writing in their end-of-semester course evaluations that class activities have helped them be less stressed about the teaching/learning process, and that they were able to further engage in learning practices and in maximizing learning outcomes, or in other words, in experiencing 'thriving' learning versus 'fear-based' learning. I have made connections between these statements and the cognitive load theory. Cognitive load refers to the demands placed on a learner's cognitive system when performing a task. Cognitive load theory argues that learning experiences should account for the human brain's cognitive capacity limits and support the acquisition and application of knowledge and skills (Paas, Tuovinen, Tabbers & Van Gerven 2003; Jong 2010). If the working memory capacity is exceeded in a learning task, this impacts negatively on learning. Both fear-based and overloaded content is not effective nor enjoyable. Several students of mine at the Lebanese American University have compared our class activities throughout the fall 2018 semester to other courses. They openly declared in class that their professors did not make them feel safe in the classroom environment and flooded them with information. They stated fearing loss of grades and that the courses' content was unreachable. Along with my previous students' statements at the American University in Dubai, it was clear that the better we take care as professors of creating a

balanced content, and of the pedagogy and the emotional effort it takes to learn, the better we can manage the energy needed to invest in learning.

My Education Approach

I have developed my education approach throughout my 20+ year career in universities in Canada, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates. I started with experiments in my classrooms at the University of Montreal in the 2000s without prior knowledge of Education theories, teaching 100+ students in every class on Sciences of Religions and World Religions by using experiential activities such as with food making and sharing, and diverse group art workshops, and by avoiding as much as possible the traditional lectures. At that time, although my practices were seen by other professors as ‘odd,’ ‘avant-garde,’ or even ‘not serious,’ my students appreciated the learning experience, and I won the *Best Teaching Award*. Back to Lebanon, I continued experimenting in my classrooms, whether with graduate students in the *Muslim-Christian Dialogue Program* at St Josef University, with *Religion and Politics* or Theology students at the Holy Spirit University, or with Social Studies students at Notre Dame University. Then from 2014 to 2018 in the United Arab Emirates, I worked with students enrolled in the *Middle Eastern Studies Certificate Program* of the American University in Dubai, and in the fall 2018 semester, with Cultural Studies students at the Lebanese American University.

Different practices, multiple trials, errors and adjustments, questions I asked myself - such as what can I do to improve the teaching/learning experience? What are the challenges that I encounter when I roam against the current and how to overcome them? -, dialogues with other professors, students’ surveys, testimonies, and course evaluations, have helped me construct, deconstruct and reconstruct my pedagogy. I have gathered and analyzed substantial data in every academic setting I was involved in with a total of 5000+ students, and have published several articles and books on the subject at hand based on my praxis, but I have only come across recently with teaching/learning theories that advocate deep learning. In other words, I have recently found a concept - deep learning - and theories - such as the constructivist and social interdependence theories - that partly describe my already long-established teaching/learning practices.

In their present forms, constructivist theories see students as active participants in their learning, who make sense of new experiences by making connections with their existing knowledge (Bandura 1977; Piaget 1959) and through interactions with others - cooperative dialogue. One interesting example is that of Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky, best known for being an educational psychologist who developed a sociocultural theory. Vygotsky argues that social interaction leads to the shaping of students’ worldviews and that this development varies from culture to culture. Learning takes place through imitating others, instructing/remembering instructions to self-regulate, and through collaborative learning which involves a group of peers who strive to understand one another and work with one another to learn a specific skill (Vygotsky 1978; Alpay 2003).

Constructivism is an alternative and reaction to approaches such as behaviorism and programmed instruction. Learning, according to constructivism, is an active and contextualized process of constructing knowledge, based on personal experiences (past and present), and hypotheses of the environment that are tested through social negotiations and are affected by cultural factors. Bottom line, students/learners according to constructivism are not blank pages ready to be filled by their professors, they have an active role in the learning process, and learning is more meaningful to them when they can interact with concepts and problems. As for the social interdependence theory, it argues that an individual’s outcomes are affected by his actions and other people’s actions, whether positively - being encouraged to succeed and deeply engaged - or negatively - when obstructing individual’s efforts (Johnson, Johnson 2005).

The above theories partially explain the theoretical framework of my pedagogical approach, which I call a peace education approach. Peace education encompasses a variety of educational approaches within formal curricula in schools and universities, and non-formal education projects implemented by local, regional and international organizations (Carter 2012). It aims at cultivating the knowledge and practices

of a culture of peace. I started to develop my approach in Montreal in 2004 and enhanced it in Lebanon from 2007 to 2014, before moving to Dubai and joining the American University where I could further refine it. My approach is interdisciplinary as the topics I teach fall in the interstices among several disciplines. It combines the sciences of religions – socio-history and interfaith dialogue theories and practices -, Irenology and art therapy, to name just a few. Apart from addressing specific political, religious, cultural and historical issues, I stress the importance of constructing and transmitting a differentiated understanding of religions and cultures, of stepping outside natural boundaries and building unity in diversity, including the religious/cultural worldview and beyond.

My students were from different religious, political and socio-economic backgrounds. I was able to collect and analyze valuable data, and the results of my researches were published in the United States (International Journal of Arts and Sciences, 2015), Japan (Asian Conference on Education, 2015) and Lebanon (Al Machreq, 2016). The basis of my approach is *the human being perceived as a whole*. Students are neither uprooted from their multiple affiliations, nor from their personal experiences and stories. Furthermore, the teaching method targets all senses and includes one major pillar: dialogue. Indeed, my peace education approach shares common characteristics with other intercultural approaches to education (Messarra 2004; Gundara 2000; Freire 1999). I refer for instance to dialogic instruction, which is characterized by the teacher's uptake of student ideas (Nystrand 1997); to dialogic inquiry, which highlights the potential for collaborative group work and peer assistance to promote mutually active learning in the zone of proximal development (Wells 1999); and to dialogic teaching, which is collective, reciprocal, cumulative and supportive (Alexander 2004). Dialogue here is not "a mere technique to achieve some cognitive results; dialogue is a means to transform social relations in the classroom and to raise awareness about relations in society at large" (Shor, Freir 1987).

My previous researches at the Holy Spirit University (Kaslik - Lebanon), Notre-Dame University and St Josef University, along with my research at the American University in Dubai and the findings based on several studies as displayed in the course *Deep Learning in Transformative Pedagogy*, prove that dialogic interaction can support cognitive development. 'When learners listen to others, build on or disagree with others' ideas, and provide explanations and justifications for views and opinions, academic performance is enhanced, and higher order skills like reasoning and problem solving are supported and developed. In other words, effective talk and dialogic interactions can support and enhance deep learning' (Gillies 2018). For instance, several sessions of the *Religions of the Middle East* or *Interreligious Dialogue* courses were dedicated to the use of different strategies. A first example was auditory, by singing and teaching students to sing; a second example was visual, by showing them images and asking them to guess the meanings of the symbols, forms and colors, while trying to reach a common meaning in the diversity of perceptions; a third one was spatial, by using different settings in the classroom and outside of it that enhance dialogue; and a fourth one was kinesthetic, with students learning through physical activities in groups - dances, hands' movements. Students seemed to be highly engaged in the teaching/learning process, for instance when they seemed enthusiastic by reciting the songs and following the dance steps I taught them or they showed one another; or when they shared personal stories of war in storytelling circles dedicated to war memories in Lebanon.

While the information transmission approach to traditional class lectures can limit the opportunity for learners to engage meaningfully with complex concepts, I found that professor-student dialogue and student-student dialogue or dialogic talk, as well as other methods that involve multiple senses and settings, have been so far effective. Also, other scholars such as Gillies argue that dialogic talk supports deep learning by promoting reasoning and problem-solving (Gillies 2016). I often organize group workshops as part of the dialogical approach I have been developing in the university context. For instance, when I have students working in small groups visiting museums and art galleries and building their presentation with a space of freedom throughout the process and a room for creativity, problem-solving, and critical thinking, while I act as their guide or facilitator.

Case Study at the American University in Dubai: The Peace Art Project

Edward Said's statements about stereotypes and generalizations still resonate in my mind, my pedagogy, activism, and artwork almost three decades after I read the second edition of his book *Covering Islam. How the Media and the Experts determine how we see the rest of the World* (1997). Similar statements such as Amin Maalouf's in *Les identités meurtrières* (1998), Etel Adnan's in *Seasons* (2008) and Eduardo Galeano's in *Memory of Fire* (1998), have accompanied my quest for catharsis and inner-peace as a war survivor, and my pursuit for peace with others. With time, experience, and nomadic journeys, I have learned to express my battle with stereotypes and my anti-war or peace vision. Furthermore, I have thrived to share it with my students, whether in my country of origin, Lebanon, my second home in Canada, or in the land of temporary settlement for four years, the United Arab Emirates.

Art has an incredibly vital role to play in the pursuit of peace, especially in Southwestern Asia where it has been proliferating since the beginning of the 20th c. with artists who express(ed) their testimonies of war's destruction, their resistance to war and their transformation vision to influence or help shape their societies. For instance: Iraqi Dia Al-Azzawi and Ahmed Alsoudani, Syrian Fateh Al Moudarre and Youssef Abdelke, Egyptian Mohammed Abla and Sabah Naim, Palestinian Laila Shawa, Naji al-Ali, Ismail Shammout and Kamal Boullata, Iranian Shadi Ghadirian and Khosrow Hassanzadeh, Lebanese Aref Rayess, Group Atlas/Walid Raad, Joanna Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, and Ayman Baalbaki. These artists and numerous others have visually and graphically captured the senseless slaughter of millions and the desolate landscapes and urban settlements shattered by conflicts. They have depicted the visceral way they and others experienced war traumas, exile, forced migration, and conveyed both the oneness of humankind and particular-contextual voices of resistance, survival, resilience, and conviviality.

Art is also a fantastic way to channel a sense of collective urgency through large-scale initiatives like Peace Museums around the world, portraying peace history and contemporary efforts to promote peace (Anti-War Museum Berlin, Hiroshima peace memorial and park, The Peace Museum UK, Gandhi Museums in India, ...), or through small-scale initiatives such as the Peace Art in Dubai project I founded and applied in my classrooms at the American University in Dubai. Furthermore, as explained by one of my students, art can be "a language shared between individuals and communities who would not have dreamed coexisting or living together a few decades ago" such as in Dubai and it can give "migrant/expatriate voices a means to be heard" (Chrabieh 2015). Not only do these voices can be heard in the academic sphere, but also when social media platforms are used, they do have a political potential to change public debates and sentiments.

The Peace Art in Dubai project is an application of my peace education approach and is presented in this paper as a case study of deep learning. Based on surveys conducted with students at the beginning of the semester and on class discussion sessions, I realized that many students' perceptions of religious and cultural diversity were stereotypes. Indeed, they did not necessarily explore issues of peace before enrolling in Middle Eastern Studies courses – mainly *Religions of the Middle East*, *Cultures of the Middle East*, *Islamic Art and Architecture*, and *Women and Gender in the Middle East*. My students had different religious - Muslims, Christians, Jews, Sikhs, Hindus -, ethnic - Southwestern Asians, Central Asians, Europeans, North Africans, and Southeastern Asians -, socio-economic, political, national and gender identities. Most of them were born in the late 1990s. They came from middle- or upper-class urban environments, except for students who were in refugee camps and poor neighborhoods but had the opportunity to get a scholarship – via the Mohammed Bin Rachid School for Communication or the former Minister of Education in Lebanon Elias Bou Saab, main founder of and stakeholder in the American University in Dubai. Most of them relied on social media platforms to gain knowledge, establish social relations and for entertainment, and few of them read an academic paper, a book or critical analyses of online news. One could agree with Edward Said (2001) that the construction of stereotypes/misconceptions and static identities is indeed the product of "ignorance" - whether natural or accidental ignorance or constructed and transmitted ignorance - moreover, that there is a fine line between ignorance, the phobia of the Other and the proliferation of conflictual ghettoized narratives.

Othring dynamics and numerous levels and genres of the phobia of the Other do exist in classrooms, especially at the beginning of the semester; but based on my observations and private discussions with students, Islamophobia for instance rarely manifests itself out in the open. Most students who are Islamophobic or who start the semester with an Islamophobic perspective fear the repercussions of criticizing Islam or Muslims beyond the verbal and visual expression of common stereotypes. Besides, most of those who identify themselves as Muslims and who claim their rejection of the so-called “Western values” and political/military hegemony rarely communicate their thoughts of Christianity or other religions, except for Judaism which is often identified as Zionism. Although every class dynamic is unique, a common trait I noticed at the beginning of every semester is an atmosphere of status-quo and relative coexistence between multiple perspectives, and this is the canvas I had to fill with the help of my students – a canvas which shapes, colors and fifty shades of grey call for dialogue and conviviality.

In that sense, I organized a series of art workshops in classrooms, outdoor agoras, cultural events, and founded an online exhibition in a blog I established in the spring 2015 semester. Students were asked to think of Peace by tackling a sub-theme such as Islam and Peace, stereotypes in the mainstream media, women’s roles and situations in Southwestern Asia and North Africa, the role of sacred arts in building inner-peace and peace in the community, and their contributions as young expatriates and locals to the betterment of their societies. From 2015 to 2017, students expressed and exchanged their perceptions, visions and their researches’ results verbally and in writing on several occasions, and via various media techniques and styles throughout the semester. They used calligraphy, arabesque, poetry, culinary art, music, dance, digital art, and collage. The end-of-semester original art productions were presented in class a first time, a second time in Middle Eastern Studies cultural events - organized by the Middle Eastern Studies division at the American University in Dubai in 2015 and 2016 -, and online.

The Peace Art in Dubai blog features more than 160 artworks. It is a space in which these students – i.e., individuals from different backgrounds, religious/non-religious, gender and ethnic identities - can acknowledge differences and advocate nonviolent conflict resolution by engaging with each other and their audiences. This intercultural/interreligious/inter-human exchange platform of artistic ideas aims at fostering new aesthetic directions and endeavors while renewing individual and collective commitments to peace.

Students’ positive feedbacks at the end of every semester encouraged me to pursue this project. Indeed, as a result of the various activities, many students have been able to create individual and shared spaces and expressions that helped them debunk stereotypes, better understand each other’s beliefs and practices, and feel the pathos and waste of war. The activities instilled in them a desire and commitment to become active agents of peace in both their country of settlement and country of origin. A majority of the 160 students started the semester with a high level of othering perceptions, and by the end of the semester, most of them were deconstructing these perceptions, and some became active peace agents, whether on an individual basis or by joining a cultural club or a local, regional and international non-governmental organization.

What also encouraged me in the pursuit of this project and similar deep learning activities were the recent changes to the federal government ministries in the United Arab Emirates, including the establishment of a Ministry of Tolerance with a clear message calling citizens and expatriates to be agents of peace and to help the government in its task, first internally, and second, in exporting the model outside of the Emirati boundaries (UAE Cabinet Website). It is hoped that the new official measures would contribute to call attention to the importance of peace education initiatives already taking place in the country. Furthermore, it is expected that these measures open the door to the establishment and officialization of peace education programs in schools and universities.

The situation is different in Lebanon. Indeed, an official peace education curriculum is still non-existent, although the Lebanese society is much in need for it, and Peace programs are considered to be low priorities in universities - even if there are exceptions such as St Josef University of Beirut Master’s program in Muslim-Christian relations. Many Lebanese official instances avoid giving too much attention and resources to Peace Studies programs and peacebuilding initiatives in Humanities, Social Studies and

Religious Studies courses out of fear that these may become politicized or because they are deemed not profitable. Furthermore, several universities in Lebanon are currently cutting down Humanities courses.

Conclusion

One of the challenges that higher education will be facing is the spread of more surface learning versus deep learning, as deep learning can particularly take place in Humanities courses when appropriate education approaches are thought and practiced. I believe that the decision to reduce education (and learning) to a corporate consumer-driven model - providing services to the student-client -, transforms universities into factories or *collegelands*. The ability to think critically and independently, to tolerate ambiguity, to see multiple sides of an issue, to deconstruct stereotypes, to appreciate diversity, to look beneath the surface, to dialogue with others on sensitive issues, and therefore the ability that equips us to live in and sustain democracies, to develop peaceful societies united in their diversity, will eventually disappear.

As I am completing the fall semester at the Lebanese American University as a part-time professor of Cultural Studies, I am being told that these courses and other Humanities' courses will no longer be offered, due to budget cuts. Although my students have stated in their end-of-semester course evaluations their need for such courses and for a pedagogical approach that nurtures deep learning and in particular peacebuilding teaching/learning methods and activities in a country and a region on the verge of further explosion, their voices have not been heard. I honestly fear that despite the efforts of few professors and educators, and of some youth and local NGOs initiatives, the future that awaits us is either further polarized or monochrome. Alternative narratives, perceptions, and practices that can challenge the 'norm' will cease to exist, and students will no longer be engaged to go beyond their disciplines and explore new avenues and skills. Furthermore, the automation of higher education will be contributing to the exacerbation of this reality. I am still struggling from my end and with other activists and pedagogues to build more just and inclusive societies in Southwestern Asia, but I honestly believe that this struggle has already become more arduous.

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