

Michael Puett – An Alternative to the Self, Economy, and Society

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The *Singapore Platform for East-West Dialogue* is a series of monthly informal meetings, where a speaker from academia, government, or industry discusses issues related to such a dialogue from their own field.

In this first of a two-part series, ISAAC TAN writes about the session by Michael J. Puett, Walter C. Klein Professor of Chinese History and Anthropology at Harvard University. Puett spoke about how Chinese philosophy offers an alternative viewpoint of the self and one's relations to the wider world.

A Generation Who Failed

16th August 2017 — His opening remarks were surprising to anyone acquainted with Dr Michael Puett, and his cheerful disposition, because it was uncharacteristically gloomy.

“Let me give you an example of a generation that, in retrospect, faced a major moment in world history and failed.” He went on to list the reasons for such a failure: “They did not try to learn from other cultures; they did not try to build a cosmopolitan world; they did

not try to engage in ideas from different cultures, and bring them together. And the results were, I would say, catastrophic.”

He acknowledged that the generation was his, and he pointed to the fall of the Berlin Wall as the pivotal moment where his generation took the first step in the wrong direction. Given that the Cold War was a clash of ideologies, the end of the war thus signalled which side had the better ideology. As such, the 1989 generation (as Puett calls it) began building a new world, “where one set of ideas, from one tiny piece of Western culture, became the only ones that were taken seriously.” That set of ideas is neo-liberalism.

Such an ideology assumes an essential self. All one has to do is to find oneself, and structure one’s life according to who one is, in one’s self interest. It is so entrenched in society that people are, as Puett noted, “judged on the degree to which [they] do this.” This can be seen in both the political and economic systems where people are encouraged to act according to their self-interest to be successful.

Puett then highlighted a profound implication: “What we were really saying is you don’t need to learn anything else; you don’t have to wrestle with ideas; you don’t even have to take ideas seriously because that’s happened—we wrestled with the big ideas and solved it.”

What contributed to the various problems that we have today is that when they were faced with a potential problem, the previous generation felt that if they raised a generation who were true to themselves, some of them will become great innovators, and they will be able to solve those problems. In that sense, the 1989 generation saw that those were not the problems for them to solve.

Puett proceeded to urge the audience of mostly young adults to take his generation as a wonderful example of what not to do. He added, “Take for granted that one single idea, if it becomes *the* assumption that guides a life or an entire world, will almost be dangerous.” Instead, one has to “work across different cultural traditions, allowing ideas from different traditions to contest and challenge your fundamental assumptions.”



An Alternative View

As for the essential conception of the self, is there an alternative view of the self that a society can adopt which might ameliorate the problems we have today?

Puett cited an alternative offered by classical Chinese philosophy which does not view the self as a stable entity. Rather, the self is “a mess of different energies, emotions, dispositions, and tendencies.” As such, our encounters with others and the wider world “draw out” certain emotions in us, and we respond to them accordingly. The danger is, added Puett, “that from a young age, we cease to really respond to the real world around us” because we “fall into patterns and ruts of responses.”

The solution is to break these patterns and ruts is through doing rituals. Such a process allows you to “see the world from a different perspective”, and “interact with those around you in a completely different way than you otherwise would.”

To illustrate his point, Puett raised an example of a Chinese ritual performed by father and son: “The son would have to walk into a ritual space, and play his own father. And the father will have to play the role of being the son to his own son, and interact as such. Each, in other words, being forced to see the world not only from a different perspective, but from the complicated perspective that is driving this complicated pattern.”

Of course, this does not mean that the father and son will immediately have a harmonious relationship. Rather, the ritual is a continuous process and by slowly being aware of the various perspectives, one becomes more attuned to the situation and will be able to find

an appropriate response to the situation. Therefore, this opens up the possibility of being able to change the world. This can be seen in the stories about Confucius, who is able to sense the situation, the patterns and ruts of others, and react appropriately.

But how does this translate to political and economic systems? “You want to intentionally create different spheres, where people are not simply seamlessly being pushed in terms of one focus, namely self-interest,” advised Puett. “If you have an economic system that’s aimed at gaining wealth, then you create a political system explicitly focused on meritocracy to emphasize different sides of human beings.” The different spheres will ensure that society is constantly forced to break out of the patterns of a sphere guided by a single vision. This enables a society to be keenly aware of the complexities that arise in a particular area.

In concluding his talk, Puett clarified that creating rituals to break one’s patterns and ruts does not mean replacing neo-liberalism with Confucianism. That is merely replacing one totalising ideology with another, and by extension, repeating the same mistake committed by his generation. Instead, one should work towards a “cosmopolitan approach to life”, where one actively learns from other ideas and cultures, and employing them to challenge fundamental assumptions. Such a process will then result in a society where people are able to see the complexities of the world, and work with them.

While it may sound Utopian, Puett argued that it is achievable because all one has to do is to begin with the mundane and slowly expand it to society as a whole. In each interaction, one could alter one’s reaction to see how things turn out. Soon, one will be adept at assessing and dealing with the complexity of each situation. This shatters any illusion of the world being stable, and that change is possible. If the current and future generations learn to see that, then they will be creating “a world where people can flourish.”

Isaac Tan received his B.A. Philosophy (Honours) from the National University of Singapore. He was the Communications Executive of Para Limes from 2017–2018.