

Q&A and Reflections on Michael Puett's Talk

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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 second article about the session with Michael J. Puett, Walter C. Klein Professor of Chinese History and Anthropology at Harvard University, ISAAC TAN highlights some of the questions posed to him and his initial reflections about the discussion.

Questions for the Professor

The first question was how one should teach the next generation to appreciate the diversity and complexity of the world. This is in consideration that many aspects of society are intertwined, and the rise of extreme movements has made the world more volatile.

Puett prefaced his reply by pointing out that neo-liberalism harks back to liberalism which shaped the political system based on self-interest. Just as the economy collapsed in the 1920s, and right-wing movements rose in the 1930s, we are experiencing a similar pattern now because we adopted an ideology wholesale. The key to educating the next

generation is to get them recognise that there is an “incredible fear of the kind of world that has been created” that is driving these movements. From there, we should respond to those fears by actually changing the system, but “we ought to have the discipline of not trying to [invent] new grand –isms to solve it.”

When asked whether there is an event today that parallels the fall of the Berlin Wall, Puett replied that the failure of the neo-liberal system is such an epoch. The silver lining is that the rise of right-wing movements have made people less complacent, and they are starting to consider what can be done to solve the problem.

Another interesting question that arose is whether one should view the practice of creating rituals as a sort of trans-cultural Confucianism, whereby the rituals created should be based on societal context, instead of importing the exact practices that Confucius was in favour of.

Puett agreed with the notion, and pointed out that Confucius emphasised what the Zhou rituals achieved, rather than the actual details of said rituals. Similarly, the rituals one decides to create or adopt should break us out of the patterns and ruts that we fall into. Hence, it would not make sense for us to perform the Zhou rituals because it has no resonance in our society.

As the session drew to a close, someone remarked that at first glance, all this seemed to be in the arena of the educated, and those who are actively looking for solutions. He asked if there is hope for the masses who are often bogged down by various worries, and understanding such concepts would be the last thing on their mind.

Puett replied that the hope lies in the momentary and fragmentary moments of interactions when people really connected. The sense of “joyousness that come from these relations where people are really connecting with each other” should be the focus. These are the moments in which people break out of their patterns, and open up for the possibility for change. Once people recognise these moments and start striving for it within their relationships, even if the connection breaks down shortly after, there is hope for change. This applies to everyday relationships and those on the societal level. Therefore, this is accessible to everyone.

Initial Thoughts: Singapore’s Lack of Identity—A Boon?

When it comes to extrapolating the idea of ritual to a macro level, Puett consistently emphasised that different sectors of society should be based on different systems, so as to prevent society from being shaped by a single totalising ideology. But what about a society’s sense of identity?

Since achieving independence, Singapore has been trying to articulate what a Singaporean identity is to very little success. The most recent discussion arose last year, when Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills), Ong Ye Kung, was asked whether Singapore was ready to do away with race categorisation.

He replied, “The Singaporean identity itself is rather quite empty. What fills up a Singaporean identity is the identity of various races and all the traditions and cultures that we bring forth and create this tapestry [with].”

Undoubtedly, those who equate national identity to national unity will feel anxious about such comments. But what if there is a kernel of truth in it (regardless of whether it justifies maintaining the current system of racial categorisation)?

Puett explained that some classical Chinese philosophers argued against there being an essential self. Could this be applied to national identity, and what does it mean for Singapore to embrace it?

Rather than trying to piece together an identity by citing several buzzwords, we should truly take a look at what we have.

Racial diversity is often mentioned as one of Singapore’s plus points, but the demographics happened partly due to happenstance, and largely because of colonialism. Apart from advertising a set of statistics disguised as a strength, perhaps we ought to come up with dialogic practices in order to engage and learn from the plethora of cultures we have at close proximity.

Of course, this is easier said than done, but engaging with such complexity is the training we all need. Instead of being crippled by this existential anxiety, it could be turned into a strength which results in a society that is sensitive and adaptable.

Only then, could Singapore truly be a platform for East-West dialogue, and not just a title for a series of meetings and discussions.

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