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1-2014

Contextualising the new national narrative: Building on the social and emotional capital of Singaporeans

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Citation

Yee, Tong. Contextualising the new national narrative: Building on the social and emotional capital of Singaporeans. (2014). *Social Space*. 12-17.

Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/lien_research/181

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CONTEXTUALISING THE NEW NATIONAL NARRATIVE

BUILDING ON THE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL CAPITAL OF SINGAPOREANS

Singapore commemorates 50 years of nationhood in 2015. What's next? **Tong Yee** discusses how understanding and building on the social and emotional capital in our people can direct us towards building a new inclusive narrative for the nation.

Tong Yee is a champion for social emotional learning and ontological coaching, and a highly sought-after speaker. In 2007, he co-founded School of Thought to promote innovation in education and civic learning in both the private and public sectors. He aims to drive social innovation through civic learning in order to nurture the next generation of thought leaders and youth change-makers. School of Thought has since evolved to become The Thought Collective consisting of four other social enterprises: Think Tank Studio, Thinkscape, Food for Thought and Common Ground.

As a social innovator, he has contributed his expertise to the Youth Corps Singapore, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Defence, the then Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, the Civil Service College, as well as several NGOs and budding social enterprises in Singapore. He also spearheaded civic initiatives such as the Stand Up for Singapore Movement, the 2065 Civic Movement, and social innovation movements in Australia and London.

He is a council member of the National Youth Council, the Singapore Memory Project, S50 Committee (Youth and Education) and Advisory Committee for Youth Corps Singapore.



Source: Nicholas Tse.

"THE QUESTION IS 'WHEN WILL WE GROW UP AS A PEOPLE?' WE HAVE A GOVERNMENT WHO DOESN'T HAVE ALL THE SOLUTIONS ANYMORE... SO IF I DO HAVE ONE HOPE FOR SINGAPORE, IT'S THAT CITIZENS WILL BEGIN TO SEE THEIR ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES IN THIS NATION AND THAT THEY LOVE THE COUNTRY ENOUGH TO WANT TO PROTECT IT."

Singapore as a nation celebrates 50 years in 2015. What are your hopes for the country?

It's interesting, but my hope stems from fear. In a way, the two are interlinked. Fear is always proportional to desire—the more I want something, the more I fear I won't get it. When I think about my hope for Singapore, I think about the issues we'll be struggling with in the next 20 to 30 years—with the ageing crisis, the development of social media, growing bread and butter issues and of course, a new political landscape. I'm concerned about these things.

The question is "When will we grow up as a people?" We have a government that doesn't have all the solutions anymore. It's reached a level of complexity where we simply can't have one player to respond to the people. So if I do have one hope for Singapore, it's that citizens will begin to see their roles and responsibilities in this nation and that they love the country enough to want to protect it.

You talk about growing up as a people. Is there some signifier that will show this country has grown up?

On one level, there must be the presence of a collective voice, and in Singapore, we're seeing a silent majority who's learning their role. On another level, we'll see the people starting to take ownership of the problems that are there, solving these problems their own way. We'll also start seeing snippets of ground-up movements, though they may not be enough to bring about changes on a systemic level.

How do you find a new Singapore narrative at a point where so many points of view are equally valid?

Oftentimes when I'm working with my students, we deal with this idea of conflict and resolution. Each time we talk about a new line of argument, say abortion or taking care of the elderly, with all lines of argument considered, they realise that they've come to a point where every

single point of argument is valid. These youths have reached a level of education where they are seeing a part of them that can follow a particular narrative, and another part that will follow another narrative. And they find themselves stuck. Why?

The point of resolution in the past was between a weaker argument and a stronger argument. So at the time of survival, the narrative was very clear—how do we survive, and how do we become more prosperous? Everything else therefore paled in that particular context. However, Singapore has reached that stage where all arguments are equally strong. And the citizens, including all these younger ones that I am working with, are genuinely struggling. They find themselves, when online, that their identity is never consistent. They can choose one direction on one day; on another, they can stand for what they had argued against earlier.

So if the youths you're working with are having this internal conflict, what's your hope for them in shaping the narrative for the future?

Perhaps the narrative has to shift away from what's wrong and right, because we don't really know what's wrong and what's right anymore? "What's fair?" and "What's right?" are not universal narratives and they are contextually driven. If you asked me how we should be teaching the students today to distinguish between right and wrong, I'd say there's no longer a clear distinction between the two. There are too many contexts in Singapore currently for us to determine what's right. But something that could be more beneficial for us is to look at what is generally *loving*—what is helpful for a broader range of people, and this is something I'm currently exploring. I'm wondering whether there can be a more universal context in which Singaporeans can begin to see things.

Could we drive towards “what we have in common”?

Yes, but I think that’s where the narrative is missing. We don’t know what we have in common yet. Many lean towards this humanity idea, but I think if we become too humanist, we start coming across as naive or ridiculous. I wonder if there’s a more strategic way to position this. If we don’t find that common narrative, then of course, every opinion is valid.

But being humanist is what you refer to as social and emotional capital in your set-up, The Thought Collective. How important is it, and how vital is it to this country?

I think there are more layers to unpack. I’m currently doing research with youth groups. These youths are basically coming up with platforms to get Singaporeans to give more. We listed every single emotion that prompted people to give. We give out of guilt, pity, sympathy and empathy. We give out of compassion, and we give out of gratitude. After we’d isolated the top ten emotions that caused people to give, we then tracked and looked at how other platforms had tried to persuade people to give. So we looked at all the ad campaigns, the voluntary welfare organisations and non-governmental organisations, and how they got people to give, and we realised that almost every single campaign got people to give through the easiest ones—sympathy, pity and guilt—because these are the fastest triggers.

But there were two things that were completely absent in getting people to give. One was gratitude—how do we get

people to give from gratitude? There’s no campaign itself that basically looked at gratitude, and yet, gratitude and love are the spaces where we are most generous.

So going back to emotional capital, I believe there should be a distinction in helping us to be aware of our emotions. With that distinction, we can start looking at something from the coaching field that says emotion is a predisposition to action. All action that we do is predisposed by emotion first—we feel it in our body, then we move.

Singaporeans, because we are human, have to experience emotion. Let’s consider the online environment, one of the environments where strong emotion is present. Many think their convictions come from the head, but they really coming from the heart. How do I give them the distinctions so that they understand there’s a rigour and discipline behind their emotions? We work through this group of youths, helping them understand the emotions involved. For them, it’s an amazing eye opener—they’re saying, “I’ve never seen that before!” Suddenly, they see the strategy they can use. If they want a quick, but not necessarily long, campaign for people to give fast, they may use guilt or pity. And many realised that whereas they used to play with guilt in getting people to help the elderly, they now need to work with gratitude in solving long-term problems. If not, guilt is going to disappear very quickly from the volunteer base because you can only be guilty for so long. No one likes being guilty!

Do you think youths in Singapore have sufficient social and emotional capital to lead the country in the future?

I don’t see emotional capital as something tied to generations. Instead, it has to do with your humanity as an individual and whether we believe it or not, we have it, we are given the capacity to trust and the capacity to love; we are also given the capacity to have courage. It’s nothing to do with what generation we’re born in or how old we are. The question is, “What is the context we are living in, in terms of what is preventing us from seeing that capacity?”



Tong Yee with students. Source: The Thought Collective.

"SO IN TERMS OF SELF-MASTERY, HOW DOES ONE LOOK AT THE POPULATION AND BRING TENSION DOWN IN THIS SPACE? NOW, THIS IS WHERE WE TALK ABOUT EMOTIONAL CAPITAL. I BELIEVE UNDERSTANDING THIS AND REDUCING THE TENSION IS HOW WE'RE GOING TO SURVIVE THE 21ST CENTURY OR THE NEXT 50 YEARS OR SO."

I think people can alter their belief systems such that they can have access to all these wonderfully powerful emotions. In our video,¹ we talked about apathy and it’s something I’m very concerned about. Apathy indeed protects us from further disappointment and loss, but in order to do this, it also deliberately cuts off other emotions. It’s saying, “I don’t want to emotionally engage, I want to withdraw and shut off one emotion.” Brené Brown in TED² talks about this. She’s one of the leaders in the US on building emotional capital. She says sometimes people turn off one emotion. So for example, we turn off fear or we turn off sadness. Now, the emotional system doesn’t work that way. Instead, when we turn off one emotion, we turn off the others at one shot. If we can’t experience fear, we can’t experience joy either. No one can experience joy, happiness, gratitude, but not experience sadness. So how do we bring discipline to managing our emotions so that we don’t get crippled by fear, or live in fear permanently? Apathy is what most youths use to deal with that.

What we learn about emotion primarily is it’s always a response. It gives information about what’s going on for us. For example, a man touches my wife and immediately, I feel anger. It’s possible that the same thing happens and I feel nothing. Now what is going on with me that I’m not feeling angry? *Anger is always a reflection of what your standards are.* This is what I believe I deserve and I’m not getting it.

Let’s look at this in the context of Singapore. If people are getting angry, that’s one thing. But there’s another conversation behind that anger, and the conversation concerns what we believe we deserve, and *that* is a far more valuable conversation. All emotions reveal a more powerful conversation we can have. Anger in itself is not wrong or right. It’s mainly a reaction to where our beliefs and values lie. And the conversation therefore is about those particular values.

In Singapore right now, this whole sense of entitlement is tied to the understanding of what we believe we deserve and the principles that will help us understand that.

Do youths have the capacity to begin having that emotional capital? My answer is because they are human, they do. But my question is what is the story we’re living that prevents us from tapping on that? So every one of us is living a story—social workers are living a story, our students are living a story. Sadly, one thing I do know that’s crippling that emotional capital in Singapore is this story about “grades.”

Grades? Can you elaborate on that?

It has to do with identity. Our identity is material and it’s based on what I have, not who I am—I have to obtain this grade or this scholarship. This is very much in line with materialism. Therefore, I get very desperate when I don’t get this scholarship; my life is going to end.

There is a simple model we deal with in coaching fields. We talk about “be,” “do” and “have.” In a relationship like this, you’ll see people work in this particular way. They might say, “I *have* a Ferrari, therefore I *am* successful.” Or “I *have* a PhD, therefore I *am* complete.” So, when you take away what they have, they’re no longer what they are, and that’s deeply threatening for them.

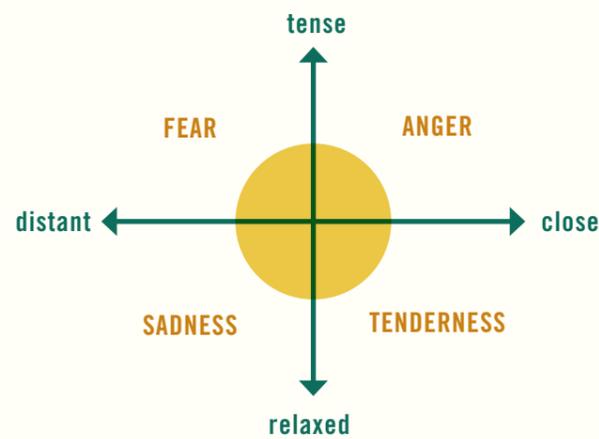
So for the longest time, we in Singapore were focusing on what we had for our growth. Look at our airport and all the things that we have. Over the years, because of this, some missing conversations are “Who are we?” and we’ve always struggled with that. But it doesn’t matter as long as we have this and that. Unfortunately, the day will come when what we have is no longer what is valued. Things will start breaking down, we’ll get into all these insecurities and we’ll become angry with ourselves.

Ideally, people should be operating this way—*because I am, therefore I do and that’s why I will have. And even if you took what I have away from me, I still am.* At the moment, our narratives are tied to two things—what we do and what we have. It isn’t tied to who we are.

In the past, there was a lot of fear in our response. These days, some people, particularly those in the online community, are

responding with a lot of anger. Returning to what you had said about anger earlier, how do you see this?

There is a model used by the International Coaching Federation (ICF) to frame all human emotions. On the x-axis, you have “distant” on one end and “close” on the other. On the y-axis, it is “tense” on one extreme, and “relaxed” on the other. In the four quadrants are “fear,” “anger,” “sadness,” and “tenderness.” Fear, for example, is always born out of two main elements—tension and distance. In every horror movie, the classic scene is one with a man pulling out a knife. The audience knows it, but the characters in the scene don’t know about it. A blonde walks in and takes a shower alone. This *tension* plus *distance* creates *fear*. If there wasn’t a science behind fear, you couldn’t possibly get any two people in the cinema feeling fear at the same time.



In Singapore, we’ve lived in fear, but in recent times, it’s shifted to anger. What is the main difference between these?

Singapore has always been in tension primarily because of our geographical vulnerabilities, and we know that. In the early years, before social media, people were always distant from the government. When there was tension and distance, there was fear. Social media’s simply shifted us to the quadrant, “anger.” Hence, the whole narrative will also begin to shift.

When we look at social and emotional capital, we are actually dealing with two axes. Ideally, we want to get people to the space where tension is reduced. So how do we release the tension and start getting people more relaxed?

Geographically, we can’t change things. Singapore is what it is. But what we learn in terms of human behaviour is that tension is 100 percent self-generated, and stress is 100 percent self-created. We can have all the stress in the

world coming to us and it’s still possible to manage the tension. So in terms of self-mastery, how does one look at the population and bring tension down in this space? Now, this is where we talk about *emotional capital*. I believe understanding this and reducing the tension is how we’re going to survive the 21st century or the next 50 years or so.

The question is how do we increase the possibility of us even considering a new narrative as a country. Let’s say I’m in a marriage and it’s going very badly. My narrative about my husband is that he’s a cheat. Now, once the narrative is locked in, I can’t consider new possibilities. The question then is how do I hold a new narrative for my marriage such that I can begin to see new possibilities? Similarly, Singapore itself is tied to new narratives. The third-to-first-world narrative was there, but now, it’s starting to disappear. The narrative right now is we’re in bad times and everything is failing. Honestly, I’m terrified of the day that this gets locked in, because once this happens, it’s very hard to have the openness to start considering new ones.

Another area to look at is our emotional mastery. This is basically our capacity to increase the possibility of considering a new narrative. So let’s say my wife is very angry with me because of something I did. Well, my wife happens to be a person with emotional discipline. She’ll pause and say, “OK, this anger is not helpful right now,” and she’ll bring it down and bring up another lens. When she does that, she’s able to see possibilities. I think that’s the same skill base we’re looking at in terms of Singapore. It’s not that new possibilities are not there, or that people are not attempting to see them. It’s that we’re so locked in.

There’s a big difference between people who experience fear and respond at a particular moment, and those who actually *live in fear*. Individuals living in the mood of fear no longer need a trigger. They wake up and they feel frightened. Fear becomes the permanent lens through which they see things. You’d notice this in the body language of these individuals sometimes. You meet people and you know that they are permanently scared of everything in life. That’s because it’s become a mood. When mood is extended into collective behaviour, it’s called culture, and in every country, there’s a certain culture tied to it. So you have heard it said that Singapore has a culture of fear. Even as we see anger coming about, I still think it’s being informed by fear.

The question is how do we get people out of this particular mood? Building new narratives is very challenging. The Ministry of Community, Culture and Youth can spend time crafting a new narrative for

Singapore in terms of writing this story, but it is genuinely challenging for them considering the diverse audience it’s being passed to. Would all members of our national audience listen to and interpret this story with the same emotional lens? When the National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre for example, talks about looking at our communities and the need to start taking collaborative ownership of them, I look at that and think how do we first even introduce an experience and narrative of collaboration? It’s not the quality of the story but the readiness of the audience listening to it.

How can your social enterprise, Thinkscope play a role in this?

Thinkscope creates experiences that advocate new perspectives on industries, institutions and issues in Singapore. We believe that experience is a powerful means to bring conviction and reality to our learning. Looking at these distinctions between emotion and mood, I can speak to you with a PowerPoint slide, or I can get you to experience it yourself. So what we’re doing in Thinkscope is bringing participants on learning trails; we want them to walk into the territory where they can literally feel the mood and witness things with their own eyes. It’s experiential and it’s in the real context. For example, you walk into Block 15, Lorong 7 in Toa Payoh and that for me is the real context. You walk in and you already feel the mood. It’s not just the dim lighting there; there’s the feel of the space. It’s an area with one-room rental flats. It’s fascinating because you can walk into all the one-room rental housing estates in Singapore and find that they all feel different. You’d think it’s all one-room demographics there, but it’s not!

With Thinkscope, The Thought Collective as an organisation is starting to get a sense of what it is that we are doing. In the past, I was the one leading all this change, but now as an organisation, we’re starting to understand. So, when we are building a trail for example, we are somehow more well-informed in terms of what distinctions to show our youths and the distinctions to be presented to the adults, such that they’re able to see. What do I mean by distinctions? When I point to lilac, lavender and purple, my daughter calls all three “purple.” I point a zebra to my daughter and she calls it a “horse.” Human beings, regardless of age, are exactly the same: if we don’t hold distinctions, we cannot see.

The idea then is how do I deliver these distinctions? How do we create trail experiences that are not so much driven by points of interest or heritage but rather a curation of experiences that reveal the most salient issues of our society? I can put it in modules or I can bring it into your community. In all educational cases, when you



Volunteer Training. Source: The Thought Collective.

really experience it in real life, it’s a far more powerful experience.

For the first four years of Thinkscope’s growth, we built a strong curriculum, a strong knowledge of experience design, but we didn’t have the ideal business model behind it. The problem with the business model is very much a demand-side issue. I believe that we have the supply side well taken care of, with compelling new trail experiences emerging every few months and a pool of well-trained facilitators that can scale learning both up or down depending on audience. But on the demand side, nobody really wakes up one morning and says, “Ooh... I am really in the mood for a trail experience today.” And although it may be desirable, nobody even wakes up and says, “I really want to gain insight and empathise with someone else today.” Unlike many of our other social ventures, Thinkscope does not offer a product that already benefits from a strong market habit. Thankfully, we have figured out that Thinkscope really isn’t a typical business-to-consumer (B2C) business like the rest of our work but rather a business-to-business (B2B) outfit. I know this seems obvious as you read it, but sometimes when we get caught in our own blind spots, we just can’t see everything.

Having said that, the very encouraging trend is that we are gaining a strong following of institutions and companies, like the Centre for Livable Cities and even Ben & Jerry’s, that wish to engage their staff or own members, and have them educated in these issues and contexts. The feedback has been great, and honestly, from what I hear, I believe this is something that Singapore should really invest in as a community, building empathy through experiential learning. The next step will be to extend this offering to the broader public in a compelling way. ■

Endnotes

- 1 The Thought Collective video, www.youtube.com/watch?v=BzE9dby5fL0
- 2 TED, <https://support.ted.com/customer/portal/articles/206144-what-is-ted->