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SPEECH BY MAJOR FONG SIP CHEE, MINISTER OF STATE FOR CULTURE,
AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE ARTS AND CRAFTS EXHIBITION
HELD IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE SINGAPORE YOUTH FESTIVAL 1982
AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUM ART GALLERY ON 2 AUGUST '82 AT 5.30 PM

I WISH I WERE YOUNG AGAIN, BUT

"Youth is a wonderful thing; what a crime to waste it on children."

This is not my indictment of our youths. These words came from George Bernard Shaw. Not being an avid reader, nor a student of western philosophy, I shall not attempt to interpret this philosophical disputation by a great philosopher of a people whose culture and social norms are different from ours. Shaw's cryptic remark on the 'immaturity' of children may well be apt in respect of his society at that point of time.

I have not been able to attribute this quotation to any particular work of Shaw's. At the risk of quoting him out of context, I must say that I do detect in this statement the author's implicit feeling of time wasted and opportunity lost, in his observation on the young people of his day.

I have tried to trace its source, and I have delved into a few volumes of books and dictionaries of quotations. I have found, in the process, and to my amazement, a rich glossary of definitions on youths - of their shortcomings, of more rather than less of their vices than virtues, of the distrust and the expectations, and of disenchantment with them. The age-old prejudice against youths certainly came through very clearly.

Thankfully, I did also find a good many axioms from these great people of yesteryears which held out the more positive views.

Young people /2.

Young people are not incompatible with society after all! Let me pick at random an example, by Morituri Salutamus: "How beautiful is youth! How bright it gleams. With its illusions, aspirations, dreams."

Shaw may be closer to the truth in another of his sayings: "Youth, which is forgiven everything, forgives itself nothing; age, which forgives itself everything, is forgiven nothing."

Not satisfied with my search on the subject, I called to mind a number of sayings by Confucius - the ancient Chinese sage whose teachings I am more familiar with. Confucian ethics are, ironically, so close to us but yet so far. One of his many observations on youths has become a cliché to many of us who have benefited (while some may claim to have suffered) from an upbringing at a time when Confucian ethics were still very much a part of our basic social code. It is written in Book IX Chapter XXII of the Analects: "A youth is to be regarded with respect. How do we know that his future will not be equal to our present." - (A James Legge translation of " 后生可畏，焉知来者之不如也 —— 论语：子罕第九，第廿二章。)

I must hasten to disclaim here that I have learnt this from the Japanese. A greater part of whose culture has been subtly blended with large doses of Confucian ethics. Apparently, they have benefited much from this, and can quite justifiably claim to be a second derivative of Confucian teachings. I, too, am a second derivative, but I do not cherish having to learn about Confucianism from the Japanese, thus making me a third derivative in the event!

Interestingly, a common attitude of Confucius and other Chinese philosophers on the question of youth had consistently been one of benignancy, always seeking to educate, to exhort, to impart knowledge and wisdom, and to enlighten. Chidings, begrudging and ridicule were the exceptions rather than the rule.

I have no contribution to make to a definition of what our youths are. It will be preposterous for me to think I am capable of adding anything worthy to the contributions made by the

literary immortals! However, I cannot allow this occasion to pass without sharing with you some of my own feelings. As for myself, I say: "Youth is indeed a wonderful thing; I want to go back to it!"

Let me tell you what I could do, or would do, if I were young again. I would most certainly have worked harder than having only managed a miserable P6 pass in the English Language. I often excuse myself by attributing my handicap to the switching from the Chinese stream to the English stream, but this has been no consolation to me. I would have worked even harder to earn a place in the university, but alas, even if I had the scholarly inclination, I had not the money. Worse still, as it turned out, I had neither. I would have charted my career on a more advantageous course. I would have equipped myself better so that I might be a greater asset to society and of more valuable service to my fellow-countrymen. Sadly, these were not to be.

" 书 到 用 时 方 恨 少 " -- "Learning, when one has to put it to use, only then one realises that one is lacking in it" - so says a Chinese proverb. I have been conscious of this inadequacy of mine since adulthood. I once thought aloud at a discussion with the Prime Minister, I told him that had it not been for the burden of office and constituency work, I had liked to pursue a course of study in the university. The Prime Minister thought for a split second and said, benignly, "Your exposure and experience will stand you well in life. Why do you want a degree for at this age? You were born at the wrong time. Had you been born under our administration, you would have walked into a university and walked away with any degree you wanted."

That was consoling, coming from the Prime Minister. But what was more pertinent than consolation was what he said of the timing when one was born. You are all born at the right time and into a society of opportunities. Your parents were not; but they have made it propitious for you. They, who are of my generation, experienced a childhood and adolescence of deprivation in many things.

You have often been reminded, sometimes chided, and at times begrudged, for being a lucky generation. Indeed, you are a lucky generation: there is nothing wrong with being lucky. It is not a sin, nor is it your fault; after all, this is precisely what your parents' generation has worked for. We are happy for you. But we, of your parents' generation, do want to fault you if you squander away your opportunities to prepare a better life for yourselves and for your children. You owe it to yourselves and to your children as much as we owe it to you.

Yes, I want very much to go back to my youth, to begin it all over again, to do what I could not do or had failed to do. It is a beautiful thought, and a tempting proposition. On deeper reflection, however, some reservations surface. I doubt that if I really want it that way.

If, by a stroke of miracle, your parents and I are blessed with the opportunity to back-track into the time of our youth, we shall have to earnestly negotiate with Providence on the timing of its coming.

I do not want to go back to my youthful days of the fifties and the sixties. I want to go back to my youth in the Singapore of the eighties, and beyond!

I do not want to go back to my youth in the fifties when I had to walk several miles to school because the bus workers, incited by the Communists and their United Front, went on strike and rioted;

when I had to live through curfews, with fear, anxiety and dangers hanging in the air;

when, because of the nightsoil workers' strike, my neighbours and I had to carry the nightsoil bucket (which served the call of nature of seven families) to empty its contents at a sewer man-hole some streets away. The exercise frequently ended with a less than dignified appearance of the 'bearers of the bucket';

when gangsters paraded the streets and made quick work of their victims with their assortment of lethal weapons, upon encountering their rival gangs;

when so many people were content with sleeping on canvas beds which lined the five-foot ways, some of them never saw daylight again, having been clobbered or chopped in their sleep;

when others, the slightly more fortunate ones, rested their fatigued muscles and bones and squeezed, into rented spaces, in bunks and under staircases - the spacemen of Singapore, the Prime Minister once remarked;

when our parents and elders were unemployed and lived barely at a subsistence level;

when I had to sing two 'National' anthems at different times during my school-life - not the "Majulah Singapura", but the "San Min Zhu Yi" and "God Saved The King"(and later, the "Queen");

when the other demi-gods who claimed to be our only salvation were the Communists;

when students, like you, camped-in, sat-in, rioted and did everything else except studied, having fallen prey to Communist agitation;

when the Colonial civil servants were neither civil nor anybody's servants;

when corruption was rampant in the civil service; and when the rich could get things done their way and the poor had to leave their fortune to fate;

when getting a place in school, anywhere and in any school, was cause for joy in the whole family - of course, only after having offered appropriate gratifications to some headmasters, teachers and even school clerks;

when the only newspapers (Chinese) we students could have sight of were available only during the off-peak hours in the neighbourhood coffee shop;

when the joy of graduation quickly evaporated, and replaced by the gloom of unemployment and an uncertainty in life;

when a pair of white canvas shoes was good enough as part of the school uniform, as well as for whatever sports and games; and sufficiently decorous footwear for the few and far between clansmen's reunions and kinsfolk social gatherings;

when many of us swam in the sea in our 'birthday suits', because we could not afford the luxury of swimming trunks and the low, yet prohibitive, admission fees of the few swimming pools; and

when sending a kid to a kindergarten was unheard of among the common people.

I do not want a re-enactment of all these, if I were to re-live my youth. Decidedly not!

Now, I want to go back to my youth, only if it is the Singapore of the eighties, and beyond. It is a far more attractive proposition, because I know that I shall have, first of all, a decent home, never mind if it is temporarily a one-room improved rented Housing and Development Board apartment;

I know I shall be able to own at least a three-room apartment someday, most probably between the age of 25 to 35 - if my parents and elder brothers or sisters do not already own theirs;

I know that few ordinary and humble people in the world can own a property at that age;

I know my parents will most certainly have sent me to a kindergarten first before I start my formal schooling;

I know /7.

I know I will have a place reserved for me in a school, most likely within a reasonable distance from my home. The question is: will I study hard?;

I know my school will have all the facilities befitting a modern educational institution, unlike the downtown shop-house type of school which many of our parents attended;

I know I can opt for a course of study or training most suited to my inclination or innate ability, regardless of whether it is to be academic, vocational, technical or professional;

I will have the opportunity and the money to enjoy the many sports, the recreational, cultural or educational amenities; and to dress in appropriate attire for the occasions too;

I know I will enjoy a high standard of health care;

I know my chances of success and the odds against me in a society built on the concept of equality in opportunity, irrespective of whatever social, ethnic, wealth, religious and cultural background one comes from;

I know that if I cannot really afford to pay for my studies, there are scholarships and bursaries abound, offered by the Government, clan associations, civic bodies, the Citizens' Consultative Committees and many others, if only I study hard enough to earn one;

I know I will have a more rounded development through the education system and the school's extra curricula activities;

I know, most importantly, that my father will be gainfully employed and my mother too can get a job if she is not burdened with household chores, and equally important, a number of jobs will be awaiting my choice when I am ready to work;

I know I will be proud to serve my country in National Service, unlike some of our fathers who distributed pamphlets against the British National Service in the fifties, and for this "misdemeanour" they got the sack from school; and

I know I will be a proud Singaporean living in a clean and green country of our own, and with a standard of living which is the second highest in Asia.

Yet, these and many more promising prospects notwithstanding, I am still a little wary of going back to my youth in the eighties. It is because I also know that if I am not careful, if I discard my own cultural norms, my sense of propriety, and deprive myself of the cultural ballast at my own peril, I may very well be plunged into a hedonistic society in which only personal enjoyment, pleasure-seeking and entertainment are what I live for. I fear too that I may lose all that my father has provided for me if I lapse into complacency and be content with resting on my father's laurels. I will be puzzled as to why so many people should despise their own language and vehemently reject their own cultural heritage. I dread that I may become a person only to be motivated by my selfish aims. I am fearful that my society may disintegrate because my fellow youths and I are prone to adopting soft options.

These are but my misgivings. They may very well come true, if we are oblivious to the challenges that lie ahead of us, and to the hidden ills that might have already incubated in us.

I do not believe in Que Sera Sera. Your father too did not believe in Que Sera Sera. That is why you are here. But if you do believe in Que Sera Sera and, worse still, compound it with the philosophy of a give-away society which some charlatan and hypocritical politicians now advocate, then, your children won't be here. I am quite sure of that.

I am equally sure that you, our youths of today and our holmsmen of tomorrow, are a discerning and intelligent lot. I have the confidence that you will be able to judge between what is right and wrong, to differentiate between prudence and irresponsibility, and to separate truth from falsehood, reality from illusions.

I wish you all an eventful, a rewarding and happy life in the era of your youth.

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