

In Their Own Words:

Polarities (in, of and for)

Performance

Interviewees

Meenakshy Bhaskar

Artistic Director, Bhaskar's Arts Academy

Dr. Samuel Wong

Co-Founder and Creative Director, The TENG Company

Yaziz Hassan

Co-Founder and Director, Nadi Singapura Ltd

Interviewer

Dr. Aaron Maniam

Editor-in-Chief, *Cultural Connections Volume 10*

The performing arts scene in Singapore is inherently variegated. This article captures key insights on several dimensions of this variety, drawing insights from a panel discussion among three established practitioners, familiar with the Chinese, Indian and Malay communities respectively, and with the connections and cross-pollinations between the three. The panel's conversation strongly echoed the work of management theorist Barry Johnson¹, where different facets of a choice are characterised not as mono-dimensional traits, but as "polarities"—dualities with two sides, where "both/and" rather than "either/or" approaches can allow for rich, non-binary outcomes rather than mutually exclusive choices. This approach brings out the dynamic and generative diversity of Singapore's performance ecosystem.

1

Tradition and Innovation in Art Forms

Samuel: The unique thing about traditional music is that the contemporary of the present is going to be the tradition of tomorrow. So what happens is that a lot of people don't realise that we are actually on a continuum. They just think of it as two sides of a coin. Oh, this is modern. And this is traditional. But the fact is that we vacillate across a line. We take elements of the past and make it relevant in the present. We take elements of the present and then reinterpret our past.

So we have interpretations of history and we have historical interpretations of the present as well. In many senses, this identity actually forms us, frames us, and gives us growth. I think what's scary is the environment that we are creating art in right now where there's so much polarity. There are wars happening and stuff like that. No doubt a lot of people have said that good art comes from strife and wars. But I think, from another perspective, we are also thinking about continuity, sustainability and leaving legacies for next generations of Singaporeans as well.

Meenakshy: I've always said that what was yesterday is tradition tomorrow. And what's today will become tradition three years down the road. How do we know how dance was practised in the past?

You have all these people talking about purity, keeping the purity [of an art form]. You know, you can't really judge. We didn't live in those days. We do not have any video recording, you know, that recorded all of that. So let's just go with what we have and be strong with what we do, but the challenges and worries about tomorrow are real.

2

Local and Global Influences

Meenakshy (on her Academy's interpretation of the Chinese legend of *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*, often known as "The Butterfly Lovers"): Our first creation of *Butterfly Lovers* really set the trajectory for how my parents were going to approach Indian dance in Singapore. They

were deeply influenced by the various cultures found in Singapore, and deeply inspired by the multicultural landscape of Singapore the first time they saw Chinese dance and Malay dance. And then internationally, there were other performers coming [onto the scene].

As my mum grew up in a very small village, she had not seen anything other than classical Indian dance. So it was a very rewarding, inspiring time for them; it inspired my mother to create the story of *The Butterfly Lovers* in bharatanatyam. Nothing like that had been done in India. So that was something very new for them. It set the tone for cultural collaborations... and really honed my mother's skills for collaboration.

Yaziz (on how global influences and Western-style systematic training contribute to Malay music):

When I started in the early 90s, only about three or four established groups were involved in Malay drumming, mainly from the performing arts groups, Sriwana, Sri Warisan and The Singapore Kemuning Society. But over the years, I think we've achieved a major milestone in that we now have more than 13 established groups. All the individual groups have their own percussionists and musicians. And they learn from proper musical training, not just from oral tradition and copying current practices. Now all these youngsters have gone to the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) or LASALLE College of the Arts, so they learn from [systematic Western] training methods, which is good.

In 2009, Riduan (Zalani), Nadi's co-founder, and I were in the show committee for National Day. That was when we realised that there were no iconic percussion groups in Singapore. Whether Chinese, Malay or Indian, there were no large Asian ensembles. That's why, in 2011, Riduan

and I created Nadi Singapura. Since then, we have had [ensembles] Drum Feng and Damaru.

During the 2009 survey, [we found that] most tertiary-level groups played Brazilian batucada or African music, and 70% of them comprised Malay musicians. Why did they not want to hold a rebana or kompang, which is much cheaper, much lighter? Very simple. Their answer was that the Malay forms were not cool because Malays traditionally did not move and play. They didn't move around or dance, and played mostly traditional Malay music or Islamic music.

The changes that we've put in place aim not to recreate the genre but to make the genre more current and relevant. We mixed Malay traditional percussion with some movement, and it has now attracted more Malay youngsters to play the traditional drums again. Today, most tertiary-level groups have at least one Malay drum group.

In 2018, we performed at the first Gemadah Malay traditional music festival presented by Persatuan Pemuzik Tradisional Melayu Singapura in collaboration with Esplanade-Theatres on the Bay. That's when we found out that we have a minimum of 13 groups playing traditional music. Actually, there are a lot more if we include less formally established groups. Most of the percussionists are now Nadi members.

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Purity and Combinatorial Potential of Art Forms— Balancing Depth and Range

Meenakshy (on not being Indian enough): My parents were here from the 50s so, by the 70s, their artform had evolved. That's almost 20 years. So when other Indian teachers were coming in and setting up schools here, getting connected with the government and working with the People's Association, there were criticisms that we weren't Indian enough.

That really hurt us in a few ways. It hurt us in the sense that a lot of the alumni who would have brought their children and other students back to us, stopped and went elsewhere. Financially, it also hurt my parents, because questions came up, and the then-Ministry of Culture started questioning the value of what we were doing.

So at that point, my father then started doing side jobs just to make ends meet. The situation eventually evolved. There was a market of people who came back and things worked out. I think arts housing was one big thing that really helped. I think it happened during the mid to late 80s. Stamford Arts Centre was deemed a place of art. My father was one of the first people to submit an application, and we got our original space there.

Yaziz (on roots and tradition while experimenting and innovating): We needed to [combine global and local influences] to attract [young people's] interest. They would often ask, "How do you infuse K-pop music with your traditional Malay drumming?" Because we were rooted very strongly, we knew our roots, that's why we could experiment [with other influences].

So that's where younger players started to learn their roots, and develop a sense of what they needed to do now to continue evolving. In 2024, during an event for Catch (www.catch.sg), Nadi Singapura played modern music with our

traditional instruments. We got about a million online views because of this. But such innovation must be relevant to where we live. We cannot make changes indiscriminately. To make changes, you need to know your roots, and how strong they are. Only then can you know how to make a change.

4 Cultural Dilution and Loss of Tradition

Meenakshy: I'm concerned that, in schools, traditional arts are now taking a back seat. Principals are now choosing to do something called "World Dance". It's not happening so much in music, but it's happening in dance. They used to have the traditional dances where the Chinese dance teachers used to teach their own dance form, and similarly for the Indian and Malay groups. Now a whole lot of Indian dance teachers have lost their jobs because of "World Dance". Instead of offering classes on Chinese dance, Indian dance, and Malay dance, every school [offering dance as a co-curricular activity] has one choreographer who's dabbled a little bit in each, and is not really trained in any specific dance form, choreographing "World Dance". This is where students are getting their first introduction to the traditional arts. This is a concern because you're having someone who's passing information to them without deep training in any specific form.

We're losing the identity of the Chinese, the Malay, the Indian. You have to go back to your tradition periodically. We're always going back to revisit

our roots, then coming back to reinvent them into new forms. We find relevance in the past or we try to contemporise the past. But if you don't have that anchoring, where do you start?

It's the same for Western classical music. You have a syllabus of classical music, and there's a progression and form for how you teach it. If the basics are not there, then I wonder where things are going.

This also affects the whole idea of working together. It's different if you only have one person doing a diluted synthesis—not the same as the three of us working together. This collaboration and synthesis are what we want to continue.

Yaziz: This is also happening in my school. I started teaching at Zhenghua Secondary School in 2005. I see the Indian dance, Chinese dance and Malay dance groups combining at certain times. Throughout, they also remained very rooted in their own traditions. It was a delicate balance.

I do not know when they started to scrap traditional dances, and everything became modern dance. The dance instructor [at my school] is very young—unlike before, when, for the Chinese and Malay dances, we had several Cultural Medallion recipients as instructors. I don't know what happened and it's really a waste, not teaching students what their roots are.

Samuel: How do we reach the young? How do we sustain their interest, energy and enthusiasm? How do we grant access to people who might want to reach us but don't know of us yet?

Yaziz: After the COVID-19 pandemic, we went back to our 50-year plan for Nadi Singapura. The next milestone is for us to open a school to ensure proper learning for Malay drumming, instead of relying only on oral traditions. We don't have any syllabus yet; in NAFA and LASALLE the focus is on gamelan rather than traditional Malay music. We're going back to what we planned—training our own members to be the future instructors in the School of Nadi Singapura.

Meenakshy: We had to rebrand ourselves in 2022 after my mom passed away. Now that the founders are gone, we are the new generation taking over.

We sat down and looked at the contributions and strengths of the founders. We figured out that giving back to the community and mentoring the next generation, not just within but also outside of our school, were always among their strengths. Having a history of 70 years [meant that] several of our students had moved on to establish big schools of their own in Singapore. So how could we help and uplift them as well? It's not just about us, it's the survival of all of them as well. So we prioritised working together with them, and with our alumni.

We found that bharatanatyam had taken off really well here. But there are other art forms that have come in from India like kathakali and mohiniyattam. Our next hope is to help these also gain the same foothold in Singapore, so we are focusing on creating awareness about these dance forms. For example, we organised a Kathakali Festival in 2025, focusing on kathakali,

5 Mentoring the Next Generation and Building Ecosystems

and gaining support for this by working with the Malayalam language community, the different associations. We gave free workshops on how to appreciate kathakali to cultivate more audiences for the art form.

A lot of this draws from my mother's personality. She was the kind of person who's very giving, very kind, and she never held anything back. She never felt that if she gave away trade secrets, someone would run away with them. She was just this overflowing well of giving, with an intrinsic abundance mindset.

I grew up around that, so I have the same mindset. If someone comes and asks me for help or asks me a question, I give 100%. I don't hold back. It's nice to work collaboratively. It's really nice to work communally because there's a lot of sharing and exchanges going on. This is one thing I learnt from watching my mother.

6 Polarities in Harnessing Technology

Samuel (on the need for strong foundations): There was a recent trend of creating Studio Ghibli-style images that prompted discussions about Intellectual Property (IP). I think this [issue of IP] also applies to SingLit and the arts more broadly. Can you take the voice of another author and subsequently write a novel—does that person then lose authenticity?

There is a risk that we lose the beauty of the traditional form that has been there since ages past. Similarly when we work with technology like Artificial Intelligence (AI), if one has a really good understanding of the form, I think one can manipulate that form and then create new works as a result. And these new works may be ideas and identities which AI cannot necessarily work on.

This is something that I still am grappling with. AI is helping us with things like digital distribution and AI-assisted creativity. But it's not yet at the stage of creating our work. I think there's immense opportunity with things like helping us to work with different storytelling models, different musical framework modules, genres which we thought couldn't possibly be fully realised, like music and literature that we thought couldn't be fused together. AI has shown us how we can do that.

So, in many ways, AI is broadening our experience. I think the issue for us is to think critically—how do we ask the right questions to inform our works, so that we create works which are relevant to our AI-saturated society.

I can speak for how TENG is going to grow. We have a series of programmes where we work with music and binaural, as well as monaural, beat technology. AI is helping us grow our neuroscientific frameworks; there are studies on how this music actually affects people's brain and brain waves.

AI and other technologies have also allowed us to collaborate with therapists, social workers, and educators. We are finding ways to create educational programmes using technology, which has not been done before. But this can only happen [when one has] strong fundamentals in the art form as a base for innovation.

This is where I think Yaziz and Meena rightly feel a bit angsty—because you have teachers outside there without strong fundamentals who produce output with labels like “fusion”, “World Dance”, etc.

There seems to be a larger emphasis on assimilation, without realising that the core actually comes from traditions, history and heritage.

Yaziz (on the need for high-tech and high-touch): Nadi Singapura is revisiting our original plans. We realise, especially for the Malay community, that we have lost the human touch. Even when you go to McDonald’s, you touch a screen to order rather than speak to a middle-aged aunty about your order.

We feel that, for the Malay arts, we lack this human touch, which actually is the best medicine offered by the arts in its healing role. One to one, face to face, we can communicate with an audience. We can talk to them after a show, rather than have them watch an AI or digital performance from home while drinking coffee and eating cookies. We feel that when things are done digitally, we really don’t have the human touch anymore. In Singapore now, many things are done on machines. We also risk slashing the salary of a Singaporean who’s replaced by this technology.

With Nadi Singapura, we know what we want to do for Malay drumming. It’s about teaching the roots properly, so that [our members] know how to create the human touch for those who come to our performances, when they see us on the roadside, when they hear or feel the drums that we actually play.

Meenakshy: I agree with everything that Sam and Yaziz have shared. The lack of human touch is a concern for us as well, especially because with music, you can put on your headphones

and hear it, but you can’t do the same with dance. Watching it in a video is not the same as having a live experience.

Samuel (on technology for monitoring and evaluating projects): AI has helped TENG to work with measurement impact frameworks. How does our music actually affect people? Do we have any psychological studies that this music can work to help with stress, anxiety, etc. It’s given us very different ways of looking at our music.

AI has actually allowed us to create frameworks for music and then assessments of those frameworks which we created. It has allowed us to think a little bit deeper, and allowed us to think of ways in which we could have outcomes that could help the community and enhance wellness. So it has made us think differently. But again, this can only be said about TENG because we are a very data-driven organisation.

My model of my company is weird in that it doesn’t function very much like an arts company even though we call ourselves one. But Yaziz and Meena worked with me and they know that we think very strategically. AI has allowed us to clarify the decisions that we make.

AI has allowed us to test strategic models of how our company should move: What is the percentage of failure? Would we be able to get this? And why are we not able to do this? It’s also able to predict ways in which we move into the future. I like to think we’re an innovative company that does Chinese music, not just a musical company that happens to innovate.

Balancing the Polarities of COVID-19

Samuel (on the impact of COVID-19 and digitalisation on audiences): The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digitisation and reframed many discussions around artist livelihoods and mental health. There were also new hybrid models of engagement that increased some aspects of viewership. Many of us started reframing the conversations that we were having on audience engagement.

COVID-19 also highlighted the role of the arts in social cohesion and healing. Arts companies now more than ever have multiple platforms with which to engage our audiences, and we are competing with new content and new dissemination mechanisms. We need to go through a point of inflexion, to explore where change is necessary in how we are getting our audiences and how we are moving ahead.

Because post-COVID, audiences have changed. The numbers of people going to shows or concerts are very different from those pre-COVID. My data shows that the audience engagement patterns for Singaporeans have changed, and so we need to study exactly how and why COVID-19 changed them.

There was also so much online content during the pandemic that nowadays, people find it a little more difficult to pay for tickets, because everything

became free [of charge]. This leads to deeper questions: What is the nature of the arts and their value? How should the arts best be disseminated?

Meena (on post-pandemic market over-saturation): We found COVID-19 a challenge and we all disliked it, especially teaching online, but I think it opened up avenues for us to connect with the community.

It may have initially been very difficult, but we adapted very well. We presented several performances, like children's programmes, and reached out to a different community altogether than we normally would have. So that was good for us, though it was a tough time.

As Sam mentioned earlier, the audience has changed considerably for us as well. They did not want to watch anything unless it was free. It took a while for everybody to come back.

The market in Indian dance is now over saturated in Singapore. You have a proliferation of different dance forms and more artists. We're competing for audiences and performance venues.

The unique thing about Singapore is that we offer arts grants to even permanent residents, which you don't see anywhere else in the world. And there are a lot of permanent residents who are creating. This is great because I think it's a good thing to have variety. It's a good thing to have a lot of people come in because some changes happen during that time—a lot of people get pushed because of the competition and it just creates a totally different environment. People get more creative. But that's been our biggest challenge, how do we find relevance in this seascape of many.

Yaziz (on digitisation and the struggle for audiences): Honestly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Nadi did nothing. We did have a grant for us to do a pilot project but all the grant money actually went to the video company for the project. All the video companies made a living during COVID, but the artists themselves didn't.

But during COVID-19, we learnt a lot. Previously, we didn't have any media or marketing team. Now we do. That means an extra budget that we need to put aside for this department to make us more relevant.

In 2019, Nadi performed to a full house of 1,800 people at Esplanade Theatre, but a lot of this was because of Esplanade's marketing strategy. The budget that they put into the marketing was high, so even people in the alleys knew about this show.

[In the Malay] community, to pay more than \$30 for a traditional arts show, concert or even a theatre show is very hard. A key challenge is that people now, even the youngsters, want to go more digital and watch from home. They do not wish to pay for tickets. That's why I think the government subsidising Singaporeans to come and watch us live, through the Culture Pass,² is a very good initiative. This is a milestone we can be proud of.

8

Recognising the Value of the Arts in Singapore

Yaziz (on recognising quality and qualifications): The artist fees paid to traditional practitioners is very far off from those received by our classical counterparts, although we sometimes manage or play at similar levels of quality. The problem is that, in Singapore, we do not have a certificate that recognises what Malay music is all about. I have a friend with a degree in music from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). In Singapore, this degree is not recognised even though it is from one of the most prestigious music academies in Malaysia.

Samuel (on excellence, access and cross-sector collaboration): As traditional arts groups, when we first start out, there is a general stereotype that a lot of us tend to be very old, very stagnant and very antiquated. So there's "arts", and then there's "traditional arts", and the two are not perceived equally.

As a result, many of us have difficulties trying to prove our value in a larger arts scene, and that is why I think maybe Yaziz, for example, finds it difficult to price certain things higher as well. Increasingly, we have to work to prove our relevance in contemporary society.

When TENG started, we went with the idea that we would try to break as many stereotypes and perceptions as we could. In a sense, the threat became a little bit of an opportunity for us.

Meena, Yaziz and I all work in the traditional arts field, and we know that today's society is now quite pragmatic. Always at the back of our minds is the issue of sustainability and how we can be relevant in a very pragmatic society.

How do we innovate and how do we subsist in a society which has a social perception of utility?

So there's always a perceived tension between artistic value and social utility. TENG has worked on a hybrid model combining excellence with accessibility, which we've found works.

Our second strategy is the idea of access and equity. At TENG, we direct our work towards communities through targeted outreach—it might be to at-risk youth, or groups with special needs. We work with healthcare professionals. We collaborate with therapists, educators and social workers to ensure that cultural participation isn't a luxury but is part of everyday society. So we break down the silos in the usual arts paradigms, and instead start merging everything together. We bring together arts and health, arts and the social compact, arts and other areas.

The larger strategy that works for us is carefully selecting what we work on. Everything else is basically about our skills—how we take our skills and find an alignment to broader concerns.

It is a virtuous cycle: once we are able to break down silos, we can also work with other entities from other fields. We find that we are stronger together than apart. We or other art companies working together with different entities, let's say health or healthcare, can bring artistic merit (in terms of programming) as well as economic benefits. So I don't see these as separate efforts. The further we break down silos, the more we find alignment.

Samuel (on the arts as essential public infrastructure): As artists, we need to find a way to make the arts an essential public infrastructure. It's a little bit like education and healthcare. Artists should be able to co-lead policies and innovations because we need to keep building bridges across various different types of disciplines and sectors—this is to build

Singaporeans' awareness about the arts, and to anchor the arts in the heart of Singaporean society.

It would be great if government policy could increase such interactions. This could both inform policy and shape the core Singaporean identity in the future. I hope that the arts in general—not just my company—will become a core infrastructure.

Meenakshy (on broad-based appeal): Arts in every home. That's one of our mottos. I think Singapore is ready for it. We're ready. We have the funding, we have the monies, and Singaporeans are at a place where we can afford it.

Yaziz (on leading the ecosystem): Our motto for Nadi is: where others choose to follow, some choose to lead. We want to be leaders of the arts, not just followers. That's what our motto is all about.

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Conclusion: Creating to Assert Our Singaporean Identity

Samuel: I also want to point out something very unique: every time we work and innovate, we actually assert our Singaporean identity as well.

Meenakshy: One of my hopes is for us to not be ashamed of what we are, that [our work] is Singaporean, to not be afraid to own that this is Singaporean. We don't have to be apologetic about it.

Indian dance is so rooted in tradition. But you know, this is also our tradition in Singapore. We should be proud of that. I recently met someone from New Zealand who is proudly owning our diasporic version of Indian dance. It's really wonderful. We had very similar conversations about history and how she's surviving her struggles.

I think this whole idea of identity in Singapore, trying to be so Singaporean—it's already happening, it's already happened. Our identity in our art form has already happened, and we have a clear identity. We have a clear culture.

I'd like to see every single Singaporean proud of our diasporic version of each culture. I think Sam, Yaziz and I, we are all in the traditional arts scene, we are shakers and movers. We're doing different things, innovating in different ways, presenting our art form to the public in a very relevant Singaporean way. And I hope that Singaporeans can someday turn around and look at us and all Singaporean arts as something to be proud of. To be really proud of the artists and the artwork that's coming out of Singaporean theatre, literature, in every scene, music and dance. I think we have a lot to be proud of. □

About the Panellists



Meenakshy Bhaskar, the Artistic Director of Bhaskar's Arts Academy and Advisor for Nirtyalaya Aesthetics Society, is the daughter of the late pioneering couple, Mr KP Bhaskar and Mrs. Santha Bhaskar. Having performed extensively from childhood through early adulthood as a Singaporean cultural ambassador, she has transitioned into the significant roles of teacher, choreographer, and mentor.

In 1996, Meenakshy was honoured with Singapore's Young Artist Award for dance. She remains passionately committed to promoting artistic excellence, encouraging collaboration, and championing inclusion within the dance community.

Her choreography, while influenced by her eclectic background, remains firmly grounded in the classical tradition of bharatanatyam. In 2015, she was commissioned by the Singapore Festival of Arts to co-choreograph the production *Returning*. Her recent choreographies include cross-cultural collaborations and multidisciplinary works such as *Radin Mas* (2023), *Marabu 3* (2022), and *Butterfly Lovers* (2021).



Dr. Samuel Wong is a musicologist, cultural leader, and visionary innovator in the field of Chinese music. As Co-Founder and Creative Director of The TENG Company, he has redefined the role of Chinese music in contemporary Singapore through research, performance, and social impact initiatives. He holds a PhD in Ethnomusicology from the University of Sheffield, where he was awarded dual scholarships for his research in Chinese orchestras.

Samuel has led groundbreaking projects such as The Forefathers Project, which preserves and reimagines Singapore's dialect-based music, and Music for Mindfulness, which integrates binaural beats with traditional instrumentation for wellness. His initiatives, including The Singaporean Composers Series and SMRT Train Chimes, showcase his ability to bridge heritage with innovation.

A respected educator and author, his works, including *The TENG Guide to the Chinese Orchestra*, are used in Singapore's national music syllabus. He has given keynote lectures at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Conservatorium van Amsterdam, shaping the future of Singapore's arts and culture.



Yaziz Hassan has been actively involved in traditional Malay music and culture since his early days in school. His passion for this musical genre has taken him to many cultural exchanges, performances, workshops and competitions, both locally and internationally. In his 37-year musical career, he has bagged close to 20 awards in dikir barat and traditional Malay music competitions.

As Co-Founder and Director of Nadi Singapura Ltd, Vice-President of Persatuan Pemusik Tradisional Melayu Singapura, and Advisor to several Malay arts groups, Yaziz has also brought traditional Malay music and culture to the international stage through performances and workshops in Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, Thailand, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, India, the Netherlands, Russia, Mexico and Ireland. In 2005, he conducted 700 students at the Singapore Drumming Festival and represented Singapore at the Commonwealth Youth Programme held in India, where more than 20 countries were involved. In 2024, Yaziz received the Steward of Intangible Cultural Heritage award for his contributions to Malay Music Traditions and the Making and Repairing of Malay Drums from Singapore's National Heritage Board.

Notes

1. For details, see Johnson, Barry. 1996. *Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems*. HRD Press.
2. The SG Culture Pass aims to help Singaporeans discover, enjoy, and engage with Singapore's vibrant arts and heritage scene. All Singaporeans aged 18 and above in 2025 will receive S\$100 worth of credits, which can be used to defray the cost of tickets to attend and participate in various local arts and heritage programmes. These include performances, exhibitions, experiences such as learning tours and participatory workshops, and other cultural offerings. Details can be found at <https://www.sg60.gov.sg/budget-initiatives/sg-culture-pass/>.