

Cultural Connections

Volume VII

2022

Learning, Unlearning, and Re-tooling for the Future

About Culture Academy Singapore

The Culture Academy Singapore (CA) champions the development of the next generation of Singapore's cultural leaders in the public and private sectors. CA's work focuses on three inter-related areas: Leadership and Capability Development, Research and Scholarship, and International Partnerships, which cut across all of CA's strategic priorities.

Cultural Connections is a journal published annually by Culture Academy Singapore to nurture thought leadership in cultural work in the public sector. This journal encourages scholarship and the exchange of ideas in the sector. It thus provides a platform for our professionals and administrators in the sector to publish alongside other thought leaders from the region and beyond.

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Contents

Foreword	7
Rosa Daniel	
Editor-in-Chief's Note	9
Thangamma Karthigesu	
The Future of Culture and the Arts in Singapore: A 30 Year Perspective	11
Professor Tommy Koh	
Thinking through Cultural Policy in Our Time	16
Professor Kwok Kian-Woon	
A Case for Building Singapore's Cultural Capacity and Capabilities	23
Keith Tan	
What is Our Compass? Some Guiding Principles for Cultural Organisations during Volatile Times	29
Low Sze Wee	

Contents

Dream and Critique: The Universal Appeal of South Korea's Contemporary Culture	34
Professor Ramon Pacheco Pardo	
Culture for Sustainable Living: Think Piece for A New Normal	39
Dr. Hilmar Farid	
Pause, Reset, Fast Forward? Thinking about the Arts in Singapore	46
Paul Tan	
In Case of Existential Threat, Redefine Your Existence: Checkpoint Theatre's Lessons from the Pandemic	51
Huzir Sulaiman	
Five Skills for the Future of Arts and Culture	58
Scott Smith	
The Role of Culture in the Post-Pandemic World	63
Yeoh Chee Yan	

Foreword

It has been almost three years since the pandemic disrupted everything we had then believed to be “the norm”. The Academy had closed the year 2019 with a very optimistic vision for the arts and culture, with an international conference on the theme of *The Future of Culture, Culture for the Future*. The futurists who had spoken at that conference had predicted a bright future for the arts despite the disruptions caused by technology and the geopolitical tensions caused by trade tariffs, increasing tension-ridden bilateral relations between the US and China, and increasing divides across the globe due to widening income gaps, greater intolerance, and the unprecedented rise of misinformation due to social media.

Two months later, in January 2020, COVID-19 took over everyone’s lives, livelihoods, and well-being, not to mention creating economic turmoil all over the world.

Since then, our arts and culture sector has shown remarkable resilience and adaptability through collaborative co-creation and active digitalisation. Supported by the Arts and Culture Resilience Package (ACRP) of about SGD75 million between 2020 and 2022, our artists and arts organisations continued to create art, celebrate our cultural heritage, and deeply engage audiences through digital means when physical activities were not possible.

Our arts companies have digitalised their content and experimented with virtual offerings. Our museums have also experimented with virtual festivals and outreach programmes including interactive virtual exhibitions. Our national orchestras have reached out to new audiences virtually, bringing classical music to the people and helping to bring what was once considered as being only for the elite to the masses, bringing joy and solace at a time of fear, mental stress and economic uncertainties. With borders closed, we reached out to, and engaged new international audiences through digital platforms. Over the last few months, since our borders were re-opened and restrictions almost fully relaxed, audiences have been enjoying the return of physical activities across all art forms and practices.

As we move from operationally ready and crisis mode to COVID-resilience, this issue of *Cultural Connections* looks at how we continue to build on our strengths and forge forward confidently in the year ahead. What new skills are necessary to enable us to operate and survive in this new environment?

(Continued on next page)

What will the role of the arts, culture and heritage be in the three new economies—the green, creative and care sectors?

As I look back, the pandemic, while taking its toll on peoples' lives and the stability of businesses in the sector, has also reinforced the value of the arts on societal and individual wellbeing. Many of us will no doubt recall instances when the sound of music, the rhythm of dance and movement, and the solace of the written word provided comfort and healing during the darkest moments of the past two years.

I hope you will enjoy reading the 10 essays written by our local and international thought leaders that discuss various aspects of **LEARNING, UNLEARNING AND RE-TOOLING FOR THE FUTURE**.

Rosa Daniel (Mrs)

Dean, Culture Academy Singapore

Editor-in-Chief's Note

This issue of *Cultural Connections* explores the theme of **LEARNING, UNLEARNING AND RE-TOOLING FOR THE FUTURE** through the twin tracks of **Creative Economy**, and **Building Cohesive and Liveable Societies**.

The disruptions, new opportunities and challenges brought on by technology, the pandemic, and the on-going geopolitical tensions caused by the crisis in Ukraine and frosty US-China relations have all contributed to greater uncertainty locally, regionally and globally. What would the arts and culture's role, contributions and value be in this new normal? What needs to take shape for the sector to remain resilient, valuable and sustainable? What Blue Oceans are out there for the sector to swim in and reinvent itself so that it can take advantage of this rebirth after a major pandemic? Our esteemed writers try to answer these questions and more in this issue.

Professor Tommy Koh, Ambassador-at-Large at Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Founding Chairman of National Arts Council, and Honorary Chairman of National Heritage Board, opens this edition recounting the 30-year journey of the sector, and how it has and will continue to thrive against all odds, thanks to Singapore's visionary policymakers, government initiatives and the arts and culture community that helped to shape and advance the development of the local arts, culture and heritage scene.

Professor Kwok Kian-Woon, Professor of Sociology, Associate Provost (Student Life) of Singapore's Nanyang Technological University, and newly-appointed Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive of University of the Arts Singapore, discusses three fundamental issues that cultural policymakers may address to truly enable Singapore's arts and culture scene to flourish. He argues that even as Singapore progresses in a challenging new era, it is imperative that our cultural policy evolves to embrace a deeper and broader understanding of the arts and culture.

Coming from an adjacent sector, Mr. Keith Tan, Chief Executive Officer of Singapore Tourism Board, discusses what he believes the role of arts and culture can be in the new normal and discusses the notion of cultural capability and its intangible and unlimited value in bolstering our national economy, global brand positioning and social cohesion.

Complementing Keith Tan's essay, Mr. Low Sze Wee, Chief Executive Officer of Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre, discusses the complex dynamics of the past decade, especially during the pandemic, encompassing destabilising shifts in the global and local socio-economic, digital, health, and environmental arenas, and how these scenarios have birthed a new age of change. He identifies four principles which can help guide cultural organisations through turbulent times.

Professor Ramon Pacheco Pardo, Professor of International Relations, King's College London, and KF-VUB Korea Chair, Brussels School of Governance, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, discusses the important

role that a nation's creative economy can play in the new normal for the extension of soft power. Using South Korea as an example, he illustrates how the dynamism of the Korean cultural economic model and the contemporary Korean understanding of topical issues have enabled its creative industries to develop diverse cultural products with a global appeal.

Dr. Hilmar Farid, Director General for Culture at Indonesia's Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, emphasises the need to prioritise sustainability in our development initiatives and practices worldwide, with locally-specific, culture-based policies that promote economic resilience, cultural diversity, environmental health and social equity.

Looking back at the past two years, Mr. Paul Tan, PhD candidate at Nanyang Technological University, and former Deputy Chief Executive at the National Arts Council, reflects on the aspects of the arts that endure even as artists, audiences, and the community that supports art-making confront the future.

And to share how an arts company survived the ravages of the pandemic, Mr. Huzir Sulaiman, co-founder and Joint Artistic Director of Checkpoint Theatre, shares how Checkpoint Theatre innovated, bravely navigated new opportunities and reinvented itself to remain sustainable, relevant and resilient in response to the pandemic.

Rapid change has taken place worldwide within the arts, culture and heritage sector due to evolving infrastructure, technology, attitudes, and audience demographics and engagement. Referring to this evolving landscape, Mr. Scott Smith, Managing Partner of Changeist, Amsterdam, and the co-author of an international study on the Future of Culture, talks about five skills that the global arts and cultural sector must learn in order to thrive in the new economy.

We round up this issue with a thought piece by Ms. Yeoh Chee Yan, Senior Advisor to Singapore's Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, and Chairman of the National Heritage Board. She discusses the future of the arts and culture sector in post-pandemic Singapore, and explores the roles that arts and culture can play as Singapore re-emerges stronger from the pandemic.

I hope you will enjoy reading this issue as much as the team had in bringing it to you.

Thangamma Karthigesu (Ms)

Director (Leadership and Capability Development) and Editor-in-Chief
Culture Academy Singapore

The Future of Culture and the Arts in Singapore: A 30 Year Perspective

Professor Tommy Koh

Ambassador-at-Large, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Founding Chairman, National Arts Council
Honorary Chairman, National Heritage Board

This opening essay by Professor Tommy Koh recalls the Singaporean policymakers and government initiatives that helped to shape and advance the development of the local cultural and arts industry over the past three decades, and expresses hope for its future.

30 years ago, many people criticised Singapore as a cultural desert. However, no one can make such a statement today. Singapore now has a vibrant arts scene, and it would not be wrong to say that Singapore has been transformed from a cultural desert to a cultural oasis. This essay will explain how that transformation was accomplished, and will conclude with my view of the future.

Government Leadership

In 1990, after 31 years as Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew voluntarily stepped down. Mr Goh Chok Tong succeeded him and became our second Prime Minister. It was Prime Minister (PM) Goh who decided that it was time for Singapore to develop a neglected sector, that of culture and the arts. He also wanted to liberalise our very strict censorship laws and policies.

PM Goh chose a brilliant young Minister, George Yeo, to helm the newly-created Ministry for Information and the Arts (MITA). Minister Yeo created three statutory boards to carry out the functions of the Ministry: National Arts Council (NAC) in 1991, the National Heritage Board (NHB) in 1993, and the National Library Board (NLB) in

1995. He asked me to be the founding chairman of NAC. In his nine years as Minister for Information and the Arts from 1990 to 1999, George Yeo transformed Singapore culturally.

During that period, the fifth President of Singapore, Ong Teng Cheong, was also a champion of culture and the arts. Before his presidency, he chaired the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts whose 1988 report served as a road map which guided Singapore's cultural and arts development over the following decades. The report recommended the establishment of the NAC and the NHB. It also recommended the building of Esplanade-Theatres on the Bay, and the expansion of our network of museums.

There is a saying in Chinese that translates as: "when we drink water, we must remember its source." Certainly, when we enjoy the arts in Singapore, we must remember Ong Teng Cheong, Goh Chok Tong and George Yeo, and their indispensable contributions for which we owe a debt of gratitude.

Building World-Class Infrastructure

The government has since devoted substantial resources to improving the infrastructure for the arts. The building of Esplanade-Theatres on the Bay has given Singapore a world-class venue for the performing arts. Its concert hall's excellent acoustics have attracted many of the world's most famous orchestras to perform there. In the same way, the building of the National Gallery Singapore (NGS) has provided us with a visual arts venue which

compares favourably with the best in the world. Esplanade and NGS have undoubtedly enhanced Singapore's reputation in the cultural world.

Supporting our Artists and Flagship Companies

There is no art without artists. For that reason, at that time, our number one priority was to help our artists, young and old. We wanted to raise their status in society, and create an environment in which it would be possible for them to make a living as artists. We gave them grants to hold their exhibitions and concerts, and offered scholarships to our young artists to study abroad. Because of the high cost of rent in Singapore, we had to provide affordable housing to our artists and arts groups. We introduced the Cultural Medallion and the Young Artist Awards. A small elite group of artists was given the established Meritorious Service Medal. In these many ways, we tried to help our artists.

When I was the chairman of the NAC, we pursued a two-prong policy in awarding grants. The first prong was to nurture a number of flagship companies such as the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, the Singapore Chinese Orchestra, the Singapore Dance Theatre, and several others. The second was to support promising companies such as Theatreworks, the Necessary Stage, the Practice Theatre, the Singapore Lyric Opera, the T'ang Quartet, and many others. We also supported young artists and those who were engaged in bold and experimental art. I was the patron of

The Substation, and worked closely with Kuo Pao Kun and his successors in making it a home for all artists, especially the young and the experimental.

Education in the Arts

When I was the chairman of NAC, another very important aspect of our work concerned education in the arts. We have two art colleges: the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and the LASALLE College of the Arts. As NAC's chairman, I received an offer from the Ministry of Education (MOE) which proposed the provision of financial aid to the two colleges. However, the amount offered was only half of that given to students in our polytechnics. George Yeo urged me to accept the offer, but I rejected it because it implied that an arts student is only half as valuable as a poly student. It took us many years before we succeeded in convincing MOE to offer the two colleges the same financial support it offered the polytechnics. I am very pleased with the recent decision of the government to ask the two art colleges to collaborate in establishing a university for the arts in Singapore. [Editor-in-Chief's Note: As of 30 August 2022, it has been announced that University of the Arts Singapore (UAS) will accept applications from 2023, and open its doors in August 2024.]

In 2003, the founding of the National University of Singapore's Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music was another excellent achievement, offering music students an abundance of educational, performing, compositional and collaborative opportunities. Additionally, MOE decided to establish a high school, the School of The Arts (SOTA), with a special focus on the arts. Thus far, SOTA has been a great success.

At NAC, we were able to obtain money from the Tote Board to enable every student in Singapore to have the experience of attending a concert and an exhibition. We were also able to bring artists and art groups to perform in our schools. Over the decades, this has helped to nurture a love for the arts in our students, and to expand the audience base for the arts in Singapore.

Cultural Philanthropy

When I first became chairman of NAC, there was no such thing as cultural philanthropy. When I approached business leaders for help, they replied that support for culture and the arts was not on their corporate agenda. In the past 30 years, NAC and NHB have worked very hard to change the mindset of our friends in the private sector. I am happy to say that cultural philanthropy is now well supported by our private sector, collectors and wealthy citizens.

Expanding the Museum Network

During my tenure as the chairman of NHB, we built four new museums: the Asian Civilizations Museum, the Peranakan Museum, the World War II Museum at the Ford Factory, and Reflections at Bukit Chandu. In my first year as chairman, I found, to my disappointment, that collectively,

our museums attracted only half a million visitors. I was determined to raise the number of visitors to one million in three years, two million in six years, and three million in nine years. My objective was to make our museums accessible to the people, and not just the elite.

I am happy to say that we succeeded in achieving our ambition. I was also very happy that we managed to produce a few blockbuster exhibitions. All this would not have been possible without the invaluable contributions of Michael Koh, Kenson Kwok, Kwok Kian Chow, Lee Chor Lin, Pit Kuan Wah, Thangamma Karthigesu, Loh Heng Noi, and Tresnawati Prihadi.

Censorship

The first censorship review committee, which reviewed and determined Singapore's censorship policies and practices, was set up in 1981, and chaired by the then Minister of State for Law and Home Affairs, Professor S Jayakumar. In 1991, I was asked to chair the second censorship review committee. Subsequent review committees were set up in 2002, chaired by Liu Thai Ker, then chairman of the National Arts Council, as well as in 2009, chaired by Goh Yew Lin.

My conclusion is that we will always have some censorship on such emotional issues as race and religion, while, on other matters, we have become an increasingly tolerant society. The trajectory is towards a more open and tolerant Singapore. The trend is to give our artists a larger space for creativity.

Art is Essential to Life

I believe that art is essential to life. During the circuit breaker, many of us survived the isolation and maintained our mental health by reading books, listening to music, watching theatre and dance on our screens, and listening to stories on our radios. We do not live by rice or roti alone; we also need nourishment for our hearts and souls. I believe that culture and the arts provide such nourishment.

A Bright Future

I am very optimistic about the future. We have a new generation of young Singaporeans who are well educated, well-travelled, and much more culture-loving than their parents are. Whenever I attend a concert in Singapore, I am happy to note the large number of young people in the audience. I am also very encouraged by the public's support for our writers and poets, playwrights and composers, actors and dancers, singers and instrumentalists. Singaporeans are globally-minded but rooted in Singapore. This is reflected in their cultural preferences. The future of culture and the arts in Singapore is a very bright one. □

About the Author



Tommy KOH is currently Emeritus Professor of Law at NUS; Ambassador-At-Large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and Chairman of the International Advisory Panel of the Centre for International Law at the NUS.

He had served as Dean of the Faculty of Law of NUS, Singapore's Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York, Ambassador to the United States of America, High Commissioner to Canada and Ambassador to Mexico. He was President of the Third UN Conference on the Law of the Sea. He was also the Chairman of the Preparatory Committee for and the Main Committee of the UN Conference on Environment and Development (Earth Summit). He was the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy to Russia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. He was the founding Chairman of the National Arts Council, founding Executive Director of the Asia-Europe Foundation and former Chairman of the National Heritage Board. He was Singapore's Chief Negotiator in negotiating an agreement to establish diplomatic relations between Singapore and China. He was also Singapore's Chief Negotiator for the US-Singapore Free Trade Agreement. He acted as Singapore's Agent in two legal disputes with Malaysia. He has chaired two dispute panels for the WTO. He is the Co-Chairman of the China-Singapore Forum and the Japan-Singapore Symposium.

Professor Koh has received awards from the Governments of Singapore, Chile, Finland, France, Japan, Netherlands, Spain and the United States. Professor Koh received the Champion of the Earth Award from UNEP and the inaugural President's Award for the Environment from Singapore. He was conferred with honorary doctoral degrees in law by Yale and Monash Universities. Harvard University conferred on him the Great Negotiator Award in 2014.

Thinking through Cultural Policy in our Time

Professor Kwok Kian-Woon

Professor of Sociology, Associate Vice-President (Wellbeing) of Nanyang Technological University
Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive, University of the Arts Singapore

Pragmatism has long underpinned Singapore's policymaking. However, as Singapore progresses in a challenging new era, it is imperative that our cultural policy is grounded in a broader and deeper understanding of the arts and culture in human life and contemporary society. Professor Kwok Kian-Woon discusses three fundamental issues that cultural policymakers may address in order to truly enable our cultural life to flourish.

What is Culture?

Ploughing through the many official documents on cultural policy in Singapore, I am sometimes pleasantly surprised by the language—the choice of words, the tone of voice, the play of ideas—that is used. The opening lines of *The Report of the Arts and Culture Strategic Review* (2012) were clichéd, referring to “our journey so far” from “fishing village and sleepy outpost” to “dynamic metropolis”—surely a caricature of our complex history. Its next section on “reaffirming the value of arts and culture”, however, drew a quotation from Aristotle to suggest that they “have a unique place in human society” and “differentiate us from animals”, although these terms “have no universally accepted definition”. The report then recalled that that in 1978, “the then-newly appointed Acting Minister for Culture, Mr Ong Teng Cheong, grappled with the question of what culture was” [and] Mr Ong said, “The library gave me some 300 different interpretations as to what culture is”.

Tolerance of ambiguity may not be one of our stronger qualities. The term “culture” is elastic, and its fabric of meanings can be stretched and wrung to serve specific purposes at hand (not least in the formulation of *cultural* policies), but that does not preclude us from clarifying and extending its uses in any instance. We, especially those of us who work in the “*cultural* sector” (and that must include education), can empathise with Mr Ong, who might have earnestly attempted to clarify the meaning of that single word when he contemplated his new ministerial portfolio. Most ministries of culture in countries with secular constitutions are officially concerned with “culture” in relation to the historical context of the nation-state, projecting a vision of its citizenry as a people and addressing practical needs. Hence, in the decades before Mr Ong inquired into what the word “culture” meant, political leaders already held firm ideas on what a desirable nascent national culture should—and *should not*—look like, as reflected in the “anti-yellow culture” campaign (Lim 2019).

Culture and Policy Making

A decade later, Mr Ong was appointed deputy prime minister, and he led the review documented in *The Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts* (1989), which ushered in a series of major initiatives in promoting the arts and heritage (Wong 2019). By that time, there were no apparent definitional difficulties. The report straightforwardly opened with the lines: “Culture and the arts mould the way of life, the customs and

psyche of a people. They give a nation a unique character.” They serve four purposes: “(a) broaden our minds and deepen our sensitivities; (b) improve the general quality of life; (c) strengthen our social bond[s]; [and] (d) contribute to our tourist and entertainment industry”.

This framework, which ascribes “culture and the arts” a fundamental role in shaping collective life and articulates their social benefits and economic contributions, has been demonstrably durable over the decades, allowing for restatements with varying emphases and elaborations in the face of new priorities. A general pattern in cultural policy includes the following elements: a high-level statement on the importance of culture and the arts in human life and society, a profound concern with “national identity” and “social cohesion”, a practical concern with economic growth, and a set of recommendations for implementation. Beneath the aura of coherence in such policy documents, one may detect a “split personality” that is being held together: on the one hand, a deeply aspirational commitment to personal development and collective life and, on the other hand, a patently realist view of economic imperatives.

In a series of studies, Lily Kong (2000, 2012, and 2019) analysed the trajectory of cultural policy in Singapore. Her 2000 article highlighted how “economic and socio-agendas” are constantly “negotiated”, and how “the hegemony of economic development is supported by the ideology and language of pragmatism and globalisation”. This analysis was further developed in her 2012 paper on the emphasis on the role of the arts and culture in the “creative economy” following the global financial crisis and the rise of “creative cities”, surpassing the rather rudimentary thinking about the contributions of the arts and culture to the “tourist and entertainment industry” in the 1989 report.

The 2012 report of the strategic review (see Hoe 2019), which was led by Mr Lee Tzu Yang, noted that “in a world that has become much more complex than in 1978, culture has not become simpler to define” and “it may be more fruitful to describe what arts and culture *do*” rather than to deal with definitions”. “[The] arts and culture enrich our souls and add meaning to our lives. They exercise our creativity, stretch our imagination, and strike a chord with our feelings. They connect us to the past, help us to dream our future, and define who we are. They develop us as a whole person [sic] – as full human beings”.

Stating that Singapore stood “at the brink of another transformation of the cultural landscape”, the report evinced a new-found awareness of the forces of globalisation, engendering the need to “secure our identity amid the multiplicity of global influences today” and “boosting Singapore’s competitiveness”. Highlighting this report in her 2019 (312-314) study on the policy directions geared towards “creative industries”, Kong (2019, 312-314) argued that although “creative economy policies” remained in place, “they appear to be joined by a new emphasis on the social value of the arts and culture” and the “language of... cultural industries is notably muted”. The report highlighted a shift towards bringing “arts and culture to everyone, everywhere, every day” and reaching new audiences “for whom economic growth is not always a primary goal”. This apparent re-emphasis on socio-cultural values led Kong to conclude: “Ironically, turning our gaze that way may address more foundational issues that, in the long run, could support a truly robust creative economy”.

The pendulum swings one way and then the other as Singapore and the world move into the third decade of the twenty-first century. Socio-cultural

and economic agendas, as Kong's work suggests, are not mutually exclusive, and we cannot avoid addressing "foundational issues" and adopting a holistic approach. This task is more urgent than ever today against the backdrop of the global—indeed planetary—experience of the COVID-19 pandemic from early 2020, with its unprecedented speed, scope and scale of disruption and devastation. As the terms "post-COVID", "post-pandemic", and "new normal" emerge in everyday discourse, one senses a collective desire to think that a once mysterious virus that wreaked untold damage has been tamed, that Science has once again triumphed over Nature, and that we can finally return to normalcy. But what would such a return mean? Would socio-cultural agendas be sacrificed in a new era of economic hardship and renewed Cold War politics tragically epitomised by the Russia-Ukraine War?

I sense that we—leaders, professionals, educators, artists, intellectuals, and citizens—might still not have fully fathomed the precious lessons of the pandemic and how our lives and policies must *fundamentally* change. Political leaders have had to do this, and Mr Lawrence Wong (2022), the new deputy prime minister of Singapore, has offered a vision of a renewed "social compact". Not surprisingly, the "Forward Singapore" roadmap covers key pillars: the economy and employment, education and lifelong learning, health and social support, home and living environment, environmental sustainability and "Singapore identity". Where do "the arts and culture", which are not explicitly mentioned, figure in this vision? The short answer must be that they undergird *every* pillar, and the makers of cultural policy will do well to understand and articulate their *pivotal* role in a new era, and in dialogue with citizens and especially artists, arts educators, and cultural workers. This is a collective task, and for my part

here, I will only sketch out three foundational issues that have been either neglected or only hinted at in the evolution of cultural policy in Singapore. It may be something of a luxury to engage in academic discourse, but I think it is worthwhile to strengthen our cognitive foundations as we grapple with the many practical issues.

The Way Forward

First, once again, we must think anew about "culture" and "the arts". In his foreword to a volume on cultural policies and institutions in Singapore, Janadas Devan (2019, xii-xiv) briefly reviewed the etymology of the word "culture" and its official uses, noting that "we have long oscillated between culture as a way of life, as synonymous almost with civilisation... and the other idea of culture as encompassing artistic activities and personal cultivation". He concluded that "The cultural choices we make—including how we define the word 'culture'—are ultimately political choices; and the essence of politics is contestation. For this reason, there has always been and will always be... a tension between the arts and the state. The state has its reasons... as does the arts their own genius". Recognising the grain of truth in this line of thinking, however, I wonder if "culture" can be too easily reduced to a matter of power politics and "the arts" becomes primarily subservient to economic necessity. I see merit in recalling the longstanding ethnographic definition of culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by [persons as members] of society" (Tylor 1871, 1). This definition also complements the anthropological idea of *material* culture that is organically tied to the everyday activities of human beings exercising their capabilities and creating

objects in the process of sustaining and improving their living conditions.

In this sense, what we call “the arts”—as embodied in artifacts, texts, and performances—must also properly be regarded as an integral part of material life, transformed by the capabilities and skills of human agents. Hence, we must avoid any simplistic critique of “economic agendas” in cultural policy, including protecting livelihoods, generating employment, and enhancing employability. At the same time, artistic creation has the characteristic of *transcending* purely practical or utilitarian concerns. For example, there are those who regard soccer as “*the beautiful game*”, fully appreciative of its special aesthetic aspects and its exacting standards of excellence without primarily caring about which team wins in a competition; failure is tolerated, and the losing team can be well-loved and command loyalty. This is what makes the game akin to an artistic activity, a *performance*, rather than a betting sport, offering us a way of thinking that is already suggested in some cultural policies. There will be winners and losers in the creative economy in the short term, but cultural industries cannot flourish in the long run without the support of a multi-ethnic population that lives and breathes in a culturally vibrant environment.

Second, a more expansive notion of culture must contend with the radically new social and material conditions that have come to the fore, most dramatically during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. The health crisis, as many have pointed out, intersected with other major crises. The zoonotic transmission of viruses has its origins in the environmental crisis, and the pandemic has exposed and exacerbated the socio-economic inequality (including the digital divide), political polarisation, and failure of leadership in many countries, even in the developed West. Indeed,

the very idea of the “wholeness” of culture—and the experience of sharing a *common* culture—has come into question at a time of pervasive volatility and divisiveness. But the *fragmentation* of culture is also rooted in the massive global transformation in the early twentieth century, in our “fractured times”. As Eric Hobsbawm (2014, xii) highlights: “The development of societies in which a techno-industrialised economy has drenched our lives in universal, constant and omnipresent experiences of information and cultural production—of sound, image, word, memory and symbols—is historically unprecedented.”

In terms of material culture, the “objects” that are produced under such conditions are “de-materialised”, and yet they shape worldviews and social relations indelibly. Extensive inequality and intensive polarisation, in turn, engender a “reality crisis” or a “crisis of truth”, as reflected in the fake news, conspiracy theories, and falsehoods that have proliferated in recent years. Here, too, we must ask how artists and cultural workers can play a significant role, for a key feature of the arts, and this is allied with intellectual life, is the need for critical evaluation of multiple interpretations. As Denis Dutton (2009, 54) puts it, “Wherever artistic forms are found, they exist alongside some kind of critical language of judgment and appreciation, simple, or, more likely, elaborate.”

Third, I return to the high-level statements in our cultural policies that reaffirm the arts as a uniquely human phenomenon and aspire to support our people in their personal development and collective life. We must take these articulations—and the larger socio-cultural agendas—*seriously* and not cynically write them off as mere rhetoric to dress up the economic agendas. It is not in the typical policy document in a famously pragmatic nation-state that one

would find references to the arts and culture having everything to do with “our minds”, “our sensitivities”, “our social bonds”, “our souls”, “our imagination” or “our feelings”. Indeed, what would it mean to take the idea of developing ourselves as “whole persons” and “full human beings” *seriously*? It would entail a perspective close to what Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum have called the “capabilities approach”, which has been adopted in the Human Development Reports of the United Nations Development Programme.

The “central human capabilities” include “sense, imagination, and thought”, that is, “being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason—and to do these things in a ‘truly human’ way informed and cultivated by an adequate education” (Nussbaum 2017, 215). Here, I would add the capabilities of self-reflection and intercultural understanding, which place value on a predisposition “for working *with* and working *out* difference” (Sasitharan, 2019, 18), so much lacking and so sorely needed in multi-ethnic Singapore and many parts of the world. And again, would the development of these human capabilities not only enhance the creativity of a people, but also build social cohesion and resilience, all of which are preconditions for sustainable economic development?

And where does “politics” figure in this rethinking of cultural policy? The economist Mariana Mazzucato (2021, 7-8) has criticised the conventional portrayal of government “as a clunky bureaucratic machine that cannot innovate”, and she advocates a bold “mission-oriented approach” in which the “scale of reinvention calls for a new narrative and a new vocabulary for our political economy”. This requires ambition and a commitment to inclusiveness, “involving many

value creators” in a time of crisis, which is “exactly the moment to reimagine what type of society we want to build, and the capabilities and capacities we need to get us there”. Artists will continue to make art under the most inhospitable conditions. The question is not whether the government has a role in the arts and culture, but what kinds of “value-creating” role its agencies can play in a truly innovative partnership with non-governmental value creators, especially artists and art groups, who in exercising autonomy, as Kuo Pao Kun (2008 [1999], 197) urges, “must also endeavour to develop a commanding fortitude, a deep sense of discipline and responsibility as well as courageous critical integrity”. This has important implications for arts education and demands a corresponding set of skills and attitudes among our arts policymakers and administrators.

Pragmatism, which has been defined as “a focus on what works in practice rather than principle” (Menon 2021, 30), has arguably served Singapore well for more than half a century. Can practice and principle truly be divorced from each other? We need to think our way through the complex crises of our time, both realistically and imaginatively, and it is in the realm of the arts that the back-and-forth *interplay* between reality and make-believe is creatively enacted, opening new ways of looking at the world. The essence of politics may well be contestation, but politics is the art of the possible, and here we are reminded of the words of Max Weber (2020 [1919], 115): “Politics is a slow and difficult drilling of holes into hard board, done with both passion and clear-sightedness. To achieve what is possible in the world, one must constantly reach for the impossible”. □

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A Case for Building Singapore's Cultural Capacity and Capabilities

Keith Tan

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Cultural expression, across its myriad forms, is a vital and unique reflection of individual, community and national identity, and yet is easily taken for granted. Keith Tan delves into the notion of cultural capability and its intangible and unlimited value in bolstering our national economy, global brand positioning and social cohesion.

In his poem “*After the Fire*”, Singaporean-Australian poet, Boey Kim Cheng recounts the sombre memory of collecting his late father’s ashes at the crematorium. This strange experience prods the poet to consider the role his father had played in his life; the ashes represent “all that you were, our lives in you.” His father may well be dead and cremated, existing only in the ashes in the urn. But he is also very much alive and present in the poet’s life:

*I can see you in heaven
materializing from the urn,
the scraps and dust
assembled into a ladder
of bone and flesh, up
on your feet, the limp gone,
dusting the ash off,
and ready to walk
back into our lives.*

Boey wrote this poem in response to his migration to Australia, as a way of invoking the presence of his father as he sought out a new life in a different country. It is an intimate and personal poem, but it resonates with me as a middle-aged Singaporean who grew up in a pre-digital 20th century Singapore, while adapting to the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. Everything around me urges me to look towards the future, which undoubtedly is vital for

Singapore’s prosperity and place in the world. But in our onward journey, what memories do we, as a nation, need to hold close to our hearts? What values ought to guide the choices that we make? What elements of our identity do we need to protect and to celebrate?

In February 2021, the French government designated bookstores as “essential businesses”, together with pharmacies and grocery shops. This unusual move arose after bookstores, like most other businesses, were closed during France’s first two COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020. However, a poll conducted during France’s second lockdown found that 52% of the population considered bookstores as “essential businesses”.

Why did the French consider bookstores as essential as pharmacies and groceries? We can ascribe much of the reason to the French passion for living a “cultured life”—a passion which perhaps few other societies share to the same degree. But even so, I wonder if the French were onto something.

Culture is a broad and amorphous term. But in its broadest sense, it reflects who we are as a society and population, expressed through art, music, storytelling in all its forms, architecture, design, dance, and even our culinary heritage. It is easy to take “culture” for granted; after all, it is easy to download a book or to listen to a piece of music on the Internet, without giving thought to the capacity of a community to produce that content, or the capabilities needed to give expression to that content. And when we take our cultural capacity and capabilities for granted, we risk devaluing and losing them altogether.

However, measuring or explaining the value that cultural capability brings to our society and economy is very difficult, unlike, say, “digital

capabilities” or “manufacturing capabilities”. The French recognised this in their designation of bookstores as essential services, but few other governments followed their example. When we use standard economic metrics such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and labour productivity to measure the contributions of “cultural services”, it is no wonder that culture comes up short. Those metrics are not enough.

Singapore’s future prosperity hinges on our economy’s ability to tap into some key “megatrends”. These megatrends include the rise of Asia (and especially Southeast Asia), digitalisation, urbanisation, and sustainability. In order for policymakers to appreciate the need for building “cultural capabilities” more holistically, we need to explain how strengthening these capabilities can support our economy’s efforts to ride these megatrends and differentiate Singapore from our competitors. As a start, I offer three questions to consider.

First, How Can Cultural Capability Support and Strengthen the Creative and Innovative Capacity of the Singapore Economy?

Economic prosperity in the 19th and 20th centuries was derived from developing good skills in repetitive tasks. Singaporean companies will need new skills to stand out in the 21st century. For example, they will need to anticipate and meet the conscious and unconscious demands of urbanised

consumers around Asia, most of whom will be digitally savvy and environmentally and socially conscious. To do so, they will need to keep raising their creative and innovative capacities, to adapt to new demands and challenges that will arise faster than ever before.

Indeed, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) *Skills for 2030* report (OECD 2019) describes how trends such as globalisation and technological advancements will continue to disrupt and upend conventional jobs and skills. The report goes on to describe the growing importance of “social and emotional skills, such as empathy, self-awareness, respect for others and the ability to communicate”. Other key skills include “emotional intelligence, integrity and ethical responsibility, adaptability and resilience... cultural sensitivity and sense-making... creativity and imagination.”

Successful companies in the 21st century will need people who possess these skills in abundance—people who demonstrate empathy and sensitivity to different cultural norms and practices, and who can build bridges across different interest groups. These skills will find their expression in many different jobs. But, above all, I believe that attention to sensitive, user-centric design will differentiate leaders from everyone else. Well-designed, user-centric products, services, applications, publications and experiences will enable our companies to stand out amid the pack, all competing for the attention and wallets of billions of consumers. Of course, there are many ways to build these skills. But I believe that strengthening our cultural capabilities (not just in school, but throughout our lives) can make a meaningful difference, by deepening our sense of curiosity about other cultures, strengthening our capacity for empathy, and sharpening our attention to user-centric detail.

Second, How Can Cultural Capability Strengthen the Global Brand Positioning of Singapore as a Vibrant Global-Asia City?

By nearly all rankings and indices, Singapore is regarded as a leading “Global City” because of its physical and digital connectivity, its role in global flows of finance, trade, ideas and people, and the presence of thousands of international and regional companies that have headquartered themselves in Singapore. This position has been hard-won through the efforts of many government agencies and their partners, and we cannot take it for granted. Cities rise and fall, and can be eclipsed by others imitating their success.

Cultural capability, however, adds a distinct dimension that is much harder to duplicate. Other cities can dangle business incentives, build roads, airports and industrial estates, and establish museums, galleries, theatres, and creative enclaves, but they will need content and people to make these buildings and precincts come alive. Singapore stands out because we are not a “mono-cultural” city. As a home and host to many different cultures, Singapore has a unique advantage few other cities share. Strengthening our ability to tap into the rich cultural capital present in Singapore (and our immediate region in Southeast Asia) can sharpen Singapore’s distinctiveness and attractiveness for businesses,

as well as for Singaporeans and visitors. After all, Singapore should not look or feel like any other major city. But we will need strong cultural capabilities to differentiate us.

In fact, according to TripAdvisor (TripAdvisor 2019), the most popular tourist attractions in major global hub cities are, invariably, attractions that reflect the unique cultural and historical heritage of that city. The National Gallery and the Churchill War Rooms in London, the National 9/11 Memorial and Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, the Musee d’Orsay in Paris, and the Shinjuku Gyoen National Garden and the Samurai Museum in Tokyo are some examples. To strengthen our position as a Global-Asia hub city in the 21st century, we therefore need to extend our cultural roots to develop richer, more distinctive content and forms of expression that enrich our vibrancy, differentiate Singapore, and elevate Singapore’s global brand.

Third, How Can Cultural Capability Strengthen the Cohesiveness of Singapore’s Diverse, Multi-Cultural Society?

In 1972, then Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam sent a trenchant warning about the risks of Singapore’s growth as a “Global City” in a well-known speech

to the Singapore Press Club. He explained the importance of positioning Singapore as a “Global City”, but also warned that:

“Laying the economic infrastructure of a Global City may turn out to be the easiest of the many tasks involved in creating such a city. But the political, social and cultural adjustments such a city would require to enable men to live happy and useful lives in them may demand a measure of courage, imagination and intelligence which may or may not be beyond the capacity of its citizens. For those people who cannot develop the necessary capacities, the Global City may turn out to be another monster—another necropolis” (Rajaratnam 1972).

Rajaratnam foresaw that Singapore would face daunting societal and cultural shifts in its journey towards becoming a truly Global City. These warnings remain no less true even now as Singapore contemplates its place in a 21st century world at risk of fragmentation and deglobalisation.

I believe that strengthening Singapore’s cultural capabilities provides one of the crucial “adjustments” that Rajaratnam foresaw as necessary for Singapore’s future success. All around the world, governments are facing ever-greater challenges with regards to governing effectively. In fact, according to the 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer (Edelman 2022), nearly half of the population surveyed in 28 countries consider “government” a “dividing force” in society. Trust in Singapore’s government institutions has remained high, but Singapore is not immune to the forces at

work in other countries that have steadily eroded trust between different communities of people, and between governments and their populations.

Strong cultural capabilities can promote empathy and trust across different communities in Singapore, and can mitigate the forces that would otherwise divide and alienate us. The products and experiences of our cultural economy, including plays, visual arts, music, films, literature, and even our hawker centres, provide a way for different communities to communicate, collaborate and find common ground and shared values. We need more of these products at a time when, left on their own, people instinctively retreat into their own echo chambers and sub-cultures. We need strong cultural capabilities in order to build bridges and strengthen societal resilience and coherence in an age of fragmentation. Singapore’s rich, vibrant multiculturalism is therefore a precious asset that all of us must celebrate and safeguard.

In January 2020, on the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic, former Cabinet Minister George Yeo delivered a sobering speech on the occasion of the 24th Gordon Arthur Ransome Oration. Entitled “Human Solidarity in a Fragmenting World” (Yeo 2020), Yeo described how trends such as social media “revolution”, disinformation, and income and wealth inequality were causing societies to fragment and become increasingly dysfunctional, perhaps becoming the “necropolis” that Rajaratnam feared. Yeo concluded his speech with a characteristically humane call to action: “the more complex the world becomes, the more we must affirm that which is at the core of our humanity.”

As a policymaker charged with an economic mandate, I take these words to mean that my work is not just about growing our economy and income levels. It is also about growing our creative and innovative capabilities, elevating Singapore's place in the world, and defending the resilience and coherence of our

society. Singapore's distinct and rich culture provides a deep reservoir for these efforts, but we must keep growing this capacity while also strengthening our capabilities to tap into it, so that the stories of Singapore and who we are will keep on inspiring future generations of Singaporeans. □

About the Author



Keith Tan was appointed as the Chief Executive of the Singapore Tourism Board in late 2018. He has held appointments in the Ministries of Defence, Home Affairs, and Trade and Industry, as well as in the Public Service Division and the Civil Service College, and has also served on the board of the Central Provident Fund Board. He holds a bachelor's degree in English and a certificate in Russian Studies from Princeton University, and a master's degree in Management from the Peter Drucker School of Management, Claremont Graduate University.

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What is Our Compass?

Some Guiding
Principles for Cultural
Organisations during
Volatile Times

Low Sze Wee

Chief Executive Officer, Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre

The complex dynamics of the past decade, especially during the pandemic, encompassing destabilising shifts in the global and local socio-economic, digital, health and environmental arenas, have birthed a new age of change. Low Sze Wee identifies four principles which can help guide cultural organisations through turbulent times.

To say that we live in volatile times today seems like a truism. The rise of the Internet has led to a vast expansion in worldwide connectivity, and an exponential increase in information and digital data. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has thrown the world into disarray at an unprecedented scale. Decades of environmental neglect and harm have finally caught up with us. Many communities are now faced with the crippling challenges of rising sea levels, pollution, the extinction of species, and the depletion of natural resources that we had long assumed would last forever.

As much as many of us instinctively crave stability and the status quo, the pace of change and its ensuing disruptions will inevitably grow in the coming years. Many of these changes and disruptions are also systemic or worldwide in nature, and, therefore, beyond the control of individuals and organisations. Thus, it would not be feasible to respond with fixed solutions or to prepare a multitude of contingency plans beforehand. Rather, it might be more helpful for organisations to think about developing a set of attitudes or principles which would stand them in good stead, regardless of the pace of change in the external world. In other words, when faced with an ever-tumultuous environment, what kind of compass should cultural organisations have in navigating choppy waters?

Navigate Volatile Times With Clarity of Purpose

It is important for an organisation to be crystal-clear about its key reason for being. What is the key outcome which the organisation hopes to achieve? Once the purpose is clearly defined and understood, then, regardless of how the external environment changes, clarity of purpose would help guide the organisation towards making the right decision in difficult situations.

For instance, when an organisation holds a music concert as part of its annual programming, it is important to ask why the concert is being held. Is it to support local talent? If so, then the next question to ask would be whether organising a concert is the best way to support musicians. Or is it to generate revenue for the organisation through ticket sales? If so, then the next question to ask would be whether organising a concert is the best way to generate revenue. Or is it to get audiences to better appreciate local music? If so, the next question would be whether organising a concert is the best way to raise appreciation levels. This line of inquiry demonstrates that there are many different possible objectives that a concert could fulfil. Hence, when a disruptive event like COVID-19 suddenly occurs, which renders large physical audience groups untenable, how an organisation responds would depend on the key objective which the organisation wants to fulfil. Would organising an online concert still serve the same objective? If not, then another solution would be needed.

However, in order for an organisation to be clear about its purpose, all its key stakeholders need to be aligned and on the same wavelength.

For instance, if an organisation has a governing board, then it is imperative that the board and management are clear about their common purpose. If the organisation is primarily funded by an agency, then it is critical that there is clear agreement between funder and organisation on the latter's key purpose. Lack of clarity on this aspect means that the management's future ability to respond swiftly and decisively to the fast-changing environment would be severely hampered. Using the above scenario as an example, if management feels that its key objective is to support local artists, then organising an online concert would be a good solution as it would serve to fulfil the same purpose. However, if the board is of the view that the organisation's key priority is to generate revenue, then organising an online concert might not be ideal since online audiences are known to be generally less willing to pay for online content.

Navigate Volatile Times With Clarity of Audience

It is equally important to have a clear understanding of the key audience for whom the purpose was intended. Once this is done, then regardless of how the external environment changes, the organisation's key audience remains the same. The only issue for the organisation will then be to determine how the external changes affected its key audience, and then to revise its strategies accordingly. The reverse also holds true. If the organisation is unclear about its key audience or defines it so broadly that it is synonymous with the general public, then the task of ascertaining how external changes affected diverse audiences will be extremely challenging for the organisation.

After the key audience is clearly defined, then it becomes important for the organisation to ensure that its staff develops and maintains a good understanding of this audience group. Very often, the staff tend to be caught up in executing tasks and completing deliverables without having clarity on whether the deliverables had any impact on the intended audience. There also need to be consistent and regular channels between the organisation and its key audience, so that compliments and complaints can be received, analysed and acted upon by the organisation in a timely manner.

Navigate Volatile Times With Clarity of Understanding

In a disruptive environment, making sound decisions is difficult. Sometimes, as the situation deteriorates before our eyes, decisions are made in haste. Other times, solutions that provide immediate relief are quickly adopted to stem the tide. We might even follow what others in the same predicament have done to mitigate the risks of failure.

For instance, during the recent COVID-19 pandemic, when on-site cultural performances were prohibited, many organisations switched to livestreaming their events on social media platforms. On many levels, this worked out well. The performers could continue to make a living. Consumers could enjoy the same offerings, albeit in a digital format. And many organisers of livestreamed events gained online viewership numbers that often exceeded

many times the physical capacity of their original performance venues. This seemed like a win-win situation for all concerned. However, there are downsides to using digital technology. For instance, although the online viewership numbers can be extremely high, the backend data indicates that many viewers only watch the first few minutes or even seconds of an online programme. The number who watch the programme from start to finish is much lower. Hence, it is important to recognise that the level of engagement from watching a few minutes will be much poorer compared to watching the programme in its entirety. This issue becomes even more critical if the intended purpose of the programme is closely related to its content, such as promoting the appreciation of local music.

Therefore, whenever an organisation adopts a course of action, it is important that it has a clear understanding of the implications. While perfect knowledge is impossible, an organisation should, at least, be aware of the possible trade-offs and alternatives when considering various solutions. With such awareness, it will be much less likely that we will be taken by surprise when things do not turn out the way we expected them to. We will then be mentally prepared to pivot and change course once again.

The need to have clarity of understanding also implies that it is imperative for an organisation to have staff with a diverse range of experience, expertise and interests. No single CEO can possibly be an expert in everything. However, it is entirely feasible for the leader of an organisation to try his or her best to reduce group-think and echo-chamber effects by actively looking for staff who can complement one another's strengths and weaknesses.

Navigate Volatile Times by Doing More With Less

When the external environment constantly changes, this often means that organisations have to respond quickly and be prepared to make revisions and improvements along the way. Operating in such volatile times is akin to running a perpetual marathon and not completing a short sprint. Hence, it becomes important for organisations to use their limited resources wisely.

One way to achieve this is by doing more with less. For instance, the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre (SCCC) recently launched a series of online videos called *One of Us*. It features about 20 local personalities and their connections to the five major Chinese dialect cultures in Singapore: Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka and Hainanese. The personalities included chefs, social media influencers, singers, and business owners who shared their personal journeys in promoting and preserving their own dialect cultures. The video series generated high viewership and positive responses.

Often, such a positive outcome might prompt an organisation to produce other videos which could garner similarly good results. However, this would entail spending more resources to create new content which might or might not have the same outcome. In SCCC's case, we decided to convert the content from the video series into a travelling exhibition. In this way, since the content had already been produced for the video series, the only additional costs for SCCC was that incurred in the conversion of

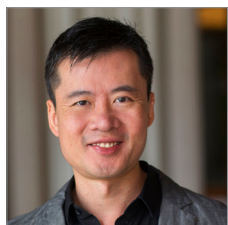
the content into exhibition panels and the search for venues which could host such exhibitions. To date, this exhibition has travelled to malls and libraries, and has been seen by people who might not have caught the online video series. This approach allowed SCCC to capitalise on a pre-existing product that had proven to be popular with online viewers, and share it in a different format with different audiences, including groups with little or no access to our digital content. This extended the shelf-life of content produced by SCCC. It also had the benefit of triggering the curiosity of those who had seen the travelling exhibition, prompting them to check out the online videos on the SCCC's Youtube channel.

This ability to leverage existing resources demands creativity and out-of-the-box thinking.

Hence, it is critical for leaders to encourage such approaches from everyone in his or her organisation. Creativity is not limited to the few geniuses like Albert Einstein. Rather, everyone is capable of creative thinking. Creativity is linked to having a keen sense of curiosity, the ability to make connections between things that are not usually related, and the capacity to generate new ideas or solutions. Hence, it behoves leaders to create working environments which encourage such traits to emerge from their colleagues.

There are no standard one-size-fits-all solutions for surviving and thriving in a volatile world. Rather, having the right set of principles or attitudes will help guide cultural organisations to develop and choose the best solutions for themselves. □

About the Author



Low Sze Wee is Chief Executive Officer of the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre. With a background in law, he later completed postgraduate studies in History of Art from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London in 1999, and Southeast Asian Studies from the National University of Singapore in 2010. Sze Wee has curated many local and international exhibitions, including important retrospectives on Singaporean artists and the Singapore pavilion at the 50th Venice Biennale in 2003. Three of his exhibitions garnered the National Heritage Board (NHB) Exhibition Award in 2007, 2008 and 2009. He was also awarded the NHB Research Award in 2007 for his contributions to scholarship on Singapore and Southeast Asian art history. In 2013, Sze Wee was the first Singaporean to be named a fellow of the prestigious Clore Leadership Programme. Formerly heading the curatorial departments at the Singapore Art Museum and then National Gallery Singapore, he was a key member of the inaugural team that oversaw the National Gallery's opening in 2015. Sze Wee has also been involved in strategic arts planning and policy in Singapore's Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts.

Dream and Critique:

The Universal Appeal of South Korea's Contemporary Culture

Professor Ramon Pacheco Pardo

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The significance of a nation's creative economy as a source of its soft power should not be underestimated. Professor Ramon Pacheco Pardo discusses how the dynamism of the Korean cultural economic model and the contemporary Korean understanding of topical issues have enabled its creative industries to develop diverse cultural products with a global appeal.

Close your eyes, and think about today's South Korea. What comes to your mind? Chances are that it will be pop music, movies and dramas. What else comes to your mind if you think more deeply? Perhaps you will picture attending a BTS or Blackpink concert in Seoul, or strolling down Gyeongbokgung like how a princess or prince might have done during the Joseon dynasty. There are millions of people like you around the world. Actually, make that tens of millions. Herein lies the power of culture. It helps you escape, dream, and feel transported somewhere else.

But culture also serves another purpose: to reflect and to offer social critique. If you close your eyes again and think about the South Korean movies and dramas that you watched during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Parasite* and *Squid Game* are likely to be on the list. Both depict a present and future that you do not want for you and your family, one of poverty, inequality and violence; they are an award-winning film and drama, respectively, that make you think, that enable you to understand that these scourges are universal.

If there is one country that in recent years has become known for producing a variety of cultural

products that present a wide range of topics while having universal appeal, it is South Korea. But how has a country that only 35 years ago was fighting for democracy and which 25 years ago suffered a devastating financial crisis emerged with what can well be described as an economic product with universal appeal?

The starting point is, of course, its people. Directors, actors, singers, writers or painters are ultimately responsible for creating the art that others want to consume. These are the creative people who come up with original ideas that they then develop into the products that others enjoy.

In the case of South Korea, the number of creative individuals seems to have grown exponentially since its democratisation in 1987-88. Partly, this is the result of individuals living in free countries being able to imagine and put into practice original ideas. Crucially, free countries do not constrain individuals' right to travel overseas. This allows them to experience new cultures and observe universal themes.

The growth in the number of creative South Koreans is also partially the result of an education system that, according to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study, makes the country's students amongst the best in the world at applying what they learn in practice. Incidentally, this is common across East Asia.

This aspect is crucial. South Koreans, and East Asians in general, are often considered to be good at rote learning and mechanical tasks, and bad at creative pursuits. This outdated stereotype, unfortunately, is yet to go away. For example, some Western media continue to publish articles about

K-Pop bands being artificially created. In this view, the performers do not matter. What matters is their ability to learn the mechanics of becoming a “pop star”. But thankfully, new generations of K-Pop stars are shattering this stereotype and letting their creativity shine, both in their music and via social media for the South Korean education system is good at helping develop creative individuals.

In this way, South Korea can draw upon a pool of creative people with their own new ideas or take on well-known themes. While some of them will not make it as artists, and some may become known only within their country, others will develop an international appeal that makes them successful well beyond Northeast Asia.

However, universal appeal does not necessarily mean the successful export of one’s cultural products. For decades, American culture—from Hollywood movies to boy and girl bands—has been dominant at the global level. When South Korean culture started to make its way out of the country, it had to compete against these and other behemoths.

Along came the government. In 1993, the South Korean government of the time was astonished to learn that *Jurassic Park* had made more money than Hyundai’s total car exports had that same year. So the Kim Young-sam government set about finding ways to support the export of South Korean cultural products. Following the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98, the then-President of South Korea, Kim Dae-jung instructed the Ministry of Culture to provide direct financial support to artists and cultural firms seeking to export their art.¹

By the 2000s, different branches of the government were involved in efforts to support the export of cultural goods. The number of Korean cultural centres showing South Korean movies or organising discussions about South Korean books grew rapidly. Local embassies were sponsoring cultural festivals and K-Pop concerts, and government TV broadcaster KBS was preparing to tour its Music Bank show around the world. These were three of the many ways in which the South Korean government provided support to creative individuals over the years. Up till now, this policy of support has been sustained by both liberal and conservative governments, ensuring continuity and stability within the sector.

Additionally, the South Korean government gives money to artists but does not dictate their topics.² This allows artists to choose what they want to focus on. Whether a drama set in the tumultuous late Joseon Dynasty, a movie about Korea’s independence, or a rap about individual choice, all creative works are eligible for government support. Clearly, the South Korean government accepts and supports both dream and critique.

Certainly, in the South Korea of 2022, many movies are distributed by private film companies, many dramas are distributed via streaming platforms, and many bands have their tours organised by private studios. But much like how the South Korean *chaebol* received government support before being able to take off by themselves, many South Korean artists benefit from the support that they receive in the early stages of their career before achieving mainstream success.

This is a key point. Dating back to the 1980s and particularly post-Asian financial crisis, successive South Korean governments have promoted start-ups and SMEs. But South Korea does not focus only on Silicon Valley-style tech firms. Its government specifically sets aside funding for start-ups and SMEs operating in the cultural field, ensuring that music studios, art galleries, documentary production companies and art schools alike are all eligible for government funding and state-supported mentoring from experts in their fields. This way, firms that find it difficult to raise private funding may still launch their operations.

Add to this the economic support that events such as KCON across the world, Korea Spotlight in Texas, or the K-Culture Festival in South Korea itself receive from different government agencies. Without this support, these events would have found it difficult to take off. But even as they have become self-sufficient, the economic support that these events receive from the South Korean government provides them with the necessary stability upon which they can rely so that they can concentrate on their core mission: to spotlight South Korean artists for the world to discover.

Besides funding, there is the freedom in terms of choice of topics that the South Korean government encourages—or at least does not discourage—which allows artists to follow their passion and choose their preferred topics. In contrast, countries such as China or Vietnam do not have a similar practice. As a result, their traditional, uncontroversial culture may be well-known, but the global appeal of their vibrant, domestic cultural scene does not match that of South Korea.

Take the case of some of the topics that K-Pop tackles. Girls' Generation's "Into the New World" has become a protest song in South Korea, thanks to its focus on solidarity in the face of adversity. BTS, meanwhile, has tackled themes such as mental health or self-acceptance as part of their ever-growing repertoire. In other words, K-Pop has moved beyond a narrow focus on songs about love and heartbreak because South Korean singers and producers live in an environment in which this is possible.

Never mind the South Korean movies and dramas that have taken over the world in recent years. Focusing on South Korean cinema, *Oldboy*, *The Handmaiden*, *Train to Busan*, or *Parasite* can only be described as dark movies exploring the depths of the human soul. But on the other hand, *My Sassy Girl*—the first South Korean movie to truly become popular across East Asia—is a more traditional romantic comedy. In other words, South Korean directors have a choice. And this only enhances the appeal of the country's culture.

As the weight of art and other creative industries as a contributor of the South Korean economy grows, while the weight of manufacturing as a contributor decreases, it has become crucial for the country to continue to successfully export movies, dramas and music. Without creative individuals, South Korean culture would not have the universal appeal that it has today. Likewise, without the support of the government, many artists would have found it harder to find fame overseas. In this way, South Korea seems to have perfected the art of making its own art known to the rest of the world. □

About the Author



Ramon Pacheco Pardo is Professor of International Relations at King's College London and the KF-VUB Korea Chair at the Brussels School of Governance of Vrije Universiteit Brussel. Prof Pacheco Pardo is also Adjunct Fellow (Non-Resident) with the Korea Chair at CSIS, Non-Resident Fellow with Sejong Institute, and Committee Member at CSCAP EU. He has held visiting positions at Korea University, the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, and Melbourne University. His publications include the books *Shrimp to Whale: South Korea from the Forgotten War to K-Pop* (Hurst and Oxford University Press, 2022) and *North Korea-US Relations from Kim Jong Il to Kim Jong Un* (Routledge, 2019). He has participated in track 1.5 and 2 dialogues with South Korea, North Korea, China, and Japan. Prof Pacheco Pardo has testified before the European Parliament and advised the OECD, the European External Action Service, the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the United Kingdom's Cabinet and Foreign & Commonwealth offices. He is a frequent media commentator on North East Asian affairs and EU-East Asia relations.

Notes

1. The name of the ministry has changed over the years. At the time of writing, it is the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism.
2. The only exception was a period during the Park Geun-hye presidency when the government drew up a list of allegedly liberal artists who were not to receive state funding.

Culture for Sustainable Living:

Think Piece for A New Normal

Dr. Hilmar Farid

Director General for Culture
Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology
The Republic of Indonesia

Globally, the pandemic has exposed longstanding and systemic flaws in our current ways of living, making, educating and working. Dr. Hilmar Farid emphasises the need to prioritise sustainability in our development initiatives and practices worldwide, with locally-specific, culture-based policies that promote economic resilience, cultural diversity, environmental health and social equity.

The Great Reset

As the health pandemic continues into its third year, the whole world seems to be seeking various answers to this question—how do we return to the Old Normal (business as usual)?

The Old Normal saw development led by economic growth, development carried out at the expense of social and environmental health. The consumptive lifestyle has created a heavy ecological burden signified by a metabolic rift between humans and nature: as if the only way humans survive is to destroy nature, consuming it to nothing. The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the latest expressions of this rift. The expansion of industry encourages the destruction of ecosystems which eventually forces various wild animals to become refugees in the human settlements, encourages the assimilation of habitats between species and triggers the emergence of zoonotic diseases such as COVID-19. Therefore, returning to the Old Normal would only mean reproducing the very environment which sustained the pandemic. COVID-19 helped us to see this

reality clearly; it showed us that the Old Normal was an abnormality.

The pandemic has brought to the fore the latent vulnerability in our modern lifestyles. This vulnerability has manifested itself in the systemic disruption to supply chains which has called into question our current way of life. It is increasingly apparent that the current situation has given rise to existential risks which put human existence at stake. What is at stake are no longer lives stricken by poverty, inequality, injustice, but human survival as a species. This crisis, in other words, should be seen as an opportunity to solve the underlying problems of modern life and create a new and better society.

This awareness has not arisen only from those who have long been critical of the global order, but also from the established institutions that represent the global order itself. The World Economic Forum is now talking about “The Great Reset” (Davos Meeting 2021). The state of the world today is conceived as a computer experiencing so many errors that it must be reformatted from scratch. Even the “economic reforms” that have been used as a panacea for every crisis are no longer seen as sufficient. The World Economic Forum has even called for global action for social change that pushes the socio-ecological sustainability agenda. When the institutions that have been representing the mainstream of world economic thought have spoken of “The Great Reset”, there is no plausible reason to keep preserving the “Old Normal”. In order to recover together and recover stronger, a global recovery strategy that seeks to create a “New Normal” rather than reproduce the “Old Normal” is necessary. For this purpose, culture plays a significant role.

The Socio-Economic Benefits of Culture-Led Development

Culture is a product of human interaction with others and the surrounding environment. For generations, humans have produced knowledge and artifacts, and built institutions to manage the relationship between them in relation to nature. In the Tado tribal community in Manggarai, East Nusa Tenggara, for example, the singing of the river cuckoo is a sign of the arrival of the planting season. If this species disappears due to forest encroachment, the community will lose the traditional reference to farming which results in a transformation in the way the community conducts their daily life. Examples of this kind are found in many other places and indicate the existence of a close relationship between biodiversity and cultural diversity. Culture is the way humans survive, respond to daily challenges, in short, adapt. The same is true in nature: each species develops different ways of responding to the challenges of everyday life and adapting. What is important to underline here is that diversity is a way of survival. If we depend on only one way of life, we will have low resilience in the face of life's changing challenges. Diversity, then, is directly related to safety, just as uniformity is related to vulnerability. It is imperative, therefore, to promote cultural diversity as common good.

The economic benefits of culture-based development are clearly seen in recent studies on the creative economy. According to recent UNESCO research, global export of cultural goods doubled in value from 2005 to USD271.7 billion in 2019, whereas global export of cultural services doubled in value

from 2006 to USD117.4 billion in 2019. This value was even higher for developing countries, reaching three times the original export value in 2019. Likewise in terms of job openings, the workforce in the cultural sector currently constitutes 6.2% of the total global workforce, and in developing countries such as Africa, it has even reached 8.2% in 2021.

The social benefits of culture-based development are also apparent in the way culture heals the societal rifts opened by rapid economic growth. People will not prosper physically and mentally if, in the midst of rapid economic growth, they feel alienated from one another, losing their social norms, divided by conflict and prejudice. Only through cultural activities can the societal rift be overcome. By encouraging the diversity of cultural expressions, the preconditions for a more cohesive and harmonious society can be laid.

All these benefits are clearly seen in the development of the creative economy in the past decades.

Indonesian Pathways to A New Normal

Indonesia has taken the lead in advancing the creative economy agenda at a global level. The creative economy is a sector that is built upon cultural resources. In order to create a more sustainable creative economy, therefore, we need to have a more robust cultural ecosystem that can preserve and enrich our cultural resources. To this effect, the Indonesian government has initiated many projects that aim to promote greater sustainability using local cultural resources. These initiatives range from processing natural fibres and



Figure 1. *Wastra Tenun Nusantara*, traditional Indonesian hand-woven and naturally-dyed textiles, from Sumba, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. Image courtesy of Directorate General of Culture, Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia.

natural dyes for fashion, to utilising a plethora of local food sources, to developing traditional architecture that is environmentally-friendly and which encourages social collaboration and inclusion.

Our effort to develop our cultural economy is focused on strengthening the local economy. The more local elements we support and nurture, the better, as this provides avenues for more people to be involved and hence employed. Focusing on empowering the local population with knowledge about the various cultural practices enables more local workers to be involved, starting from indigenous peoples, traditional cultural actors, and various elements of the community at the village level. It also supports economic decentralisation; instead of enabling the accumulation of capital by a single company, this measure will distribute capital evenly throughout the supply chain that connects various regions. This will make society, as a whole, more resilient in the face of economic crises.

One of the challenges of managing the cultural economy is to overcome inequality of access among different segments of society. For this purpose, the Indonesian government has developed a cultural platform called “*Indonesiana*”. This platform plays the role of matchmaker between local governments and artists or cultural workers to create collaborative festivals that help bring diverse cultural expressions to people across Indonesia. This platform was designed to spearhead the improvement of festival management and to multiply similar collaborative efforts between state and civil society in the local cultural context. And to reduce inequality of access in art education, we have launched the “Artists Go To School Movement (GSMS)” in which we deploy 1,500 artists and writers to teach at elementary and high schools across Indonesia. This programme also presents artists with the opportunity to enrich their artistic experience in residency.



Figure 2. Making *Petis Udang* (Shrimp Paste), an Indonesian food of intangible cultural heritage, from East Kalimantan, Indonesia. Image courtesy of Directorate General of Culture, Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia.

Lastly, there is an urgent need to accelerate the process of cultural mainstreaming, that is, to create a synergy between cultural policymaking and broader policymaking for development. For this purpose, the Indonesian government has developed a “Cultural Development Index (CDI)”. More than an instrument to measure cultural development, the Indonesian CDI is embedded in a unified policy matrix that allows its implementation not only as a context-sensitive means of measuring cultural mainstreaming performance, but also as an integral part of the development planning process at the local level. Development planning is executed from the ground up, involving the participation of artists, cultural actors, indigenous people, and cultural experts, together with local level planners. The cultural policy planning documents produced through this process serve as a reference for the formulation of general development policies at the local and national levels. If the plan is implemented properly, the result will be an increase in the CDI

score. This ensures that the CDI becomes an integral part of the development cycle from the local to the national level. It has been four years since the implementation of CDI and its policy matrix, and we have found that cultural mainstreaming can be successful if each region develops local cultural resources to respond to local development challenges such as lack of resources, insufficient infrastructures, or inequality of access. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to the challenge of sustainable development. In fact, more diversity in cultural expression equals more possibilities when seeking solutions to such challenges.

Culture-based policies are the key to creating sustainable development, with tangible benefits not only in the economic field, but also socially and environmentally. Cultural mainstreaming needs to be based on the awareness that there is not one solution that fits all. Cultural and contextual characteristics cannot be ignored when managing

development based on culture. Any attempt to find one solution to all problems only adds to existing problems. Every development challenge arises in a unique geographical context and must be overcome by the strengthening of existing local potential, rather than by the application of general prescriptions that may be considered applicable anywhere and at anytime. The solution to a problem in a particular geo-spatial situation must be found from within the situation itself. Solutions must emerge endogenously, not imposed from a general pattern.

G20 Culture Ministers' Meeting And The Agenda For Global Recovery

The Indonesian government also plans to lead the formation of a new global consensus on culture-led recovery through G20. The third G20 Culture Ministers' Meeting will be hosted by the Republic of Indonesia on 12–13 September 2022 at the Borobudur Temple Compounds in Indonesia. It will be a continuation of previous meetings held by the Saudi Arabia's Presidency (2020) and Italy's Presidency (2021). This meeting will continue the commitment outlined in the Rome Declaration (2021) of the G20 Ministers of Culture to recognise culture as an integral part of a wider policy agenda. It will have as its main theme: "Culture for Sustainable Living". By focusing on this issue, the meeting will explore the possibilities of sustainable recovery

in creating the New Normal, which is a transition from unrestrained development towards a more socio-ecological, justice-oriented development, supported by policies based on the diversity of cultural resources and which acknowledge the role of cultural economics in creating pathways to sustainable lifestyles.

There is global awareness that the arts and culture sector needs support in order to return to life post pandemic. For this reason, Indonesia's Presidency of the 2022 G20 will be marked by a commitment to initiate the development of the Global Arts and Culture Recovery Fund (GACRF). This funding platform is expected to help with the restoring of the cultural economy, especially in developing and less developed countries which have been badly affected by the pandemic, focusing on communities of artists and cultural workers who are working on projects that promote sustainable living practices. With GACRF, the global arts and culture sector can recover more quickly and again play a major role in encouraging the realisation of the ideals of sustainable development. With the support of G20 member countries and UNESCO, it is expected that the GACRF can be launched on 13 September 2022, on the occasion of the third G20 Culture Ministers' Meeting. [Editor-in-Chief's Note: The GACRF was successfully launched at the G20 Culture Ministers' Meeting.]

If all of this is explored and strengthened by public participation made possible by equitable access to technology, we will be able to see a great transformation in our way of life, resulting in a step out of the pandemic, climate crises, and social inequality at the same time. □



Figure 3. The Borobudur Temple Compounds in Magelang Regency, East Java, Indonesia, will be the location of the G20 Culture Ministers' Meeting on 12–13 September 2022. Image courtesy of Directorate General of Culture, Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia.

About the Author



Hilmar Farid is currently the Director General of Culture in Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia. He also serves as the President Commissioner of the state-owned publishing company Balai Pustaka (2020-present). He is also a lecturer at the Postgraduate Program at Jakarta Arts Institute (2015-present). He received his PhD from the National University of Singapore (PhD).

Pause, Reset, Fast Forward?

Thinking about the Arts in Singapore

Paul Tan

PhD candidate at Nanyang Technological University
Former Deputy Chief Executive at the National Arts Council

With the world's arts and cultural sector emerging from the worst of the pandemic, and now adapting to the idea of living with COVID-19, arts communities everywhere have been stretched by both new challenges and lessons learned. Looking back on the past two years, Paul Tan reflects on the aspects of the arts that endure even as artists, audiences, and the communities that support art-making confront the future.

Never did I imagine in my years as an arts administrator that we would be discussing the trajectory of aerosolised particles created by vocalists and wind instruments. But indeed, that was the nature of some of the new work during the thick of the COVID-19 situation. We were in earnest discussions with our colleagues in the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) on how we could keep the performing arts going in some form despite the trying circumstances. Eventually, we ended up working with A*Star, Singapore's Agency for Science, Technology and Research, and the Esplanade-Theatres on The Bay, Singapore's premium performing arts centre, to get data on how droplets spread in outdoor and indoor settings, and this allowed us to make a more informed decision about creating safe distances between audiences and performers.

This was just one instance of the different approaches to work that everyone in the arts sector had to adopt during the COVID-19 pandemic. Whether you were an actor, art gallery staff, stage manager or administrator in the National Arts Council, you had to reorientate yourself, including figuring out how to make the best of WFH ("work from

home") and developing hacks to ensure you did not burn out from the long hours and reduced in-person interactions.

In many ways, the pandemic made clearer the trends which had already started, in particular, the push toward digitalisation. Much has already been written about the explosion in digital consumption of the arts during the strictest of the Circuit Breaker, as well as how the arts community was compelled to quickly figure out how to use the online medium, and how the government stepped up funding to enable the arts community to digitalise their programmes for greater outreach, in anticipation of the brewing health crisis.

Another trend that accelerated was the ability of artists to talk and transact directly with their patrons and potential fans. Whether it was live streaming services for musicians, subscription sites like Patreon, or the use of blockchain technology and Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs) for visual arts, there was certainly a growth of awareness and adoption of new tech-enabled distribution platforms.

But the pandemic also exposed some weaknesses such as the precarity of jobs in the sector. In pre-COVID times, the gig nature of the arts economy meant flexibility, freedom and working for one's passion, but the pandemic proved a sobering reminder about practical realities: maintaining a buffer in one's personal finances, the need for health insurance, the importance of being adaptable and willing to try new things. While governments around the world rolled out many support schemes for affected arts sectors, the international arts community also rallied like-minded partners in the sector to self-organise initiatives and

take care of one another. Indeed, the last two years were a trial by fire for arts communities everywhere. We are fortunate that in Singapore, our community showed a steely resilience and forward-looking optimism.

New Trends Amid Enduring Perspectives

But we also should resist the temptation of privileging everything that is new. While we reflect on some of the latest trends, we realise there is much that endures with regard to the sector. For instance, one can easily contend that these new aspects listed here are actually modalities of presentation or the evolution of the ecosystem, and that nothing at the core of arts creation or its appreciation has fundamentally changed.

To elaborate, there is truth in the argument that, for millennia, humanity has had a propensity for creative expression across different cultures. Think about the Lascaux cave paintings or stylised terracotta figures from ancient Asian civilisations. Whether modern global citizens think the music they listen to on their daily commute to work or the digital imagery on their computer games qualifies as art or not, these are creative expressions naturally woven into our daily existence. The value of the arts, and the recognition that they need to be nourished and funded, I believe, has not changed.

I believe all humans have some innate capacity to value beauty. I would add that increased exposure to the arts will build that capacity and, of course, it is helpful to have some domain knowledge to help one better understand the context of an artistic creation and the formal standards with which a work is assessed. But domain knowledge should not be a prerequisite. In fact, the notion that one must have specialist knowledge to unlock the value of art has created an unhelpful, elitist perception of the arts.

The potential of the arts to be a space safe within which one may explore tougher topics like end-of-life or societal inequalities has not changed either. Whether during pre-COVID times or today, this potential must be tapped, though it needs to be done responsibly and in a balanced way. Throughout history, the arts, encompassing the literary, visual, decorative, and performing arts across a multitude of genres and functions, have been an important vehicle for critical thought and social change.

We see this in many important masterpieces of artistic endeavour; consider writers like Lu Xun and Pramodya Ananta Toer whose works challenged the traditional belief systems or the failings of colonial administrations. Or look at how performance art revolutionised art-making from the 1960s as it challenged the notion of art as being object-based and revelled in the ephemeral nature of the performative event. Art which pushes boundaries may be ahead of its time. At the point of creation and public reception, it can

stimulate discussion and controversy, and even discomfit some audiences.

As a provocation for critical thinking or a vehicle for advocacy, art helps us to imagine different worlds beyond the status quo and, conversely, also jolts us into appreciating what might otherwise be taken for granted. As Singaporeans, we should celebrate the diversity of practices in our arts community, and support our artists in their endeavours to express differing views, as a way of holding up a mirror to society. Surely, given how creative energy and out-of-the-box-thinking can fuel Singapore's future economic success, surely the arts will be a valuable crucible for game-changers and broader innovations that will benefit society?

Given the complex make-up of Singaporean society with its diverse communities, the Government's desire to protect this multicultural fabric as part of a larger social compact is understandable and, indeed, important. Artists need to consider the local contexts of their art-making to help audiences appreciate the role that the arts can play in advancing creativity and openness to a diversity of views which in turn undergird the building of mutual understanding and harmony in society. In this vein, arts education is critical.

Some Tentative Crystal-Ball Gazing

So, what does the future hold? The push to digitalisation raises interesting questions that will take time to answer. How do we assess the value of a digital work, given the relative newness of the form, especially when an evolving work interacts with users who help generate part of the content? What are the formal aesthetic qualities experts should use as a yardstick? And what are the potential intellectual property issues that may arise, when there is no sole, identifiable artistic creator?

The second set of questions in this crystal-ball gazing exercise: will the trend of circumventing the middleman lead to the death of the gallerist, the publisher or the agent? I would not place my bets on this. I suspect there will continue to be a role for the intermediary to help us wade through the plethora of art experiences in the physical or virtual world. For example, consider how we appreciate relevant and useful recommendations from bookstore and library staff, whether it is for ourselves or our children. Similarly, gallerists can help us understand the history behind particular artworks or different artistic practices as one contemplates purchasing a new work.

In the best-case scenario, more intermediaries will develop symbiotic relationships with artists, offering an independent eye or practical assistance; responsible publishers will continue to provide editorial rigour and publicity support to writers, just as galleries will discuss curatorial options and work closely with artists for upcoming exhibitions. The direct-to-consumer modality will continue to thrive, providing artists with an alternate digital means of reaching audiences. This will also spur the middlemen in the sector to improve and raise professional standards.

Even as new challenges arise, we can be confident that, in the near term, the arts in Singapore will remain well-resourced, and that the adaptable and resilient arts community will continue to harness its creative energies well. My hope is that our diverse arts practices find sustainable support among different audiences, and that new artworks will continue to be added to the cultural “substrate” which shapes Singaporeans’ shared identity. When we attain a broader appreciation and understanding of the nature of the arts and the roles that they can play in our lives, the arts and their impact on our 57-year-old nation-state will undoubtedly endure. □

About the Author



Paul Tan is currently a PhD candidate in Creative Writing at the Nanyang Technological University.

Paul joined the National Arts Council in 2011 as the Festival Director of the Singapore Writers Festival and Director, Literary Arts, and helmed four editions of the popular literary festival before serving as the Deputy Chief Executive Officer at the Planning and Corporate Development Group until August 2021. During his tenure, he also served on the boards on numerous arts companies including the Singapore Chinese Orchestra, the Singapore Symphony Group and the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre.

Paul has also published five volumes of poetry and writes the occasional opinion piece for *The Straits Times*.

In Case of Existential Threat, Redefine Your Existence:

Checkpoint Theatre's Lessons from the Pandemic

Huzir Sulaiman

Co-founder and Joint Artistic Director, Checkpoint Theatre

The performing arts sector was particularly hard-hit during the pandemic as live performances ground to a halt. Local company Checkpoint Theatre, however, endured with a nimble turn to diversification as well as care for their staff, in addition to government subsidies, and thus provides a case study in adaptive capacity and resilience. In this essay, Huzir Sulaiman shares some lessons he learned from the past few years.

It was March of 2020, and I was on the phone with a worried National Arts Council (NAC) officer. Performing arts groups in Singapore were reeling from the impact of the rapid spread of COVID-19. Our account manager at NAC was concerned that Checkpoint Theatre would be plunged into despair at the closure of venues and the freeze on our industry.

“Well,” I said, with what must have seemed an inappropriate amount of chirpiness, “it’s just like the Japanese Occupation!”

“Er... how is that a good thing?” she replied.

“It’s not a *good* thing, but there’s no point in moaning and wailing about it. You do what it takes to survive. You learn Japanese. You trade rice on the black market. Don’t moan about the British surrender. Pick yourself up, adapt, and carry on. That’s what Checkpoint Theatre will do.”

Historians may find fault with my analogy, but it was psychologically useful. When everyone was talking about “unprecedented times”—

how we all came to hate that phrase!—it was comforting to realise there was an arguable historical precedent. The tribulations of 1942–1945 brought hardship and pain, and you had to be brave, flexible, determined—and lucky—in order to come out on the other side.

So this is what we did during the “Occupation” of 2020–2022, and what we learned from it.

When the pandemic began, Checkpoint Theatre was 18 years old, and was pursuing its mission of developing, producing, and promoting original Singapore theatre with ever greater vigour. It was a point of post-colonial pride for us to never stage a Western play—everything was a home-grown Singaporean work, and created in-house. We rigorously developed our plays with the creators, sometimes over two years, going from an idea and a blank page into a full staging, and often a publication or international tour. We received NAC Major Company Scheme funding, and had been commissioned five times by the Singapore International Festival of Arts and its predecessor, the Singapore Arts Festival. With five live productions planned, 2020 was slated to be one of our biggest seasons ever, in venues ranging from the Drama Centre Theatre to the Esplanade Theatre Studio to an intimate museum setting.

All the shows had to be cancelled, of course. Our cash losses for our March and April 2020 productions were close to SGD300,000, as we decided to pay every one of our freelancers their full wage, and the projected lost revenue for the rest of the year was about SGD700,000. There was no prospect of further ticket income, and no

idea how long the pandemic would go on. The closure of theatres meant that our remaining solely a theatre company would have posed an existential threat, a threat to our very existence. Rather than allow ourselves to be made powerless by the uncertainty of the situation and sit paralysed until theatres were allowed to reopen, Claire Wong and I—co-founders and Joint Artistic Directors of the company, and partners in life and art—resolved to come up with a creative and constructive response to this pandemic: a new way forward.

Beyond Boundaries, Into the Unknown

Over the years, we had increasingly diversified the nature of our work to reflect the multidisciplinary interests and skills of the artists with whom we collaborate. Beginning with the Singapore Writers Festival 2015, we had started to proclaim the cross-platform nature of our company when I curated *What I Love about You is Your Attitude Problem*, which featured 24 different events or performances we commissioned across a range of art forms, from works by singer-songwriters to monologues to installation art to drag cabaret to short films.

As we had been on this path organically, looking across different platforms and disciplines for some years, the pandemic provided a strangely welcome push for us to lean into that multidisciplinary, freed from the rigid season planning and mission

statements of a pure theatre company. Because we worked with living creators and always started with a blank page, their work could go into any format for which we could marshal the resources and expertise. Our colleagues—the full-time arts administrators as well as the Associate Artists of the company—embraced our new vision.

Within a month of the declaration of the pandemic, Checkpoint Theatre re-positioned itself as original Singapore storytellers across different media, disciplines and platforms. We leaned into a multidisciplinary approach to allow us to reach audiences in different ways. This decision allowed us to still create, practise our craft, and bring meaning to the lives of our collaborators and our audiences.

Our excitement grew through 2020 and 2021 as we moved forward on projects ranging from graphic novels to music to online films and podcasts. Amid the loss and grief that the sector was experiencing, we were grateful to have found a way through the darkness to reconnect with our impulse to create.

From the beginning of the pandemic to the time of writing this essay, Checkpoint Theatre had produced three audio experiences, four new online films, seven comic books in both print and e-book formats, four online conversations, a successful online fundraiser, playwriting masterclasses for eight writers, and dozens of digital school shows. Since December 2021, we have also staged four plays and held two live talks, but our commitment to our diverse artistic products continues, notwithstanding the reopening of theatres.

What we have learned and the way forward

Monetising digital content is difficult to begin with, and impossible when piracy is rampant.

As a company accustomed to sold-out shows, pre-pandemic, with ticket-buying audiences sometimes as large as 3,500 for a play, we were curious to see how our ticket sales would translate to the digital space. Our *free* online content garnered thousands of views, but our paid content saw a significant drop from what we had expected, to the hundreds. Studying this phenomenon over the last two years and seeking input from colleagues, we realised that, simply put, audiences in Singapore are reluctant to pay for online content, and seem quite happy to commit intellectual property theft.

NAC research shows that 63% of people expect online content to be free (National Arts Council n.d.). And when you couple that with the fact that 40% of Singaporeans admit to piracy, as reported in *The Straits Times* in 2017 (a figure I consider suspiciously low), the net outcome seems to be that if something costs money, it will not be bought, and it—or more importantly, something else—will be stolen.

To be clear, it is not my belief that digital products by Checkpoint Theatre or other Singapore artists are themselves being pirated; that would be somewhat flattering, albeit infuriating. But what happens is this: when the consumer is faced with a choice between a Singapore product made with limited resources and available quite cheaply (our online films were priced at SGD7.99), and

a big-budget American or Korean show that can be illegally streamed or downloaded, the Free Foreign will always beat the Affordable Local.

The remedy for this is two-fold.

First, Singapore artists need to “up their game” to ensure that their products provide some sort of edge that even the most skinflint, larcenous viewer is willing to pay for. We’re all certainly working on this part.

But in tandem with that, the Singaporean government should, through rigorous enforcement of its own intellectual property laws and high-profile prosecutions of offenders, discourage the consumption of pirated digital content, thereby creating a genuinely level playing field where Singapore creators can compete solely on quality. This will expend political capital, as anecdotal evidence suggests that many families in Singapore have a child with a hard drive full of illegally downloaded anime, and the electorate might not like to see them systematically hauled up before the courts and punished for intellectual property theft.

I’m sure the reader is now chuckling nervously and thinking about the contents of their own devices, or their nephew’s. But my point is very serious: unless and until piracy is comprehensively discouraged through robust prosecution, it will be impossible for Singapore creators to monetise their online work. Any much-heralded pivot into digital content creation will never be financially sustainable.

The K-pop group Blackpink has 48 million Instagram followers and 76 million Youtube subscribers. Yet when they released a long-awaited concert video at the height of the

pandemic, they only garnered 280,000 paid ticket buyers, largely assumed to be a consequence of widespread piracy. If Blackpink, arguably the biggest music act in the world at the moment, can't make money online, what hope is there for the rest of us?

And yet, there is a gentler alternative to relentless prosecution of piracy: generous and continuous subsidy for the arts, for which I will argue shortly.

Transformation needs time, an honest assessment of who we are, and state support.

In seeking to transform Checkpoint Theatre and broaden our practice, moving into many new product lines, I realised that many of the largest companies now in the media and entertainment sector took a very long time to get there, and sometimes started in unlikely places. We must remember that Disney only moved into live-action film after 27 years of concentrating on animation; it took them another 21 years to venture into theme parks. And for the first nine years of Samsung's existence, it sold noodles and dried fish. Even much less dramatic shifts require time to understand a new market, make mistakes, and correct course. In the arts sector in Singapore, we therefore need to allow ourselves time to transform, well beyond the grant-reporting cycles tied to a single fiscal year.

Part of the problem is a certain fuzziness of self-image. The major players in the sector are rightly classified as charities, recognised for contributing something to the public good, and eligible for donor tax incentive schemes and matching funding. These schemes are enormously helpful to us and gratefully utilised.

But arts groups are one of the few types of charities that can directly *sell* their services to their beneficiaries. We look like—and have come to be subconsciously judged as—entertainment *businesses*, even by ourselves. Animal welfare charities cannot expect stray animals to directly pay for their rescuing or feeding; those groups are dependent on indirect support. But arts charities are constantly confronted with a rhetoric that they need to be financially sustainable, part of that being an implicit pressure to directly monetise their product.

In the Singaporean government's superb pandemic response, the support schemes that were rolled out and adjusted in successive budgets, including raising the Job Support Scheme wage subsidy from 25% to 50%, and several substantial one-off grants, had a hugely positive impact on Checkpoint Theatre's viability. By reducing the daily anxiety of collapse, it allowed us to concentrate on telling Singapore stories in new ways, and making great art. We have done some of our best and boldest work precisely because we knew that we were cushioned somewhat from failure by a supportive funding structure that snapped into place in this time of crisis.

This does not mean that our transformation efforts were a failure. With our podcasts, films, music, and comics, we are slowly building a market, and they may very well be profitable one day—perhaps even massively so. That is certainly my hope. But it may take years, and we will continue to need state support.

I would therefore urge the arts sector to engage with the government in good faith, to rethink the now-widespread philosophy of sustainability, and to relook at how the arts should be funded as we continue to transform and embrace new

challenges. The pandemic has taught us that we can survive and transform when we have more state support and subsidy, not less.

Ultimately, people come first.

At one of the early online industry town halls in 2020, a senior government official said—not unkindly, but gently and factually—“We don’t expect all of you to survive,” no doubt reflecting the gloomy analyses of those days. That galvanised our desire to make sure that not just Checkpoint Theatre survived, but that all of our people would too. We needed to take care of them.

We have been told that Checkpoint Theatre set an industry standard right from the start of the pandemic. We paid our freelancers—actors, designers, technical crew—full fees for cancelled shows, partly because it was the decent thing to do, but also because if these brilliant, self-employed persons had to exit the profession due to economic hardship, the sector as a whole would suffer an irretrievable loss. I am glad many other groups followed our lead. Even as our war chest was depleted, our donors rewarded us by renewing, and sometimes increasing their support.

None of our full-time arts administrators were let go or had their salaries cut. We knew we had to hold on to them and take care of them, rewarding them for their hard work and belief in our ability to survive. Promised raises were honoured. Bonuses were paid, though Claire and I forewent ours in 2020.

We began a practice of morning online check-ins, which continues to this day, where we spend a lot of time on personal things: how are you sleeping; what have you cooked or eaten; what music are you listening to; how is your auntie doing, the one who had the fall? These “watercooler conversations”, such as you would have in a physical office, help cement our identity as people who care about each other first, long before the first work discussion of the day.

Mental health was and is a constant consideration. We make frequent, discreet accommodations for staff who are going through a difficult time with the pandemic. Early on, we resolved never to police online productivity. A midday nap is perfectly fine. Time out to deal with kids or ailing parents is perfectly normal.

Ultimately, the biggest lesson of the pandemic for Checkpoint Theatre was that if we put our people first, whether full-timers or freelancers, they would see us through each stage of survival and transformation.

It is 2022, and we are now in our 20th Anniversary Season. Our multidisciplinary transformation is fully embedded, even as we have returned triumphantly to the stage with the critically-acclaimed *The Fourth Trimester*, filling the huge Drama Centre Theatre with the laughter and tears of our audiences who have stayed with us all through this dark pandemic period. We are grateful for our audience’s support, for the loyalty and hard work of our team members, and for the constant care and support of government agencies. We look forward to an exciting 20 more years and beyond. □

About the Author



Huzir Sulaiman is the co-founder and Joint Artistic Director of Checkpoint Theatre. He oversees the company's development of new work, including plays, audio experiences, video, and comics. A critically-acclaimed and award-winning playwright, his *Collected Plays 1998-2012* was published in 2013. His work has been commissioned five times by the Singapore International Festival of Arts and its predecessor, the Singapore Arts Festival.

Recent directing credits include *The Weight of Silk on Skin* as part of Chamber Readings: Plays by Huzir Sulaiman (2022), *Session Zero* (2021), *Vulnerable* (2021), *Two Songs and a Story* (with Joel Lim, 2020), *Thick Beats for Good Girls* (2018), and *FRAGO* (2017).

Huzir has taught playwriting at the National University of Singapore's University Scholars Programme; at the NUS English Department; the School of the Arts; and other institutions. Huzir was educated at Princeton University, where he won the Bain-Swiggett Poetry Prize, and is a Yale World Fellow.

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Five Skills for the Future of Arts and Culture

Scott Smith

Managing Partner, Changeist, The Hague

Rapid change is happening worldwide within the field of the arts and culture in an era of evolving infrastructure, technology, attitudes, and audience demographics and engagement. Referring to this evolving landscape, Scott Smith, the co-author of an international study on the Future of Culture, talks about five skills that the global arts and cultural sector must learn in order to thrive in the new economy.

One does not have to be a dedicated art critic to know that art and culture are changing rapidly around us. Many of us no longer have to take a day out, purchase tickets, dress up and stroll to a museum, gallery or theatre to engage with art. Increasingly, art meets us where we live: in public parks, shopping malls, in the wilderness, scrolling through social media, and on game consoles. Art, by its very nature, has always taken new and innovative forms, from ochre on sandstone in pre-modern days to images encoded in DNA and “art” rendered by neural networks. As the product of human creativity, art reflects or projects stories of triumph, tragedy, sublimity, and mundanity. It both responds to the moment and reflects eternity. Art does a lot of work—it always has done. But the work of imagining, making, delivering and supporting art is as complex as its many forms.

Here, on the edge of a paradigm shift in how we experience the world—through technology and what we experience in the unfolding, uncontained Anthropocene—the skills needed to do the work of making and bringing art to a dizzying array of publics are reconfiguring. With new tools constantly arriving, ways of working evolving, modes of experience changing, and audiences rapidly diversifying, an inventory of

necessary adaptations in the arts could fill this publication on its own.

Fortunately, two research efforts my colleagues at Changeist and I carried out during the global COVID-19 pandemic in the past two years have given us some focused insights into five particular areas of need, touching disparate but closely connected capabilities that will be increasingly necessary as we move into the next decade of opportunity and challenges. These research projects—a deep dive into the ecosystems of creative R&D we developed for a working group of arts organisations in the UK in late 2020 (still to be published), and a global survey into the Future of Arts and Culture carried out with support of Arup and Therme Group in 2021—pointed in similar directions regarding necessary skills for the near future of the arts, while looking at the landscape demanding these skills through slightly different lenses.

Below is a distillation of what our research showed are the most urgent skills needed, as reflected in these in-depth probes. The list can surely go on, but these were seen by over 200 arts and culture organisations and artists and technologists globally as the most pressing of many future needs.

Technology Skills

Art has always been reliant on technology, from made pigments to polished lenses to digital projections. In recent decades, however, the boundaries around what constitutes art and around many of the disciplines art interacts with have dissolved, creating rich ecosystems

of exploration and experimentation. While many institutions may still separate them, the arts and sciences are deeply intertwined today. The leading edge of artistic experimentation is taking place at the intersections of art and biology, art and material science, art and physics, art and computation and so on. While the latter is getting a tremendous amount of attention through the explosion of digital arts, whether through flashy non-fungible tokens (NFTs) or amazing fusions of arts and artificial intelligence, there is practically no technology stone that is remaining unturned by experimental, and often only loosely directed, collaborations between artists and technologists, or by self-described artists who take it upon themselves to explore new tools.

The cross-sector professionals who responded to help us develop the Future of Arts and Culture study and resulting scenarios saw mastering new forms of digital creation and delivery as a key challenge facing artists and institutions in the coming decade. This recognises the feedback loop of new tools reaching new audiences through new channels—online galleries, performance spaces, marketplaces, new narrative forms—which in turn will drive even more diversification. Tools of the so-called metaverse, such as mixed reality, sensory immersion, visual worldbuilding, narrative creation, and even digital currencies, will require familiarity if not some facility, in order to work with many aspects of art and culture in the years to come. But, as described above, the touchpoints of technology and art have spread far wider, into just about any form of technology or field of science you can imagine. Removing institutional, philosophical or curricular boundaries between arts and

technology will be key to delivering the skills necessary for the future that lies ahead of us.

Networking Skills

Somewhere, you have probably encountered an arts entity or “brand” from across the world, outside its normal geographical boundaries. This may have been through a touring exhibition, a documentary or an online experience. Through globalisation and the spread of platforms like the Internet into most corners of the world, arts institutions big and small are no longer confined to the physical communities they may be rooted in. Formal and informal networks abound in the arts today as well. Many creators, curators and producers shift between institutions, bringing new works to new audiences, creating many interconnected relationships that help hold the arts together.

In years to come, however, these networks may be both critical pipelines *and* lifelines. They will be critical pipelines in that they will play an increasingly important role in bringing new voices and talent from under-recognised perspectives and communities to audiences around the world. They will be critical lifelines as smaller and mid-sized arts institutions and platforms will need to band together to survive and thrive in a more turbulent and uncertain social, political, financial and technological landscape. As funding models shift due to changing priorities, such as climate change, or changing business models, the ability to build, maintain and grow networks and strong connections between and among institutions, creators, supporters and communities will be central to the continued existence of many arts organisations.

Storytelling Skills

Much of art is about storytelling, so this is an eternal skill in many ways. However, the arts have never lived in such a data-driven moment as they do today. Funders struggle to develop and impose metrics for impact in the arts, and lack a clear framework for understanding the ecosystems that make up the arts. Yet, they still live in and place arts organisations—and by extension, artists—in a world that seeks to manage by measurement. This dynamic expands exponentially in digital environments. Finding ways to tell stories about impact that move beyond the data-driven will be a necessity, especially as the digital side of the arts converges ever more closely with the data-driven worlds of media and entertainment.

Likewise, telling stories through different media, and with possibly unfamiliar forms, puts an emphasis on strong narrative skills. The local is increasingly global, and cross-cultural, as well as cross-platform, so stories must be conveyed to unfamiliar audiences, many of whom may be experiencing a culture, form or genre for the first time. For better or worse, attention is a currency with audiences as much as with supporters or patrons, and the options available to the audience already stretch toward the infinite.

Discovery Skills

The participants in our Future of Arts and Culture research shared many priorities for themselves and their organisations coming out of the

pandemic, but one of the clearest areas of energy and enthusiasm for future opportunities centred around bringing new talents, new voices and new forms to audiences. Regions that have been dominant in global arts discourse for decades or centuries are seeing the demand for new talents and ideas, particularly from peoples and communities that have been underrepresented and undervalued. Other regions that are just beginning to make a strong mark on the global cultural scene are eager to bring their own talents to wider publics.

With so much new talent on offer, relying on traditional definitions of curation alone will be insufficient. Active scouting, championing and supporting the elevation of new voices and ideas means sampling from sources and forms well outside one's "local" community, whether that community is socially, economically, geographically or philosophically defined.

Economic Skills

The death of distance created by digitalisation has not only collapsed value chains, but "markets" as well. The ability to reach an audience or patron or, increasingly, a co-creative community means artists and arts organisations have to take on much more responsibility for creating and managing their own economies.

Concern about future business models emerged as the single most important issue for our study participants considering their own organisations or role in the arts going forward. When we scratched the surface on this issue, we found this

encompassed not only worries about traditional sources of funding and the availability of public funding in the future, but also reflected a realisation that creators increasingly go direct-to-audience (dare we even say “consumer”?) in economic relationships. It is not only possible but, for a small but expanding group of artists, even profitable to create and maintain such direct economic relationships with audiences, whether via new forms of fundraising, selling or otherwise distributing ownership through digital platforms, or even creating new financial mechanisms that better suit their work and their communities’ interests. Artists are finding ways to license their own creativity in novel ways, fund their work

through non-traditional mechanisms, or even “assetize” themselves in experimental ways.

Of course, a great deal of arts and culture will continue to be created as a public good, just as there will still be many creators who are not concerned with the economic side of their work. However, as exotic business models proliferate, and arts funding dramatically reconfigures in the coming decade due to economic uncertainty, the pressure to take on management of one’s own business models and audiences will grow, making it even more imperative that economic skills be recognised and included among the creative ones. □

About the Author



Scott Smith is a futurist and founder of Changeist, a research and consulting partnership based in The Hague. With almost 20 years in futures, Scott and his team have worked with a range of global institutions, including SWIFT, UNICEF, The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, AXA, ASOS, BBC R&D, Nesta, ArtScience Museum, Museum of London, the National Gallery, the National Lottery, and the Dubai Future Foundation. He is the co-author of “*How to Future: Leading and Sense-Making in an Age of Hyperchange*,” published by Kogan Page Inspire.

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The Role of Culture in the Post- Pandemic World

Yeoh Chee Yan

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Many contributors to this volume have explored new practices, platforms, perspectives and partnerships that arts and cultural institutions have developed as they learnt to navigate COVID-19. They all explore the topic of creative self renewal from different perspectives. In this closing essay, Yeoh Chee Yan discusses trends shaping the future environment of the cultural sector and the roles that arts and culture can play for Singapore to re-emerge stronger in the post-pandemic world.

COVID-19 buffeted the cultural sector. Cultural venues and events, artists and arts groups, especially those which depend on live audiences and visitorship, were under a cloud. But, as always, there was a silver lining. The pandemic accelerated the blooming of culture on digital platforms and the metaverse. It also drove home the need to cultivate new business and funding models for greater resilience in the face of future disruptions. We weathered the storm and, hopefully, are in a stronger position to face future challenges.

We now stand at a watershed. Unfortunately, even to the most die-hard optimist, the post-pandemic recovery feels fragile. Brittle economic growth, workforce and supply chain disruptions, inflation, income insecurity—particularly for gig workers—have all exacerbated socio-economic inequalities and consequential social pressures. Society has continued to fragment into subcultures, some

of which have global networks, which nurture the polarisation of views fed by misinformation, amoral algorithms, and emotionally-charged narratives on controversial issues. Geopolitically, the outlook is fraught with uncertainty. The world order remains in flux, with European Union (EU)/North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-Russia relations and United States (US)-China relations yet to reach stable equilibrium. It looks like yet more stormy weather ahead.

Still, tremendous opportunities await those who are ready to ride the wave of re-opening. In this context, perhaps the question about the role of culture can be asked in different ways. Do we in the cultural sector see ourselves as price takers or creators of a better future? Do we see a role for the cultural sector in creating economic opportunities and good jobs in the creative industries and the metaverse? Do we think that there is a role for culture in bringing people together and in growing our collective imagination about how we can forge more sustainable, equitable, healthy, and cohesive societies? Do we consider it a social good that culture can inspire a sense of identity, personal growth, and well-being in good times and bad?

As we look ahead to the next decade, what role can culture play in helping us create a way forward? While there certainly are different ways of posing these questions and answers, here are a few ideas about the role of culture in the coming years.

Culture Can Connect Us to a Broader Perspective

An important role for the cultural sector is to illuminate the big issues of our time (Menon 2021). While the Centre for Strategic Futures (CSF)¹ in Singapore aims to encourage policy makers to take the long view and understand the driving forces shaping the world we live in, COVID-19 showed us that global challenges can affect everyone—and how citizens respond is crucial. Our first Foreign Minister, Mr Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, was prescient when he said in 1979, “we are not only living in a world of accelerating change but also of changes which are global in scope and which permeate almost all aspects of human activity...only a future oriented society can cope with the problems of the 21st century” (Rajaratnam 1979). COVID-19 is a sobering reminder that the prospective capacity not just of policy makers, but also of citizens, will make a difference to how well a society adapts to the forces of change. And this capacity depends on how well-informed the man in the street is about trends and challenges shaping the world we live in, as well as whether a majority of citizens are moved to do something about it.

There are many parts to this equation. But trustworthy sources of public information and civic

platforms where citizens can engage one another in constructive dialogue on important issues must be part of it. As safe spaces, cultural institutions are well-placed to play a role. In addition, the power of culture to ignite the collective imagination, its creative capacity to see solutions, and not just problems, is our special value-add.

How can we better play this role? Partnerships between reputable cultural institutions, civic groups and thinktanks doing futures work could break new ground in engaging the public mind. Thus, with regard to their new arts and heritage plans, the National Arts Council (NAC) and the National Heritage Board (NHB) can explore closer partnerships with the CSF. Moreover, cultural spaces are well-positioned to present content and host conversations about global challenges. As an example, NHB promotes environmental sustainability as part of its new heritage plan. “Rooting for Change: Artistic Responses to Climate Change and Sustainability” will be the first in a series of programmes and exhibitions on environmental sustainability planned by the National Museum of Singapore, during which it will host programmes to engage youth and other segments of the public to discuss societal responses to climate change and other global issues.

While heritage is closely linked to history and the preservation of sites, artifacts and traditions of the past, it is also about the transmission of values, intangible cultural heritage, and the choices each

generation makes which shape the heritage we leave for the future. Thus, the Founders' Memorial does not just commemorate the values of the founding generation of leaders of independent Singapore, it also seeks to inspire future generations of Singaporeans to dream and create anew.

Cultural institutions can play an important role as safe and creative spaces within which the public may explore the big issues of our time, particularly if they are not seen as partisan or captured by special interest groups. Likewise, independent arts houses, collectives and artists can also be powerful voices for responsible national and global citizenship.

Culture Can Connect Us with the Wider Society

Accessibility and Inclusiveness, Diversity and Cohesion

Given the trends towards greater socio-economic fragmentation such as socio-economic inequality, demographic and workforce shifts, the drift towards exclusivity of subcultures and polarisation of views—culture plays a critically important role in bringing people together. The arts and heritage can help us encounter,

understand, empathise with, and appreciate people of different religions, races, perspectives and walks of life. They can do this because of the power of culture to connect us through our shared humanity.

To play this role effectively, we must deliberately design our programmes and spaces for accessibility and inclusivity so that Singaporeans from all walks of life can enjoy their own subculture while also encountering others, both in content and conversation, in ways which engender better mutual understanding. This involves mastering the art of bringing people together, playing the role of honest broker, and inspiring the collective imagination to embrace a wider definition of “us”.

Thus, our heritage institutions have increasingly made it a practice to engage sub-ethnic communities in co-creating exhibitions which re-tell the Singapore story, evoking an open society which celebrates diversity, respects differences and values cohesion. A recent example is the Malay Heritage Centre's (MHC) 2021 series of programmes and exhibitions, “Se-Nusantara: Our Stories, A Shared Heritage”. To create it, MHC collaborated with members of five Malay sub-ethnic communities to highlight the Malay community's diversity and shared history. Another example is the Asian Civilisations Museum which has long partnered academia as well as industry, socio-religious and cultural organisations in discussions of intercultural, interreligious, intersectoral exchanges involving Asia and how this has enriched our shared heritage.

Cultural Relations, Soft Power and Global Citizenship

We may also want to look at the role of cultural diplomacy through a wider lens. Given the trends towards major power rivalries, nativism and demonisation of competitor countries, international cultural exchange at the people-to-people level can make for more resilient ties. The cultural content we present to visitors in Singapore and those abroad can also play a role in capturing the global imagination about Singapore. To be credible, the Singapore narrative must be authentic and unafraid of showing us as we are. At the same time, our cultural relations must also say something about the values we believe in as an open, cohesive, plural society.

Exercising their responsibility as global citizens, BTS (a highly popular South Korean boy band) partnered the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) to campaign against youth violence, and spoke at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 2021 about helping young people find their voice. More recently, they visited the White House to talk about anti-Asian racism (Cruz 2022). The six-Academy-Award-winning dark comedy, *Parasite*, explored the universal pressures of social inequality in Korea's unique context. Credit must go to the Korean artists and creative mavens for giving voice to issues of our time. Moreover, their efforts have undoubtedly helped Korea to accrue soft power and have also enhanced its attractiveness as a cultural

destination. So how can international cultural relations help Singapore be seen as an attractive global citizen who "gets it"? Perhaps we have to be a bit more intentional about the values and issues we curate.

Culture Can (Re)Connect Us with Ourselves

Health and Well-Being

Undeniably, the pandemic took a toll on the mental health of many. It drove home the importance of investing in health and personal well-being as keys to vibrant and resilient living. Research by the World Health Organisation's (WHO) Regional Office for Europe has shown that the use of the arts in health care can have lasting benefits for health outcomes (Fancourt and Finn 2019). There is much more we can do in the cultural sector to realise the positive, preventive and therapeutic value of the arts and heritage for health and well-being. This could involve new partnerships between the cultural, health and social service sectors, between cultural spaces and practitioners of intangible cultural heritage such as traditional medicine, the martial arts, meditation, or promoting the learning of skills like dance or art therapy for therapeutic applications.

The Creative Self

At the end of the day, perhaps the fundamental value of culture is how it connects us to what is important to us as individuals. Culture inspires us to reflect on who we are and who we want to be. It helps us make sense of ourselves, and deepens our sense of identity and personal fulfillment. It is an open invitation to exercise our creative capacity as human beings (Arts Council England 2020). Culture may be perceived as a luxury, something high up on Maslow's hierarchy of needs. But therein lies the irony because, like prehistoric cave paintings or the murals at Singapore's Changi Chapel Museum, the role of culture, even in the most challenging times, is to create, capture and

communicate that—of our human experience—which is of enduring value. And while it may be perceived as a private good, the creative self is arguably the basis of the creative economy and of the making of shared identity, both of which are certainly for the common good.

Undoubtedly, the inspiration and creativity of the individual is necessary to ignite the collective imagination and the creative industries. At the same time, culture can connect the individual to a broader perspective, to the wider society, and to a more expansive, creative sense of self. These are some roles culture can play in the next decade. We must be willing to continue to invest in culture to create the shared path ahead. □

About the Author



Ms Yeoh Chee Yan began her public service career in 1985, and served in various appointments, among them Head of the Scenario Planning Office in the Public Service Division, where her team developed the first set of National Scenarios.

She served as Permanent Secretary (Education Development) from 2008-2012. In 2012, she was appointed Permanent Secretary of the new Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth. Under her leadership, MCCY embarked on new strategic plans for sports, heritage and the arts. MCCY also championed capability building in citizen engagement across the Public Service. She also led the Ministry in several successful national initiatives, including the coordination of the SG50 celebrations, the establishment of the National Gallery, the inscription of Singapore Botanic Gardens as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the successful hosting of the 28th SEA Games.

Ms Yeoh currently serves as Chairman of the National Heritage Board and as Senior Advisor, Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth.

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Note

1. Centre for Strategic Futures (CSF), based in the Prime Minister's Office, is a division of the Singapore Public Service.

