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Anchors and Bridges: The Work of the Singapore National Arts Council in Cultural Diversity

Arts and culture have played a vital role in nation-building in Singapore. The results of the 2015 Population Survey conducted by the National Arts Council show that 89% of Singapore residents agree that the arts give us a better understanding of people of different backgrounds and cultures, 78% agree that the arts give us a greater sense of belonging to Singapore, and 78% agree that the arts say who we are as a society and country. Cultural policies and programmes in Singapore have approached this in two ways. The first is the continued emphasis on not simply the preservation but also the celebration of traditional art forms so that the identity of multicultural Singapore is reinforced. This also acknowledges the arts as a means by which we pass down our cultural values and norms. This presentation will describe some of the council's initiatives such as the Seed Grant for Traditional Arts companies and the Traditional Arts Taster Programme for Pre-Schools, and also investigate the challenges and opportunities faced, for example, in defining traditional arts in Singapore as the country's cultural profile continues to evolve. The second approach is to explore how the arts can be used as a platform to create more cross-cultural experiences so that people of different ethnicities learn about one another's customs and beliefs. The presentation will therefore also discuss how the council encourages inter-cultural collaborations as well as curates and programmes inclusive arts experiences.

ANCHORS AND BRIDGES: THE WORK OF THE SINGAPORE NATIONAL ARTS COUNCIL IN CULTURAL DIVERSITY

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The arts have always been a vital component of nation-building efforts in Singapore mainly due to the fact that Singapore has drawn immigrants from across many countries and cultures.

Our nation's leaders recognised early in the country's development the capacity of the arts to bring diverse communities together. The arts provided opportunities for shared experiences, the fostering of national pride, and the creation of narratives and symbols that could articulate a common identity, experience and aspiration.

This was especially important for Singapore during our early years of independence. The Ministry of Culture was set up in 1959 under Minister S. Rajaratnam to embark on "a conscious and deliberate effort to help shape a Malayan culture" (Wong 2017, quoting Rajaratnam, 5). This came in the form of public exhibitions at community centres and performances at the Singapore Conference Hall. One of the Ministry's flagship programmes was the *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat or People's Variety Show*. This was an outdoor event with broad-based appeal featuring Chinese, Indian, and Malay performers. The first such showcase was launched in 1959 at the Singapore Botanic Gardens, where then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan

Yew expressed that, "in the course of time, out of the interaction of our rich and varied cultures, we will be able to breed a new strain of culture ... Here, under open skies, Malays, Chinese, Indians will, I hope, discover the materials for a national art and national culture" (Wong 2017, 7).

Roughly 60 years on, the results of the 2017 Population Survey on the Arts conducted by the National Arts Council show enduring public support for the importance of the arts in city life, with:

1. 89% of Singapore residents agreeing that the arts give us a better understanding of people with different backgrounds and cultures;
2. 78% agreeing that the arts give us a greater sense of belonging to Singapore;
3. 78% agreeing that the arts reflect who we are as a society and country;
4. 78% agreeing that the arts help to draw Singaporeans closer as a community.

Cultural policies and programmes in Singapore continue to recognise the critical role played by the arts in our multiracial society. Continued emphasis is placed not only on the preservation, but also the celebration of traditional art forms, especially those of Chinese, Malay, Indian and South Asian heritage as the majority cultures in Singapore.

Reinforcing Singapore's identity as a multicultural society is important so that all Singaporeans can see that there is a place for everyone here, that this is our home. Having active, vibrant, and admired artists and arts groups within each of our main cultural groups means that we see our traditions and values being respected, our cultural icons and mythologies revered. This translates into a stronger sense of belonging.

In 2010, the Council launched the Traditional Arts Plan to help provide more opportunities for Singaporeans to "explore their roots and achieve a deeper connection with their communities". This was done through over 100 traditional arts groups as well as 1,400 arts activities a year (about 19% of the total arts performances a year) "[serving] as the basis for our national identity and cultural continuity" (National Arts Council, 2017). A total of S\$23 million was set aside to be invested over five years in support of the various initiatives under the plan. A dedicated Traditional Arts Seed Grant, for example, was introduced in 2011 to help traditional arts groups strengthen their organisational capabilities. Today, many of these groups such as Apsaras Arts Ltd. and Siong Leng Musical Association are now part of the Council's Major Company¹ scheme. They play a crucial leadership role in our local arts scene alongside their counterparts in the contemporary art forms.

The plan also makes advocacy and audience development a priority as some members of the public may have preconceived ideas about the traditional arts. It is therefore important to create space for the traditional arts to be (re-) introduced to the public, allowing the quality of the work to convince and convert audiences. Over the years, the Council has worked with various partners to provide traditional arts groups with high-profile platforms to reach new audiences. In 2016 the Mid-Autumn Festival at Gardens by the Bay, for example, featured 416 performers, and enjoyed a crowd of 61,000.

Credit must also be given to our national arts institutions. The Esplanade, for instance, organises culturally specific arts festivals throughout the year - namely, *Huayi*, *Kalaa Utsavam* and *Pesta Raya*. These are timed to coincide with the respective ethnic celebrations, allowing commissions and showcase opportunities to traditional arts groups. These artists are often invited to perform at the Esplanade's broader art-form specific festivals as well. Chowk Productions, is one such invitee. It has performed at both *Kalaa Utsavam*, the venue's festival of Indian arts, as well as its *dans* festival which is not culturally-specific.

As in many countries, the population demographic continues to evolve in Singapore. How do we continue to define what constitutes traditional arts in Singapore as we shift increasingly beyond our Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others framework? According to the Department of Statistics (Singapore) website (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2018), an estimated 30% of people living in Singapore at present are neither Singapore citizens nor Permanent Residents. In addition, 20% of all marriages now involve people of different races (Choo, 2017). Even within cultural groups, internal diversity is growing. For example, Indian immigrants to Singapore continue to be drawn from across the subcontinent. Internal diversity can also be observed in immigrants from China. Tensions around newly naturalised Singaporeans as well as differences in languages and social conventions also present new challenges. The cause of these tensions can, however, also be opportunities.

How can the evolving role of the arts help, not only in mitigating such tensions, but actually draw on these differences to foster stronger, more cohesive communities?

This is why, even as we deepen support for individual forms of traditional art, we must also continue to create more points of intersection across cultures, and broaden opportunities for

Singaporeans to access and understand people of different ethnic backgrounds.

The Council's second approach is, thus, to actively explore how the arts can provide more cross-cultural experiences. Knowledge is understanding. The NAC believes that by providing people of diverse ethnicities with the platforms to learn about one another's customs and beliefs, barriers can be broken down. Similar to the *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat*, free or low-cost community-oriented arts festivals therefore continue to be run by the Council. These are designed to be both accessible and appealing to a wide audience. The inclusion of traditional artists and groups at events (such as the Council's Arts in Your Neighbourhood series) in town centres result in opportunities for them to extend their work to a culturally diverse crowd, beyond the usual audience that supports their performances. Spectators are also exposed to innovative work by artists trained in both the traditional and contemporary arts, such as Maya Dance Theatre, *P7:ISMA*, and SA the Collective. These performers challenge outdated expectations of cultural traditions. In addition, the public nature of such events mean they are attended by new Singapore citizens as well as migrant and transient workers living in Singapore.

Cultivating the young is, of course, key, and so, strong school programming is crucial. From humble beginnings in 1993, the Council's Arts Education Programme (NAC-AEP) database now lists nearly 2,000 arts enrichment programmes which schools can purchase at subsidised rates, with funding from the Tote Board Arts Grant. Since 2001, the Council has also run an Artist-in-School Scheme: a match-making programme connecting artists to schools which want to cultivate a long-term partnership. Traditional arts feature significantly in both these flagship programmes, with Ding Yi Music Company, NADI Singapura, Sri Warisan Som Said Performing Arts Ltd., the Temple of Fine Arts, and the Teng Ensemble being just some of the traditional groups available to schools for NAC-AEP workshops, assembly shows, and excursions.

Such initiatives expand offerings in schools beyond what the schools' own arts teachers can provide. More recently, the Council has also started a series of taster music, dance, and storytelling programmes specifically for pre-schools and kindergartens to introduce traditional art forms in a fun and accessible way to children from the Nursery Two to Kindergarten Two levels. Another school programme of note is the Dance Talent Development Programme, a partnership between the Council, the Ministry of Education, and LASALLE College of the Arts, which was launched in 2013. About 150 – 170 Secondary Two and Three students who are passionate about dance, from around 50 – 70 secondary schools, come together each year for a series of workshops conducted by six dance companies covering six dance forms. These include the Chinese Dance (Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre), Indian Dance (Bhaskar's Arts Academy), and Malay Dance (Era Dance Theatre Ltd.). It is an opportunity for these fourteen and fifteen-year olds to make like-minded friends from different schools, and bond over a common love for the arts. More importantly, it means students trained in one cultural dance in their own school Co-Curricular Activity, for example, are now exposed to other cultural dances as well, and learning them from the leading Singapore professionals of that form. The Council believes it is very important for children of all races to be introduced to - and inspired by - artists of different cultures and traditions, and to cultivate an appreciation of their creative talent.

Of course, the works themselves can also cross-cultural boundaries. The Council supports many productions, bringing artists of different ethnic backgrounds and practices together to create striking and original presentations. An example is *Crossing Cultures* by the Singapore Chinese Orchestra which featured Eurasian, Indian, and Malay performers collaborating with Chinese musicians. TheatreWorks is one company with a long tradition of intercultural works, drawing on practices from across Asia. Also worth highlighting is the Intercultural

Theatre Institute, a theatre school which emphasises intercultural forms in their training.

With the increased ease of subtitling, not only is access widened to non-native speakers, more theatre groups are creating works that feature multiracial casts speaking in multiple languages as part of the performance. Recent examples include The Necessary Stage's *Model Citizens*, and Wild Rice's ambitious *Hotel* which told the story of Singapore's history through the decades, and through characters speaking in English, Malay, Hokkien, Cantonese, Mandarin, Tamil, Urdu, Tagalog, and Japanese.

Hotel which premiered at the 2015 Singapore International Festival of the Arts commissioned by the Council, is an example of how the arts can invite conversations about national identity, and what it means to be Singaporean, forging deeper understanding through reflection, dialogue, and critical discourse. These works speak powerfully to the wider Singapore public because they are contextualised within, and also address very Singaporean experiences and concerns. Under its *Both Sides, Now* banner, Drama Box presents interactive community performances and visual art exhibitions that deal with the topic of living with dying, and brings these to open-air public squares. People from different backgrounds converge, and engage one another on issues that matter to them. The company's *Trick or Threat*, a forum theatre piece, dealt specifically with the issue of what it means to be a true "community" in the event of terror on Singapore's underground transport system. Do you stay united as a people, or do you allow yourself to fall apart because of racial stereotypes and prejudices? Such programmes by socially conscious arts groups expand the national conversation beyond one's ethnic identity towards a larger one as a Singaporean.

The Council remains committed to the Traditional Arts Plan, with \$5M now set aside annually from when the first iteration of the plan concluded in 2015. One vital component is the establishment of a traditional arts digital repository where source materials will be digitised and compiled

for easy sharing with the wider public, and to ensure oral traditions and practices passed down from one generation to another through apprenticeship are not lost. Another highlight is the setting up of a traditional arts centre, scheduled for launch in the first half of 2019. Situated at the former Stamford Arts Centre, and located opposite the Sri Krishnan and Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho temples, the centre is expected to house around eight to ten tenants. These will be either traditional arts groups or artists keen to work with such groups, as the Council is mindful of the need to foster partnerships, including those in the wider culturally rich Bras Basah precinct where the centre is located. "Our vision is for traditional groups that also think about contemporisation ... collaborations that may be interdisciplinary or looking at contemporary versus traditional forms," explains Elaine Ng, Senior Director, Performing Arts at the Council (Martin, 2018).

The Literary Arts department of the Council will also continue to increase its emphasis on supporting translation work in Singapore to bring stories from different cultures and languages to a wider pool of readers. Alongside the existing Publishing & Translation grant and new capability development opportunities for translators who aspire to upgrade their skills, literary translation has also been articulated as one of the priority areas for the Council's Creation Grant as well as its undergraduate and postgraduate scholarship schemes.

Questions remain as Singapore continues on its journey. Firstly, how explicit should we be when creating opportunities for the arts to address cultural differences? We have noted above some examples of programmes where the emphasis is on the distinctive qualities of different cultural art forms, and others where we simply want to allow the space for a more organic, shared experience to emerge. Secondly, if we view the arts as a tool for helping us articulate a national identity, then we perhaps need to be clearer about what is considered "uniquely Singaporean" art. Is it a specific cultural identity? Our own unique mix of cultures? Or anything that is rooted in the

Singapore experience, made by artists holding a pink Singapore identity card? What about immigrants who have lived in Singapore for many years and had been nurtured and inspired by Singapore?

Finally, when we talk about being a truly inclusive society, we need to consider the role arts can play to bring all of us together, not only in terms of race and cultural identity, but also people of different abilities and disabilities, economic and educational backgrounds, and points of view.

A version of this paper was first presented at the National Institute of Education (Singapore) on 26 April 2017 at the UNESCO-NIE Centre for Arts Research in Education (CARE)'s International Perspectives on Cultural Diversity and Arts Education forum.

Notes:

1. The Council provides organisational funding to identify Major Companies for a commitment of three years, as opposed to funding on an individual project basis. A Major Company must produce work of high quality, contribute significantly to the arts scene in Singapore, and have strong administrative and organisational structures. Major Companies referenced in this paper include TheatreWorks, Intercultural Theatre Institute, The Necessary Stage, Wild Rice, and Drama Box.

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