Unpacking the Value of Culture

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Editor-in-Chief (EIC): Thank you, Gee Keow, for agreeing to be part of this conversation. I remember that, while you were in MCCY, you had talked about the ministry being, in some ways, the custodian of the soul of the country. As you reflect, after over five years in MCCY, how do you think the arts and heritage contribute to that soul?

Gee Keow (GK): I'll list two examples of where I think arts and culture play an important role. The first was during COVID-19, when we had to get everyone to socially distance and essentially stop all activities. This hurt the arts and culture sector significantly because so much of what we do in the arts and culture is connecting people, bringing people together, and helping them reflect. This was certainly hampered. But, at the time, we had to prioritise keeping people safe. Then, when we opened up to smaller groups and in different formats, I thought the arts community really came through, finding different ways to collaborate and perform, whether it was online or in venues.

After COVID was behind us, I felt that the arts sector really came together in a period of helpful catharsis and reflection for the nation. During the entire cycle of COVID, observing how the arts sector responded, I thought it had the ability to uplift minds and hearts in a thoughtful, meaningful way. I also remember the National Gallery's post-COVID exhibition which featured several artists reflecting on the COVID period. I think the arts sector has the ability to force us to take a look at what happened, how we felt. Its approach is so different from that of the typical Singaporean, especially the typical Singaporean public servant; we don't naturally respond in an emotional way. But when you emerge from a period like COVID, I think you have to draw those emotions out, reflect on what happened, and how it affected you as a person. The arts and culture domain provided a safe space for us to do that; it enabled a quiet uplifting; a realisation that "now I can let go and move on". The arts have a very deep way of connecting with people and asking people to connect with themselves.

The other example of how arts and heritage rally Singaporeans was when we got our hawker culture inscribed on UNESCO's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Singaporeans really rallied around this. Of course, everyone loves food here, but our inscription meant more than that. It was about our community and how, as a multicultural, multi-racial, multi-religious nation, we have been able to come together, enjoy our common spaces, and make our own distinctive culture out of our interactions. It was great how everyone recognised that, and how the hawkers themselves were excited to be seen as a distinctive part of our Singaporean culture. We keep saying diversity is strength. But when you talk about hawker food, diversity *is* strength.

EIC: That's an elegant way of framing it: cultural experiences helping people take stock and move on, but also bringing people together. Talking about taking stock and moving on leads us to think about the future. I'd like to connect this thought to the two arts and heritage strategic plans launched last year. How do the plans of the two statutory boards contribute to MCCY's three-C outcome: Caring people, Cohesive society, and Confident nation?

GK: There's a strong community mission undergirding both plans, even in their first iterations. This is still very important to us. The shift is having the community work together with us now for both plans. Certainly, a sense of joint ownership can only lead to a better outcome. So it's not just the government wanting to push, promote or subsidise culture; it's also about the arts community and the people. Hence the emphasis on partnerships and engagement.

Arts and culture are a wonderful way to bring people together and help build a cohesive society. I remember discussing local-foreigner integration at a MCCY meeting and saying how we can't simply run a programme called "Local-Foreigner Come Together". But a thoughtful arts or heritage programme can bring people of different and diverse backgrounds together in a setting that they find natural and comfortable. People can interact with each other authentically, and serendipitous and spontaneous moments will arise. Of course, there must be some design behind the programme to enable this.

Another interesting aspect of both arts and heritage plans represents the collective desire of the HQ and the agencies: to unlock the economic potential of the cultural sector. Our SG Arts Plan talks about employment opportunities and collaborating with adjacent industries, while our SG Heritage Plan seeks to improve the sustainability of heritage businesses and careers. This is a slight shift in our strategies for culture, but we should not be apologetic.

EIC: I believe the economic contribution of the sector is currently not very significant?

GK: Yes, but we want an arts and culture community which doesn't shy away from considering how it can contribute to the economy, how it can give Singapore a creative cutting edge, and remind Singaporeans that our imagination can be boundless. We can try different things, for instance, in the spaces where we live in or work. How can the arts and culture sector contribute to developing the whole person, imbuing qualities that will benefit the Singaporean throughout his or her life stage?

We have arts and cultural programmes in our schools, and our teachers teach innovation and creativity. But when we come out of school, life becomes less structured. That's when these opportunities to engage with the arts and culture can keep us growing and learning. I'm old enough in public service to remember the Renaissance City strategy. We pushed really hard on the economic objectives in that strategy. Then, in 2012, when MCCY was formed, the emphasis was much more on community. As you said, we realised there wasn't so much that the sector could contribute to the nation's GDP. Now we're swinging back a little, trying to find a healthy balance.

EIC: I like this idea of the boundless imagination. I wonder how the arts, heritage, and culture can help stimulate or inform the current work that you're doing now. How might that help the public servant of the future?

GK: Definitely, we want a spirit of creativity and imagination in the public service core. Public Service Transformation is a critical mission in the Public Service Division. How do we do today's work differently? But, also, what's the different work that we need to do for the future?

Increasingly, we are going to need our public servants to, not just tread where people have trodden before, but be prepared to do something different, explore something different.

Figure 1. *ubin* by Drama Box, Singapore International Festival of Arts (SIFA), 2022. Image courtesy of Arts House Limited.

You can't just tell someone: think out of a box, be creative. But we can help by providing tools, some framework, some exposure, some inspiration. Here is where I think the arts and culture can play a role.

Just recently I had a chat with an NParks officer, and we were talking about the trade-offs between conserving natural heritage and development. We were talking about how to achieve balance, and he felt we should be more confident that Singaporeans can understand and make some of these trade-offs. He mentioned an epiphanic moment he experienced when attending a forum theatre performance by Drama Box, where a question was posed to the audience about whether a piece of land should be developed. The audience was divided into four corners, each with a decision to be made. The NParks officer realised that, compared to the start of the performance, the audience had become much more circumspect by the end of it, having realised that there were so many considerations beyond the ones they had first come with. To him, this was an epiphany because he realised he could use a tool like that. Secondly, he realised that if you give

Singaporeans the right environment, they can make good choices.

That's an example of how the arts and culture can actually be a tool, and provide a framework or pathway. It doesn't mean that the officer will go back and stage more forum theatre. But he gained more confidence and a larger toolbox. And he can work better with Singaporeans going forward whenever such major decisions need to be made.

EIC: I suppose that the format of forum theatre allows you to hear different perspectives. It must be useful for a public servant dealing with complicated issues.

GK: The other thing is that, over the years, we've had policy layered upon policy. Sometimes when I do my talks, I show this crazy picture of a New York underground piping, with things criss-crossing over and on top of each other. You would imagine that any time someone needs to touch a pipe, you would have to figure out the engineering around it. Similarly, our policies are so intricately linked.

When HDB wants to make a change, you've got to think about how it will affect CPF, and, if it affects CPF, how it will affect healthcare. Complexities like that. We need public officers to realise that it's not just that the future is complex. We ourselves have laid a complicated set of criss-crossing frameworks which we now need to be mindful of.

Complexity is not black and white, of course. And the arts and culture have the role of helping people experience that complexity and how it affects human lives. You may not solve a complex problem with the arts, but you may gain the confidence to deal with it and take the first steps to figuring things out. Surely this is better than saying: no, I give up, I don't care, I have put my blinkers on.

Arts and culture generally deal very well with ambiguity. Whether it's our public officers or Singaporeans at large, I believe exposure to arts and culture can help us become much more comfortable with uncertainty. We will need their skills and dispositions so that we can manage the future. Returning to the earlier point about MCCY outcomes, if we give up on dealing with ambiguity, I'd say this is not a confident nation. To me, that is a self-defeatist set of attitudes. I think it comes back to how can we help Singaporeans, help Singapore feel that it can manage. Confidence is also tied to identity and nation. When we think about Joseph Schooling, we feel a sense of national pride, that his achievement is also our achievement.

EIC: Any thoughts on how the sense of confidence works in the cultural space?

GK: I come back to the SG Arts Plan. One of its thrusts is internationalisation, which means getting our arts groups out there, showcasing what Singapore is about, and what it can achieve.

As with the Joseph Schooling, if we have arts groups doing very well on the international platform, we feel a sense of pride, and this contributes to our Singaporean sense of identity. The not-so-pleasant reality is that some in Singapore still feel there is a need for international endorsement first before we say something is very good.

EIC: Can I return to the theme for this edition: any thoughts about the roles that we see in culture, whether in the museums or the arts sector? There is also the well-known statistic that at least one third of the resident arts workers are Self-Employed Persons (SEP).

GK: My own sense is that the arts and culture sector is significantly different from other sectors. In the transport sector, there are private hire drivers, taxi drivers and so on. Traditionally, their profile is very different from the SEPs in the cultural sector who are graduates and professionals. Based on intuition and anecdotal evidence, the SEPs in our sector are voluntary SEPs. It's not that they cannot get jobs elsewhere. The nature of the sector requires professionals and higher order thinking, but the structure of the sector is that many of these roles are not full-time jobs. So if we can make them less precarious in the future—and by this I mean ensuring they have enough for retirement and understanding how they deal with low seasons—then the fact that they are SEPs shouldn't be an issue.

In fact, how do we turn that into a strength of the sector? After all, arts organisations have the ability to assemble different people with the different skills needed for a particular show or project. If you think about it, it's kind of like tech development, where you need to create an app, or an IT platform. It is very agile. Once you're done, you disassemble, and when another project comes up, a different team is put together. Having a strong SEP workforce without

the precarities will allow our arts organisations to create offerings with the best individual talents. For the SEPs themselves, this allows them to get involved in a range of projects which they feel moved to do, or which they feel they have the skills to contribute towards. So there's huge labour flexibility, something that we've experimented on and would love in other sectors.

EIC: But there's a point of tension there, isn't there? On one hand, an arts SEP chooses this path, with this dimension of precarity. Meanwhile, the government, or its agencies, are actively thinking about helping the segment or smoothening the kinks. Could I take a hard-nosed position and say, well, you chose this precarity?

GK: Even if the individual volunteered to be in these roles, the question I would ask is: is there still asymmetric information? Have they remembered that they have to take care of their retirement, and so on? I think that government can play a role, and make that information available. And if you still choose not to do it, then so be it.

This is the case for many government policies. Many of our financial assistance policies are created in the spirit of a social compact: I can give you the money, but you need to fulfil your end of the bargain as well. So in this instance, the government can provide information and full access to your CPF, reminding you to contribute, and ensuring employers are responsible. But then, once that's settled, the individual has to make the choice. It is ultimately incumbent on the individuals to have to take care of their lives.

I'd like to raise another area for discussion. As I was looking through your questions and thinking about the arts sector, it struck me that the sector should also not fall into silos. The question is: how can

the government and the arts fraternity create the conditions where people can come together across disciplines? Also, how, as a government or funding agency, can we be agnostic about what disciplines you engage in or how you pull together teams?

Because when you stage a production, you do bring in people with different sets of skills. In a musical, you've got the acting, singing, dancing, the props guys, the lighting designer, and so on. But we need to move beyond that. How can other disciplines become more enmeshed in the performance or the creative process part itself? Or, at the least, how can we avoid unnatural barriers to bringing people together for multidisciplinary work?

I think it applies to artistic expressions of our multiculturalism as well. So why must all our arts performances just be of one sort of cultural genre? Can we have more groups, more people interested in creating multicultural offerings?

EIC: Yes, in a way that is not tokenistic.

GK: When I was in Shanghai, I met a young Singaporean studying dance in Beijing on a scholarship and remember her recounting how there was an event where everybody had to put on a national costume, and she couldn't figure out what it was. She lamented: if only we had something that was very distinctively Singaporean, that represented a fusion of all our cultures, not just a baju kurong, or some Merlion image. So again, it's back to how we can capture the multi-disciplinary and multicultural without being contrived. But you need the fraternity to really believe in it, for this to happen.

EIC: This connects nicely to the idea of the creative economy. Certainly it's about getting out of the silos within culture, but, at a macro level, you can

Figure 2. Dancers from Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre being featured through holomesh projection at *Routes: A Multi-Perspective Exploration of Traditional Arts* in Singapore, an immersive exhibition about Singapore's dance pioneers and practitioners presented at Stamford Arts Centre from 1 July to 12 September 2021. Image courtesy of The National Arts Council (Singapore).

dissolve the barriers across different parts of the economy as well.

GK: We've always said that our artists and designers can go into healthcare. You can use the same principles and think about how you design a process or an experience for a patient. There can be roles in every sector. You just have to be able and prepared to relate what you do to that particular sector, rather than to be confined in your own thinking, that you must be working in the arts and cultural sector.

EIC: That must also involve education and changing the mindsets of young people.

GK: Yes, we can move more upstream. Maybe, at the pre-tertiary level, we can identify and discuss the broader issues, but once you get to university, there should be more intentionality in introducing young people to the jobs they can have. Career fairs at universities should also feature consulting companies, healthcare companies, and banks. Our undergraduates should be prepared to consider roles in different sectors, even if they are trained in the arts or humanities.

EIC: Can I take a step back here and talk about culture broadly? MCCY has the word "culture" in its name, and your current role also deals with the working culture in public service. Can you talk about this?

GK: In terms of the DNA of a public officer, what we definitely want in terms of values is integrity and a strong sense of mission. But in terms of the other dispositions, I think we need public officers who are able to deal with change. We had earlier talked about the ability to deal with ambiguity, and the confidence to overcome it. One of the shifts that we've made over the years in public service culture is to be more citizen-centric. What that really means is to deeply connect with Singaporeans and their way of life. That should inform how we think about policies, programmes, schemes. So for an individual public

officer to connect with a citizen and know how to do that, empathy becomes key. And, again, arts and culture helps build that up in a person.

Another shift is the emphasis on care: care not only for citizens, but also for our own public officers' well-being. Many of our public officers dive in 130%. Then the question is: who is helping to take care of our own public officers? Part of it has to be self-care and the recognition of its importance. But a big part of it also has to be what the individual organisation does.

One final shift in the culture of public service has got to do with One Public Service. It's about being able to identify with someone else who may not even be in your ministry, and be willing to collaborate and work across ministries. This connects to the multi-disciplinary approach that I mentioned earlier—being able to look beyond one's bounds.

EIC: It seems hard because everybody has different KPIs or agency outcomes. Some officers might say it's extra work without clear benefits…

GK: I agree. I don't think we've cracked it yet. But all public officers share the same mission, and that's serving Singapore and Singaporeans. So at least we have that higher order mission statement. The question is: how do we live it on a day-to-day basis? That's the part that is very uneven right now. Some of that tension has got to do with resourcing. If I lean forward and do, is anyone going to fight me? Another part of it is recognition and reward at the individual level. If I am willing to do this, what do I get? Will somebody turn around and bite me?

As hard as it is, it's something that we need to keep working at. When it comes to arts and culture, it really is that issue of empathy, deeply connecting, and the disposition to embrace change. We talked about how arts and culture can provide the tools

and frameworks. Over time, it can give us in public service the disposition and inspiration to deal with the most difficult and uncertain things.

EIC: What about the idea of aesthetics that is associated with the arts? Does that play any part at all in this conversation?

GK: I suppose it makes it easier to connect. In a sense, it's instrumental… Perhaps a means to an end. If something is aesthetically pleasing, you will gravitate towards it. You'll be more curious about it. Of course, curiosity is important and culture can help us learn to be curious and keep an open mind. If something is aesthetically pleasing, it naturally draws you in and you want to know a bit more. But I'm cognizant that the term aesthetically pleasing is subjective. What may be pleasing to you is not pleasing to me. I remember some of the more provocative, less aesthetically pleasing art I encountered overseas. It made me think about why I felt so uncomfortable and why I wanted to walk away from the exhibit quickly. Such art challenges your own perceptions of what is good or bad, what's tolerable, what's not, and makes us reflect further.

EIC: Back to the theme of this edition, do you have any thoughts about the future of jobs, especially in the cultural sector? We're all going to be disrupted, aren't we?

GK: I think we should be both worried and not worried. We should be worried from the point of view that all these new unknowns are entering our lives. But it will only stay worrisome if our response is to put on the blinkers, right? A better response would be: how do we work with the unknown? How do we make sense of it? How do we create new offerings? For instance, how can you use ChatGPT to make a different art form, a different product, a different

artwork? It's the same with digitalisation, everyone using different tools to create a more immersive environment, for example.

I believe it's possible to work with some of these new technologies and make something different. It may not be better, but it will be different. At the systems level, that diversity of offerings can induce, invite, make people think, reflect, as well as inspire. I always think that it's the response that matters, not so much whether the technology is coming to kill us, kill our jobs. We have to be prepared and open-minded. And we have to deploy technology responsibly. For instance, we now have a version of ChatGPT for use within the public sector, and it works well, cutting down a lot of manual work, like summarising notes of interviews with people.

Some of this technology, I think, can benefit from the folks in our creative sector. They can help to improve AI. People who are accustomed to dealing with other people empathetically can easily snuff out the biases that may be inherent in machine learning, identifying what doesn't seem ethical, and helping to work out the kinks in the algorithm.

EIC: It's good to learn that the public service is actively optimising these tools in the public sector. My last question is more personal: if your child says, mum, I want to pursue a degree in archaeology. Or maybe the child wants to go to a dance school. How would you respond?

GK: I think my first question would be: why? I would be supportive as long as he or she can articulate why. My MCCY stint really made me appreciate arts and culture jobs. And while I'm not looking for a specific right answer, I think if someone is able to explain why, that person ought to be given the opportunity. But for everything we want to plunge headlong into,

I also ask for an exit strategy. For example, "Why don't you try it for three years? And then we will review". And if it's not working out for you, then do something else. I'm aware not everyone has the luxury of having that sort of conversation or exit strategy. And the opportunity cost could be very high. If you are someone who has very constrained resources, you may not be able to afford it.

Here's where I think Singaporean society can do better. We have certain stereotypes and we value certain things in a particular way. But if our society is open to what success means and to people pursuing dreams, we'd have many more opportunities and choices. An individual passionate about the arts can still take a role in a bank, and then do arts and culture on the side. For them, the arts is core and their bank job is really just helping to support that passion. With a good variation of opportunities, there will also be others who go into arts and culture knowing that the remuneration isn't going to be the same as their peers.

If you measure your life not in dollars and cents, but in terms of meaning and impact, you can be richer for it; you can end up more fulfilled than your friend who became an investment banker. What we do need is a Singaporean society which values different strengths, and does not make one feel second-class.

EIC: Is there anything we can do to help broaden the meaning of "success"? What can the government do? What can we do as individuals?

GK: Actually, what the government has done is to mainstream some of this. Look at how SOTA, has made mainstream the value of arts and culture. What the fraternity can do is make sure that they're relevant. They should work hard at getting recognised, and demonstrate their value. Then I

think all these other things will naturally fall into place. It cannot be a sector that beats its chest and says, I need the suffering to become a better artist. I don't think the sector can afford to do that. Certainly not in Singapore, because it's irresponsible as well.

It's not going to be overnight. It will take time. Given the fact that I see parents willing to have their kids pursue arts and culture, similar to what I see with our Sports School, I think we are evolving in a good way. More parents today are willing to invest in their children and help them grow. We just need society to come along, to support our own talents.

EIC: That's an optimistic note to end on. Do you have any final thoughts?

GK: I would like to appeal to the arts community not to see the word "economy" as a dirty word. I've talked about how artists need to be relevant, and how they can make a contribution. It's not an "either or" binary. Every time someone uses the word "trade-off", I stop, pause, and try and change that to an "and".

So it's never about one extreme or another. It's more about how we can strive to move forward. Hopefully, the arts fraternity embraces that as well. It's not just art for art's sake; it's also about what one can do for society, as well as how one can embrace the economic side of things in order to support their journey towards their overall goals. If we do this well, I believe, over time, society will naturally rally and be prepared to support the arts community.

Some issues we'll have to grapple with are intellectual property rights and how to create good jobs, issues which are related to the economy. So we've got to be quite intentional in how we want to shape that to the advantage of our arts and cultural sector as well.

I understand there is some discomfort with the use of "cultural workforce". We have to be mindful, but, again, how can the government connect with the arts community such that we can understand their language and they can understand where we're coming from? In reality, the cultural workforce *is* a cultural asset. So how do we help uplift those who work in the sector?

Furthermore, we're not done with the project of nation-building in Singapore. And I believe the cultural sector has a very critical role in nation-building and everything we talked about: identity, building empathy, having a spirit of boundlessness, being able to overcome issues, and dealing with ambiguity. The arts and heritage communities contribute to all of that and play a role in nation-building. Culture helps us understand where we come from and anchors us, even as we make necessary changes for the future.

EIC: Indeed, good reminders for all of us who work in the sector. Thank you, Gee Keow, for the candid and insightful discussion today. We wish you all the best in your new role. □

About the Author

Tan Gee Keow is the Permanent Secretary of the Public Service Division, Prime Minister's Office. Prior to this, she was the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, and had also served in various appointments across the Civil Service. Tan graduated from the London School of Economics and Political Science with a Bachelor of Science in Economics. She obtained her Master of Philosophy in Economics from the University of Cambridge in the United Kingdom, and a Master of Science in Management from the Stanford University Graduate School of Business. During Tan's time at the Ministry, she had the privilege of working with practitioners, patrons and colleagues from the arts and heritage fraternity who were not only professionals in their fields, but were also passionate about how they could make an impact on building a resilient, cohesive, and confident Singaporean society together.