The Four-Letter Problem:

Thoughts on Cultural Leadership and Cultural Work in a VUCA/BANI World

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In the brave new world after the global pandemic, how has cultural work shifted, and what does leadership mean for this dynamic sector? Joy Tan, who has served on the boards of cultural organisations, offers a perspective.

It is two years post-COVID-19. Holographic avatars of 1960s-era ABBA are playing to sell-out crowds at the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in London. Liu Cixin's cerebral science fiction novel 三体 (*The Three-Body Problem*) has been turned into an eight-episode Netflix series in English for an international audience. Legislation has just been passed requiring Singaporean employers to make flexible work arrangements available, though this may be futile if Elon Musk is right about the future and jobs for humans disappear.

That future has never been brighter—or more uncertain. On one hand, advances in medicine, public health, and living standards mean that overall life expectancy has more than doubled since 1900, while the proportion of the global population living in extreme poverty has fallen from 50% in 1950 to less than 10% in 2019. Conversely, wars, climate change, and, yes, the digital revolution, are not just disruptive forces, but pose existential challenges for the world and Singapore.

The global uncertainty is indisputably more of a problem for the cultural sector. Its workers and practitioners, particularly those in the performing arts, enjoy less job resilience and career security than workers in more traditional industries. They suffer disproportionately from precarity, largely because of the pervasiveness of freelance, short-term, casual, undocumented, and underpaid work in the sector. This was amply illustrated by the impact of COVID-19. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) 2022 report indicates that 30% of cultural workers are self-employed compared with the OECD average of 15%. In Singapore, the latest statistics show that one in three workers in the cultural sector is self-employed.

The decades-old business school parlance VUCA—describing the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous global environment—has evolved. The post-pandemic world appears to now be encapsulated by a new set of four letters, BANI, reflecting a world that is no longer only volatile but brittle, not just uncertain but now anxious, no longer merely changing but nonlinear, and not simply ambiguous but incomprehensible. How can our sector's leaders and workers better ready ourselves for this VUCA/BANI future?

Four Leadership Solutions: Agility, Transparency, Community, Purpose

What an uncertain and disrupted environment most requires, according to Harvard Business School, is agile leadership and organisational flexibility. Leaders should recognise the most detailed budgets and scenarios can be superseded overnight. Rather than stick to rigid annual plans, they need to foster a climate of experimentation, learning, and enthusiasm for the unknown.

Figure 1. Adrian Pang (left), Gaurav Kripalani (centre), and Ivan Heng (right) in *The Commission*, a co-production by Pangdemonium, Singapore Repertory Theatre and Wild Rice, 2021. Photo by Crispan Chan. Image courtesy of the Singapore Repertory Theatre.

Corporate leaders can learn much about agility from the cultural sector, and the artistic process. Take for example the inherently fluid, dynamic and improvisational nature of jazz. During a performance, the orchestra plays itself, riffing off of each other, in an echo of the US War College's adage, "Plans are worthless, but (the planning process) is everything". Performing artists learn to deal with the unexpected by practising their craft and experimenting on-the-job.

Another key leadership quality is transparency. Keeping stakeholders in the dark and hoarding information within a small group of power brokers is no longer an advisable boardroom tactic. Given the challenges to comprehend, let alone plan for, a brittle and nonlinear future, surely the best way to address an anxious workforce and business partners is via a culture of openness and accountability? Leaders should surface problems as they arise, clearly communicate what isn't working, and take responsibility for solutions.

Cultural leaders and workers intuitively know the transformative power of the arts on the human spirit, but also believe that arts organisations are essential to a flourishing community and world. Leaders should see their organisations first and foremost as part of an ecosystem, and, as Kenneth Foster argues in the 2nd edition of *Creating Sustainable Arts Organisations*, our missions should encompass engaging with our wider community.

A critical part of that ecosystem approach is collaboration. The boards I have been involved in have striven to galvanise willing partners and participants. For example, in its mission to promote Singaporean Chinese culture, the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre (SCCC) has commissioned projects that bring together different cultures and languages as well as different arts disciplines. During the pandemic, the Singapore Repertory Theatre (SRT) partnered other English-language theatre companies—Pandemonium and Wild Rice—to create original works, *The Pitch* and then *The*

Commission. Creativity is multiplied in a shared open-source environment, and this inclusivity enriches art-making as well as the larger ecosystem.

While for-profit leaders today speak of looking beyond shareholders to stakeholders, of putting purpose before profits, non-profits have always had purpose as their *raison d'être*. This will certainly not be new for cultural leaders; nonetheless, it is a reminder that they should regard themselves as stewards of public interest.

Clarity of purpose came to forefront when, earlier this year, SRT's planned rebrand intended to reflect our 30-year journey as a Singaporean theatre company met with unexpected criticism from peers in the community. Reflecting on our deeper purpose, we listened to our stakeholders and took the decision to revisit the rebrand. I'd like to believe this was a modest demonstration of agility and transparency; more importantly, it showed us putting our community first, and centring our purpose to promote Singapore theatre.

How do we build better cultural boards for this VUCA/BANI era? Conventional business strategy correctly puts diversity at the forefront. Directors with different skillsets (finance, legal, donor stewardship) and different life experiences will maximise the insights, perspectives and abilities needed to helm cultural organisations. Of course, such directors must embrace the leadership qualities discussed earlier, and be united in the organisation's purpose.

Resilience in the Cultural Sector: Will There be No Jobs in Future?

While cultural jobs can be precarious and vulnerable to disruption, the sector also has tremendous potential for growth. UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD) estimates the global market value of the world's creative industries at USD1.3 trillion, and pre-COVID sector growth rates in OECD countries outstripped other business (18% vs 12%). According to the OECD, the UK's cultural and creative sector engages in more product, process and organisational innovation than the rest of the economy. In Singapore, the nominal value-add from the creative economy, which includes the arts and culture sector, increased by almost 50% over the past five years to SGD11.7bn in 2022.

Other studies suggest that, despite being among the sectors worst hit by the pandemic, cultural organisations might be more resilient than others, and cultural workers might weather disruption better than other types of workers. Henley Business School's Benjamin Laker argues artists are inherently entrepreneurial and nonconforming, embracing moving targets and constantly learning. Examining the industry's inclusiveness and flexible organisation structures, its use of technology and employment of creative and technical talents, Laker argues that these resilience strategies apply across all sectors.

Certainly, the industry has a head start on what has emerged as a general post-pandemic demand for flexible working and self-employment. In the 2023 International Labour Organisation (ILO) report,

Figure 2. The cast of the *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, a production by the
Singapore Repertory Theatre 2023. Photo by Crispan Chan.
Image courtesy of Singapore Repertory Theatre.

the key future trends in the arts sector identified are technological advancements and the change in consumer and market dynamics. Even pre-pandemic, digitalisation had already been transforming the ways people engaged with culture, spurring new business models and new skills needs. The sector responded by adopting virtual performances that expand audience reach, and developed new models of production and consumption which have been mainstreamed across other adjacent sectors. We should thus regard Netflix and ABBA Voyage—and other creative-economy innovations which compete with more traditional arts audiences—as opportunities and potential for collaboration.

According to Goldman Sachs, generative artificial intelligence systems will disrupt around 300 million full-time jobs globally and substitute up to a quarter of current work. This includes creative jobs. Already AI image generators like Midjourney are being used to create concept art for marketing campaigns and the gaming industry, while GPT3-based Jasper can produce social media posts, sales emails and first

drafts. The cultural industry is right to be concerned, and to push for greater AI guardrails, as seen by the US Screen Actors' Guild recent AI deal and various intellectual property infringement lawsuits over the unauthorised scraping of creative work to train AI models.

Furthermore, Goldman's report suggests that generative AI could lead to significant labour cost savings, automating up to 26% of work tasks in the arts and entertainment sectors, and could not only augment existing jobs but create others in entirely new fields; it could even eventually increase annual global GDP by 7%. McKinsey Global Institute's 2023 report indicates that AI will have a net positive impact on arts and creative jobs in the US of up to 11% by 2030. As YouTube CEO's Neal Mohan said at this February's World Economic Forum (WEF) at Davos, AI should not be a replacement for human creativity, but a tool to enhance and "democratise" the creative process.

Recent examples of how creatives are harnessing technology, to inclusive and democratising effect: Canadian singer Grimes recently launched AI software Elf.Tech that allows others to sing with her voice, offering to split the royalties generated. At home, Inch Chua's *Myles: The Perfect Soulmate*, commissioned by SRT for this year's Singapore International Festival of Arts (SIFA), is an anti-musical that uses immersive AI technology to explore the human-AI relationship. The central idea is to get AI sufficiently "trained" to create a seamless performance in real time on each night of the show.

The Case for Creativity: "The Ultimate Fate of All Intelligent Beings"

What skills are needed by cultural workers of the future? To capitalise on the digital transformation, the International Labour Organization (ILO) suggests cultural workers develop digital literacy, which it estimates more than half of the jobs in 2030 would require. There will also be anticipated demand for technical skills related to digital performance and production processes (including sound engineering, digital video production, and familiarity with virtual and augmented reality technologies). The need for such hybrid, cross-disciplinary skills have also been reflected in the National Arts Council's 2024 Skills Framework for Arts.

Like other Singaporean arts groups, the SRT has seen an increased need for such digital and technical skills in both the production and operational/front-of-house ends of the business. The company has also launched a digital initiative to make not only our shows but also our learning and engagement resources remotely accessible. Thus, young theatre professionals currently emplaced in our residency programme (many of whom continue to work full time in the industry) can be expected to utilise hybrid skills that combine artistic and technical expertise, as well as culture-adjacent skills like UX design and social media platform management.

Similarly, the SCCC promulgates the use of technology and digital skills by making digital outreach one of the key metrics in their programming commissions. Its performance venues are already digitally capable. And this year, the centre will launch an online repository of historical and archival cultural material.

To help transform the skills in the sector, educational institutions and training programs have stepped up by offering interdisciplinary courses that bridge the gap between traditional arts education and the demands of the digital ecosystem. I know of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts' (NAFA) *Metaverse: Introduction to Augmented Reality Design* and LASALLE College of the Arts' interdisciplinary project modules, but I'm sure there are many others out there.

Still, I would consider the most important skill to be creativity. Elon Musk's views notwithstanding, creativity seems the most important difference between our human intelligence and a generative artificial one that is (at least for now) merely a high-functioning predictive model. Creativity, I believe, will be the skill least likely to be replaced by AI; it is critical for future-readiness and it's one that cultural workers inherently possess. Indeed, in *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future*, Daniel Pink argues that the future belongs

not to left-brained lawyers and accountants, but to creative and holistic right-brain thinkers whose creativity and emotional intelligence will better equip them to succeed in a disrupted, unscripted world. In his BANI-originating *Facing the Age of Chaos*, Jamais Cascio makes the same case for right-brained intuitive, empathic and mindful leadership to helm humanity's journey through a chaotic future.

Around the world, policymakers now recognise arts and culture as drivers of innovation and economic benefit, and the creative economy is more a buzzword than ever. Cultural leaders, arts practitioners and cultural workers should recognise our importance in this ecosystem, while reminding ourselves that what we do best is also what makes us human. Liu Cixin's fictional protagonists may not have managed to safeguard their future via left-brained science; it's up to us to co-create a better tomorrow through culture and the arts. □

About the Author

Joy Tan serves on WongPartnership LLP's Executive Committee, and co-heads the Firm's Commercial & Corporate Disputes and Corporate Governance & Compliance Practices. A cross-disciplinary practitioner with over 20 years of experience in dispute resolution, corporate governance and contentious investigations, she advises corporates and financial institutions on a broad spectrum of business disputes and corporate governance/ compliance challenges. Tan serves an independent director on various for-profit as well as non-profit boards, including as Income Insurance Ltd, Singapore Health Services Ltd, and the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre. She chairs the Singapore Repertory Theatre.

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