

ASEAN Arts and Culture: The Role of Singapore

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The development and opening of The Esplanade in the year 2002, with its world-class concert hall and theatre, was a game-changer in the promotion of arts and culture in Singapore. The Esplanade accelerated the government masterplan to develop human resources and audiences, and to introduce innovations and new technologies into arts and culture. It catapulted Singapore into the top league of arts and culture physical infrastructure, and attracted rave and pejorative reviews from various quarters including certain ASEAN circles. One discomfort is the perceived “control” of arts and culture by the government. There is also the so-called “mercenary” approach of the authorities in developing arts and culture.

In 2012, the government further galvanised Singapore’s arts scene by announcing that it would be spending S\$274 million over five years to develop arts and culture in Singapore. Within the year, the Nanyang Technological University Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore was launched in Gillman Barracks as a national research centre. The centre was set up with the aim of positioning Singapore as a hub for critical dialogue and creative thinking about curating in Southeast Asia.

2015 was earmarked as a milestone year for Singapore’s arts and culture scene, with the opening of the National Gallery Singapore. The government also invested in revamping three major cultural institutions in the country: the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore Art Museum and National Museum of Singapore. Many arts-related activities were also organised in commemoration of Singapore’s 50th anniversary of independence in 2015. However, there are some Singaporeans who worry about the long-term viability of the costly National Gallery while some Southeast Asians feel Singapore is “mining their culture” as the city state is said to have “limited own artistic heritage”.

The fact is Singapore has long been the business, finance and transportation centre of the region. Geography plays a big part in this accomplishment and history also contributes substantially to the growth of Singapore’s hub status. For example, Singapore was the place to be for Malay journal printing and Malay movie production after the Second World War. The efficiency of public administration in the city-state and its relative political stability have long fostered a state of mind to locate body and value in Singapore. The art and cultural festivities in 2015 and the momentum carried forward from that also reinforced Singapore as the ‘cosmopolitan gateway between the East and the West’ (Adam, 2015). Of course, much of this was possible due to Singapore’s good economic position globally. It has helped establish the city-state as a cultural destination and an authority on Southeast Asian artistry.

In his speech at the opening of the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre in Shenton Way in 2017, Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong highlighted the uniqueness of Singapore and how it has helped Singaporeans develop arts and culture. Over time, the different ethnic communities in Singapore, while retaining the uniqueness of their respective cultural traditions, have also influenced the customs and heritage of one another. He highlighted that, “The result has been distinctive Singaporean variants of Chinese, Malay, Indian and Eurasian cultures, and a growing Singaporean identity that we all share, suffusing and linking up our distinct individual identities and ethnic cultures” (Salleh, 2017). Prime Minister Lee has aptly described the outlook of the country’s arts and culture scene: to blend in the arts and culture that Singaporeans are exposed to, and form Singapore’s own unique creation. As such, Singapore has created various unique art forms to showcase to the rest of the world and at the same time, attracted artists both from the region and the rest of the world.

ASEAN neighbours have not always affirmed Singapore's ways of modernising or adapting various art forms that have originated from cultures around the region. Though the intent of Singapore is to create something distinctive out of the patchwork of diverse cultures existing within Southeast Asia, and to also provide a platform for artists in the region to present their talent to international audiences, it has been perceived differently by some quarters in the region. They are of the view that their traditional ways should remain pure and be passed down through generations. They see fusion in their arts as something that has tainted their heritage. There is also unhappiness with what they claim to be the lure of the "glitzy" and the "techie" in Singapore.

It is important to recognise these different views on arts and culture in the region and find new ways in which they could be presented to the rest of the world, both in their traditional forms and those that are blended with other cultures and innovative characteristics. Moreover, the goal is to show the world the various art forms that exist in this region and for the arts and culture sector to flourish in ASEAN. Younger artists and the more educated performing and visual artistic talents from ASEAN come to Singapore to seek breakthroughs and technologies to advance their respective careers. Successful talents have returned to their home countries to develop indigenous arts and culture, and to encourage compatriots to go to Singapore and further afield from there.

ASEAN is a significant platform to display arts and culture of Southeast Asia for various reasons, the strongest being that it represents all the countries in the region. This would mean that ASEAN can be accountable and also take credit for the different forms of arts and cultural performances that are produced in Singapore. In other words,

the arts and culture sector needs to be "ASEAN-ised" to maximise its vast potential for the benefit of the whole region. Singapore is a convenient and suitable conduit. It can continue to play an integral role in this respect. Firstly, because Singapore has spent the last 15 years systematically building the infrastructure and resources to open up and sustain the arts and culture sector in Singapore. This has also involved developing talents in and for the region, and giving them a stage to showcase their skills. Furthermore, Singapore is the Chairman of ASEAN in 2018, thus giving it an opportunity to raise the arts and culture profile of the region in the wider global context.

Being involved in pushing arts and culture is not a completely new notion within ASEAN. There has been a variety of ideas already introduced in and through the regional body to promote culture, heritage and the arts in the region. The arts and culture sector in ASEAN is being overseen by the ASEAN Ministers Responsible for Culture and Arts (AMCA). This team of leaders is responsible for fostering arts and culture to help realise the ASEAN Community. They are guided by the 2016-2025 ASEAN Strategic Plan for Culture and Arts, which seeks to strengthen the cultural identity within ASEAN and facilitate dialogue amongst the various cultures in the region by engaging all the stakeholders. The plan also aims to build enthusiasm and appreciation for histories, cultures, arts, traditions and values of the ASEAN region. It will help build a sense of ownership, importance and unity in the ASEAN Community, encouraging people to pay more attention to preserving, conserving and innovating art forms. All these will create livelihoods from arts and culture and contribute to improving the socio-economic status of the Community.

The ASEAN City of Culture and the Best of ASEAN Performing Arts Series are two useful

initiatives that have helped cultivate an ASEAN identity (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2018). The ASEAN City of Culture initiative requires ASEAN member states to take turns to hold activities over a period of two years each time to display and promote their respective art forms and cultural heritage. It was designed to raise the arts and cultural profile as well as the creativity of each ASEAN member state while advancing the ASEAN image as a whole internationally. The Best of ASEAN Performing Arts Series is a performance concert showcasing the talents from each of the ASEAN member states.

Beyond AMCA, there is the ASEAN Foundation based in Jakarta which also has an Arts and Culture programme of its own. This programme covers the performing, visual and fine arts, and involves music and singing, photography, crafts, dancing and other creative activities. The programme aims to protect, celebrate and build an ASEAN Community identity and to foster unity among the peoples of ASEAN. The foundation's ASEAN Puppets Exchange helps to raise awareness on traditional art forms in ASEAN by showcasing the art of traditional puppetry. The exchange serves to elevate the skills and innovation of ASEAN's puppeteers so that the art form can remain sustainable in the long run (ASEAN Foundation, 2018).

Despite implementing such activities and initiatives, ASEAN cooperation in arts and culture is described by critics as insufficient and patchy. They offer various reasons for this. First, countries in the region tend to be overly sensitive about the origin of a particular art form or cultural expression. Instead of openly sharing traditions and heritage elements so that all could learn and improve from one another, several ASEAN member states have allowed "gatekeepers" to establish ownership of specific

art forms perceived as originating from their own countries. While they are willing to organise joint performances to showcase their talents, there are often nativist sentiments leading to strong protectionist tendencies. Occasionally, there have been outbreaks of public protest and violence as a result of both sides claiming ownership of art forms.

Governments in the region are also primarily focusing on economic cooperation through ASEAN than engaging in socio-cultural cooperation. Most cultural exchanges are done bureaucratically, with the lack of involvement of working artistes and the younger generation. Many traditional art forms, especially music and dance, are slowly dying off as they are predominantly practised by the older generation with minimal engagement of the youth. As a result, the showcase of arts and culture within the region has stagnated, with ASEAN member states repeatedly sharing the same things with one another and not embracing the changes and practices that have evolved over the years. Contemporary artistic and cultural elements are rarely seriously presented or discussed in a sustainable manner.

Consequently, enterprising and younger artistic talents are breaking away and seeking support outside of government. For example, the C-ASEAN Consonant, an original and creative ASEAN traditional group comprising multi-ethnic musicians, with one representative from each ASEAN member state, makes use of music to strengthen the bonds among peoples in the region. The project was initiated to engage the younger generations in ASEAN and to preserve the heritage of the region. Fortunately, C-ASEAN Consonant is backed by a Thai business conglomerate, ThaiBev. More efforts and support from the ASEAN private sector are needed. At the same time, undue competition and rivalry among

cultural practitioners are distracting. Scarce resources should be maximised for the common good of ASEAN.

ASEAN has limited infrastructure and resources in the arts and culture sector. Many of the programmes organised are more focused on raising awareness and meeting political objectives. To develop arts and culture further, there is a need to create unity within the ASEAN arts and culture sector and “bring ASEAN to the world”. That is, to introduce these art forms on an international stage and also attract international stakeholders to the region to invest in the sector. Singapore can contribute to the development of arts and culture via ASEAN, especially with all the ASEAN initiatives already implemented or in the various existing plans. As mentioned earlier, Singapore has good physical infrastructure and its “software” is strengthening. Funding artists in the region to train and perform in the international space through ASEAN, and supporting existing initiatives in ASEAN by providing infrastructure and resources that allow art forms and culture to be showcased to mass audiences are two significant ways Singapore can help sustain the region’s tangible and intangible heritage. For example, artefacts relating to the culture of ASEAN could be loaned through the governments of member states to be showcased across the region. Singapore could also provide the opportunity for ASEAN member states to display their artefacts in Singapore museums.

Wider-scale cultural exchange programmes could be initiated through ASEAN so that more people are educated about the arts and culture sector, and are open to pursuing the arts across ASEAN. Strengthening the region’s arts and culture sector benefits all, including Singapore, as more people across the world are likely to acknowledge the growing arts and culture sector in ASEAN. It will also widen the platform to attract stakeholders from elsewhere in the world to invest in the sector. Such investments will have a salutary effect on ASEAN’s broader economic and political development.

Diversity is an essential part of the ASEAN identity, as we are made up of multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural societies. We should harness this strength to develop ourselves together, as one ASEAN Community – “We are only as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided.” □

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