Ah Beng's[1] excursion into the past, present and future of culture

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What is culture?

If you were to ask a Singaporean to explain his culture, he might identify Singlish[2] as a defining characteristic. Indeed, language is an important part of culture. But it is only one component. Culture covers all aspects of human life that are determined or conditioned by being part of a society. It includes not only language but also religion, food, dress, gestures, social habits, music and the arts. If you prefer a more formal definition, culture could be described as "shared patterns of behaviours and interactions, cognitive constructs and understanding that are learned by socialisation" (Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition 2020). Indeed, it is through socialisation that culture is learned and transmitted from generation to generation.

The fact that people eat or drink is not in itself cultural. It is a biological necessity for the sustenance of life. On the other hand, we eat particular foods and refrain from eating other types even though they may be perfectly edible and nourishing, like vegetarians or those who observe Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and other religiously-defined dietary practices. We drink coffee at certain times of the day; we go to the hawker centre in the evening after work. These are not just personal choices but also matters of culture. Reflecting this, last year Singapore nominated its hawker culture for inscription into

UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Religion too is part of culture. The Tamil festival of Thaipusam sees Hindu devotees carrying *kavadis*[3] as a form of penance. For the uninitiated, it is a spectacular if not slightly unnerving sight of people skewered with needles and hooks. This practice, which originated in India, is not only preserved here, but has also been embraced by others outside the Tamil-Hindu community. When I was doing my military service, one of my national servicemen who was moonlighting as a Chinese temple medium, a *tangki*, decided that he too wished to carry a *kavadi*. I do not know whether he had undergone a Damascene conversion, or simply wanted to escape from some of his military duties. But he went through all the rituals and preparations and, by all accounts, manfully carried a *kavadi* like any other Hindu devotee. Thaipusam in Singapore is more than just a Hindu religious festival. It has become part of the larger cultural consciousness of all Singaporeans. Societies like Singapore's are no longer defined by one culture, but instead incorporate many cultures that co-exist with and even blend into each other.

Purpose of culture

In his brilliant and engaging book *Sapiens*, Yuval Noah Harari describes how language gave people the ability to create legends, myths, gods and religions, which are the underpinnings of culture. Culture was the social glue that kept people in groups, first in hunter-gatherer tribes, and when they became sedentary farmers, in small farming communities that evolved into villages, towns, and eventually into cities,

countries and nations. Anthropologist Joseph Tainter (Tainter 1988) and political scientist Thomas Homer-Dixon (Homer-Dixon 2010) have offered a different perspective. As the material basis of a society gets more complex, mechanisms emerge to manage that complexity. These include not just more complex forms of government and laws, but also of culture.

Another view from Benedict Anderson (Anderson 1983), the political scientist and historian, conceptualises nations as "imagined communities". Nations are too large for people within to meet face-to-face. Yet they are able to find sufficient shared interests to identify themselves with their country—an imagined community—against those outside. Mark Moffett, a biologist, quoting philosopher Ross Poole, neatly explained it this way, "What is important is not so much that everyone imagines the same nation, but that they imagine that they imagine the same nation" (Moffett 2018).

But it is also culture, not just nationalism, that binds people together, and with equal force. Culture creates shared imaginings that underpin community as much as nationalism. While Anderson was focused on imagined communities as a product of modernity and mass communications, the concept holds for the communities of our ancestors as well.

The role of empire

Because each community had its own culture, the early period of human history consisted of many small, fragmented cultures. Then empires rose which amalgamated these multifarious cultures into a few big cultures. They accommodated diversity, and "people expressed their identification

with the empire with geographically local flourishes that reflected their ancestry"(Moffett 2018). Harari explains that "ideas, people, goods and technology spread more easily within the borders of an empire than in a politically fragmented region"(Harari 2015). The purpose, Harari goes on to explain, "was to make life easier for themselves. The cultural ideas spread by empire were seldom the exclusive creation of the ruling elite. Since the imperial vision tends to be universal and inclusive, it was relatively easy for the imperial elite to adopt ideas, norms and traditions from wherever they found them."

So, empires catalysed a process of cultural osmosis—the assimilation of customs and practices by one culture from another. The few dominant cultures today such as the European and the Chinese trace their roots to empires. Historians credit Genghis Khan, the ruthless founder of the Mongol empire, the largest contiguous empire in history, with bringing the Silk Road under one cohesive political environment. This increased communication and trade between Europe, the Middle East and Asia. As a result, cultural practices flowed and mixed within these regions. When Kublai Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan, completed the Mongol conquest of China, he decided to make China his base. He adopted the Chinese political system and supported its cultural model. As a result, Chinese customs and culture were preserved.

Cultural imperialism

A more recent but perhaps even less benign version of cultural osmosis is cultural imperialism, often attributed in the last few centuries to the imposition by the colonial powers like England, France, Portugal and Spain of various aspects of

their own culture—including religion, customs, traditions, language, social norms and values, even architecture—onto their colonies. This deliberate and sometimes forceful extension of the colonial powers' way of life over their subordinated populations either transformed or replaced aspects of indigenous cultures.

Because decolonisation is a recent phenomenon, echoes of cultural imperialism still reverberate strongly in many parts of Latin America, Africa and Asia. Certainly, Singapore as a colony of the British empire was profoundly affected by cultural imperialism. The neo-classical buildings around the Padang—the former City Hall and the Supreme Court—are genuflections to English architectural traditions. Our *lingua franca* is English. Our educational system, system of government and laws, even some of our street and building names, have British roots. The displacement of indigenous cultures by the colonial process has sometimes been justified as a modernising impulse. To quote Thomas Babington Macaulay, a British politician in the 1800s, English-language education in colonial India was intended to form "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect."[4] On the other hand, the loss of cultural identity is real, irreparable and irreplaceable.

Role of patronage

Throughout history, patronage has played a big role in fostering arts and culture. Leonardo da Vinci was able to produce great works of art because he had patrons like the Medici family[5] and Cesare Borgia[6]. Arts and culture flourished in China over millennia because of the patronage of emperors. Beethoven's greatest patron was Archduke Rudolph who, as brother of the Austrian emperor, was able to gain for Beethoven access to the highest salons in Vienna. In those days, the rich and powerful were expected to extend patronage to worthy individuals who were below their standing in society.

Today, in lieu of kings and princes, patronage flows from governments and philanthropists. In the United States, where public philanthropy has reached its apogee, great performing halls and museums are funded by contributions from patrons of the arts, and some by individual philanthropists like industrialist Andrew Carnegie, the famous and famously rich American steel magnate who built the equally famous Carnegie Hall in New York.

Here in Singapore, major cultural events like the Chingay Festival obtain much of their support from government. We have two magnificent venues for the performing arts: the Victoria Concert Hall and Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay, where plays, orchestral performances and opera are staged to a growing base of fans who have learnt to appreciate these as the finer things in life. Both were funded by the governments of the day. Indeed, given the cost of such cultural infrastructure, it is hard to see how in the Singapore context such undertakings could have proceeded without strong government backing, financial or otherwise.

But should culture and art depend exclusively on governments and philanthropy to flourish? The answer is 'no'. In a way, the culture that is centred on the concert hall where people have to pay to enter, and at any rate, where there are limited seats, is culture for the few. In contrast, culture for the many has to be much more accessible, affordable, and perhaps have a popular appeal to those who have not developed an ear for opera or symphonies. In Singapore, culture for the masses can be found in open air street

wayangs[7], and *getai*[8] performances during the Hungry Ghost Festival.[9]

The development and evolution of culture is not just the province of the elites. It is also an organic process, developing and evolving through the interactions of the people in society. In the late 1970s, many students in secondary schools, junior colleges and polytechnics in Singapore began to write songs in Mandarin to express their thoughts and feelings around themes like friendships or love stories, and often sung to the accompaniment of guitars. This genre of songs is called *xinyao*[10]. Like many cultural trends, it emerged spontaneously. Its appeal is perhaps because the lyrics of *xinyao* songs relate to the daily lives of Singaporean youths. It is now an integral part of the music scene in Singapore.

In recent years, radio, television and the internet have made culture more accessible. Indeed, one of the factors that made *xinyao* popular was its exposure on radio and television. During the recent COVID-19 circuit breaker, local plays and musicals like "Emily of Emerald Hill" and "Madam White Snake" were streamed by the Wild Rice theatre company on YouTube, free of charge. Other production companies acted similarly during comparable lockdowns. The world-famous New York Metropolitan Opera recently produced a whole gala performance—chorus and orchestra—miraculously achieved by assembling performers online from their homes, and then streamed it to a global audience.

Technology

Today, technology plays a pivotal role in the spread of the arts and culture. Television brought American culture into living rooms around the world. As a result, American cultural norms, such as popular music and dress styles, have been embraced in countries around the world. In the same way, Asian culture has spread, in particular Japanese and Korean culture. For example, K-pop, such as the hit Gangnam Style[11], became wildly popular global phenomena, spread by television and through the internet. I recall not a few recruits for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs telling me that they had learnt a third language, Korean, on their own. When I asked why, they explained that they wanted to watch undubbed Korean television serials. Whereas culture used to spread through conquest by empires or trade routes, today it is spread almost instantaneously around the world by technology. Carried to its logical extreme, will this lead to a single global culture, a cultural singularity? Maybe not. But it is clear that cultural formation today is increasingly the product of the combined forces of globalisation and technology.

But technology does not just spread culture. It also creates new cultural forms. Photography was for a long time not considered art, merely a technology that recorded images of the real world. It was argued that photographs could not replicate human creativity, unlike drawing or painting. Of course, this view has given way to a more enlightened view. Today, some of the best photographers can command millions for their works, no different from painters whose pieces adorn the walls of museums around the world.

But the medium does not just lend itself to fine art. Photography has evolved into a democratically accessible activity. With the introduction of the Brownie camera at the turn of the last century, Kodak ushered in an era of photography for the masses. This process accelerated in the 1990s with the introduction of fully digital cameras. Digital cameras were soon incorporated into the ubiquitous mobile phone, enabling almost every human being on the planet to aspire to be the next

Henri Cartier-Bresson, or a Sebastião Salgado, or a Noboyuki Arashi, or a Robert Mapplethorpe. Digital cameras became the 'killer app' for mobile telephones. When combined with social media platforms like Instagram and Pinterest, new cultural activities have emerged.

Indeed, technology is lowering the barriers to entry for creating, disseminating and monetising art. For example, music-creation software removes the need to purchase and master musical instruments. Artists are also able to crowdsource funding through new platforms enabled by technology, such as crowdfunding site Kickstarter and membership-based platform Patreon to help artists and creators monetise their works. Instead of just governments and philanthropists, technology giants are now assuming the role of providing funding and other opportunities to cultural workers and artists.

Acceleration

The pace of technological change is accelerating. The reason is Moore's Law, an empirical law that says computing power doubles every two years. This constitutes an acceleration. A large segment of technology that depends on semiconductors tracks Moore's Law. If technological change is accelerating, then the cultural change it fosters must also accelerate in tandem. While in the past, cultural norms took decades if not centuries to develop and evolve, today, cultural practices that are impacted by technology have a half-life of years. A few years ago, the Augmented Reality game, Pokémon Go, swept the world. It was arguably a cultural phenomenon because it changed social behaviour. Smartphone zombies, obsessed with tracking down Pokémon, wandered about town oblivious to other people and to the

danger of traffic whizzing around them. Today, the Pokémon Go craze has subsided. New apps like Tik Tok, a video sharing social networking platform, are all the rage now. It is today a facet of culture around the world.

Such new forms of technology-driven culture are often ephemeral, like tweets. Limited to 140 characters, tweets are fleeting and perhaps a bit superficial. But they are a reflection of society today. So, the US Library of Congress has collected tweets at great cost ever since Twitter's beginnings in 2006. This is because it considers tweets part of culture, being records of societies' knowledge and creativity. Arguably, technology makes the transmission of culture broad and shallow, like tweets, rather than deep and narrow of tradition in the past, when cultural practices had time to evolve and become deeply embedded into social structures.

In his marvellous book *Scale*, Geoffrey West describes how the very environment that the city provides that enhances innovation, creativity and open-ended growth, also leads to another profound feature of modern life, namely that its pace seems to be continually speeding up.

The Peranakan[12] culture is a unique part of the Singapore and Malaysian heritage. In the heyday of the Peranakans, *nyonyas*[13] would gather each day to gossip and to prepare complex spices, and then cook the meals of the day. However, the pace of life in those days was more laid back and tranquil. Today, with the pressures of modern society in fast-moving Singapore, few have the time, or even the inclination, to prepare food in the traditional Peranakan way. Instead, the cuisine is sustained by ready-mixed spices, and ready-to-eat microwaveable packages. Is this real Peranakan culture? Or is it a poor imitation of the real thing? The argument will continue, but for

now at least the cuisine is preserved in speedy and convenient new forms.

Contestation

Recently, the well-known Singaporean chef and writer, Violet Oon, herself a Peranakan, concocted a fusion "Nyonya Nasi Ambeng"[14] dish for her restaurant. Some said that it did not properly acknowledge its Javanese roots, even accusing her of "cultural appropriation". She subsequently renamed the dish. This episode echoed an earlier dispute that arose a few years ago between Singaporeans and Malaysians over who invented chilli crab.

This reflects the ceaseless phenomenon of cultural contestation, except that today, this happens with greater speed, energy and potential for conflict because technological change is accelerating. And the contestation is not just over food. Young people often lead the way in challenging the norms. The hippie countercultural movement of the 1960s and 1970s originated in college campuses in America and then spread to other parts of the Western world. It was a phenomenon of youth who rejected the mores of middle-class American life, criticising middle-class values, repudiating established institutions, and opposing nuclear weapons and the Vietnam War. This contestation eventually influenced the mainstream, and its effects are seen today in more relaxed attitudes toward sex, in the new concern for the environment, and in a widespread lessening of formality.

Today, we see contestations arising from decolonisation—tearing down statues even in the West, re-visiting history and questioning the assumptions of established historical narratives. We have had our own version of this when the bicentennial celebrations ignited a debate over the role of Sir Stamford Raffles in modern Singapore's development. In a sense, it is out of such contestation that culture emerges. It may be disconcerting in the near term, because it challenges familiar structures that we are accustomed to and the similarities that comfort us. But it also provides the scrabble letters for new meanings to emerge, and from that, new cultural forms. If we take culture as the product of contestation, then the rules of engagement—which reflect societal values—become crucial. Are they inclusive? Do they embrace differences? Do they contribute to shared directions and aspirations? On the basis of this contestation and the rules of engagement, cultures evolve, helping society adapt to the changing environment.

The future

Today, globalisation and technology are forces that are transforming human societies around the world. But there are other forces at work that also alter societies. Climate change is one such force. Millennials are acutely aware that climate change will impact their lives and their children's much more than their parents'. Individuals like activist Greta Thunberg and movements like Extinction Rebellion are re-shaping attitudes towards climate change. It is in the nature of culture, being an intrinsic part of human society, that it will change in tandem. For example, food choices in future will very much be determined by their carbon footprint, and red meat will become less fashionable. Likewise, cultural events will be designed to be more environmentally-friendly.

That is the central point. Culture is alive and adaptive. Societies that try to maintain things the way they are, including culture, introduce rigidities into the system. They deem culture to be unchanging and eternal, rather than a human construct that is maintained at a cost. The Roman Empire is an example that springs to mind. The moment it was no longer able to fuel and feed its sprawling territories, especially the Western empire, it collapsed and its sophisticated and dominant culture went into decline.

Conclusion

In a sense, culture comprises agreed-upon societal heuristics or short-cuts—practices, norms, rituals, and so on—that grease the wheels of society. It saves people the trouble of having to negotiate their relationships from scratch with others in the community. That works as long as the world is unchanging. But the world will shift, as it must in this globalised and inter-connected world of accelerating change. If the culture does not change and evolve, then society will become dysfunctional. This is the point at which it collapses, as Joseph Tainter argues in his book *The Collapse of Complex Societies*. So, culture must change and evolve for society to survive and thrive. Traditions can be preserved, even celebrated, but they cannot hold back the larger societal changes that are a necessary part of human progress. But because human society is a complex adaptive system, these changes are always going to be emergent.

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Peter Ho is Chairman of Urban Redevelopment Authority of Singapore (URA), Chairman of Social Science Research Council (SSRC), Chairman of the Singapore Centre on Environmental Life Sciences Engineering (SCELSE), Chairman of National Supercomputing Centre (NSCC) Steering Committee, Chairman of Campus for Research Excellence and Technological Enterprise (CREATE) Governing Council, Chairman of Office for Space Technology & Industry (OSTIn) Board, and Chairman of PRECISion Health Research, SingaporE (PRECISE) Pro-Tem Board Oversight Committee. He is a member of the Board of Trustees of the National University of Singapore (NUS), and a board member of National Research Foundation (NRF), a member of the Board of Governors of S Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), and of Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP).

When he retired from Singapore Administrative Service in 2010 after a career in the Public Service stretching more than 34 years, he was Head, Civil Service, concurrent with his other appointments of Permanent Secretary (Foreign Affairs), Permanent Secretary (National Security & Intelligence Coordination), and Permanent Secretary (Special Duties) in the Prime Minister's Office. Before that, he was Permanent Secretary (Defence). He was also the inaugural Chairman of Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore.

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Notes:

1. The term *Ah Beng*, used in the title, is Singaporean slang for a man who is rough round the edges and unsophisticated, that is, uncultured.
2. *Singlish* is an informal version of English that is used in Singapore. Linguists refer to it as Singapore Colloquial English or Singapore English (See National Library Board's entry on Singlish in *Infopedia* https://bit.ly/2ZOfuNA).
3. Devotees who carry the *kavadi* pierce silver pins through their cheeks and tongue and/or prick the body with hooks and spear-like needles. A *kavadi* carrier can have as many as 100 spears piercing his flesh, but apparently loses little blood, sustained by faith in a trancelike state.
4. In the discussions leading to the English Education Act 1835, Macaulay produced a Memorandum on Indian education in which he argued that Western learning was superior and could only be taught through the medium of English. Together with other measures promoting English as the language of administration and of the higher law courts, the Act eventually led to English becoming one of the languages of India, rather than simply the native tongue of its foreign rulers.
5. The House of Medici was a powerful Italian banking family and political dynasty that gained prominence in Florence during the 15th century.
6. Cesare Borgia (d. 1507) was a powerful Italian noble who held various offices and tried to establish his own principality in central Italy. His policies inspired Machiavelli's work *The Prince*.
7. *Wayang*, a Malay word meaning "a theatrical performance employing puppets or human dancers", commonly refers to Chinese street opera in Singapore.
8. *Getai*, which literally means "song stage" in Chinese, is a popular form of mass entertainment in the 1950s with *getai* established at various amusement parks. Today, *getai* is mainly staged during the Hungry Ghost Festival to entertain both the living and the dead.
9. The Hungry Ghost Festival, also known as the seventh month, is a significant event in Chinese culture. For the whole of the seventh lunar month in the Chinese calendar, believers worship their ancestors and make offerings to the departed.
10. *Xinyao* is a genre of music that typically refers to Mandarin ballads composed, written and performed by youths in Singapore (from National Library Board).
11. *Gangnam Style* by the South Korean recording artist Psy became the first music video to hit one billion views on YouTube on 21 December 2012. By June 2014, the video had surpassed two billion views.
12. *Peranakan* refers to people of mixed Chinese and Malay heritage. They were also known as Straits Chinese as they were usually born in the Straits Settlements of Singapore, Penang and Malacca.
13. A *nyonya* is a female Peranakan. A male Peranakan is known as a *baba*.
14. *Nasi ambeng* is an Indonesian rice dish that consists of—but is not limited to—steamed white rice, chicken curry or chicken stewed in soy sauce, beef or chicken *rendang*, *sambal goreng* and other ingredients. (from Wikipedia)