

Culture and Crisis

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The COVID-19 pandemic is often portrayed as a healthcare and economic crisis. However, as rightly pointed out by the author, the pandemic has also created tremendous mental and social stress. By drawing on local examples, the author shows that culture plays a special pivotal role in sustaining communities and building the resilience and mental strength needed to weather the crisis and its challenges.

While we are not yet out of the woods, pundits, planners, and policymakers, and not least historians, must be reflecting on the impact of the long-drawn global pandemic and pondering the lessons to be learnt from this global crisis. The profound impact of COVID-19 on lives and livelihoods has been unprecedented to say the least. Our social interactions, our sense of community, the way we work, familiar habits (the good and the bad) we have taken for granted have been upended. The experience has been harrowing and humbling. It is also a sobering and timely reminder for change, for reflection on what we value and desire for our society as we move forward. While it is probably premature for any country or organisation to claim victory over the virus, the knowledge and experience of the past 20 months may afford the world some sense of how to move forward.

As an emergency that cuts across healthcare, social life, the workplace, and economy, as well as politics and international relations, the COVID-19 crisis has required the marshalling of total state efforts and resources to bear on tackling its multifaceted challenges. Better organised states that are politically united, well-coordinated and with easy access to abundant resources tend to have a better handle on managing the crisis, are able to utilise technology for good measure, secure

and deliver vaccines, and coordinate social and economic actions as necessary. Clearly, in times of crisis, effective governance tends to bring about better outcomes.

But the complexity of the crisis has also made one thing clear—that governments alone cannot provide for every need and solve all problems. A crisis that has not only threatened lives, but also amplified existing problems and fault lines, disrupted livelihoods and accentuated hardships for vast sections of populations, needs more than hospital beds, medicines, and financial panaceas. The structural and emotional problems that have emerged—social divisions, economic hardships, stress, and despair—require attention and care that can better be undertaken and sustained at the community level.

It will become evident, as the crisis wears on, that the best hope of weathering the challenges, and eventually emerging well from it, will have to depend on individual and community resilience, solidarity and support, as well as the ability to find cheer and hope in prolonged moments of hardship and uncertainty. The consciousness and ability to sustain community spirit in trying times do not normally stem from state action, but emanate from an organic sense of belief, self-awareness, and willingness to act—both at the individual and community level. In such times, there has to be a meaningful and concerted engagement between government, individual, and community. These conversations are potentially fraught with difficulties but they are necessary.

Jon Hawkes, an Australian scholar and leading commentator on cultural policy, asserts that a society cannot survive unless it is able to “develop and maintain, amongst its constituents, a shared expression of, and commitment to, a sense of

meaning and purpose.” According to him, “a society’s values are the basis upon which all else is built. These values and the ways they are expressed are a society’s culture.” Culture, which Hawkes defines as “the inherent values and the means and the results of social expression” and what “enfolds every aspect of human intercourse”, is not just a “ballast to keep communities afloat in difficult times”. Its vitality is essential for a sustainable and flourishing society; it is a fourth essential pillar, he argues, alongside social equity, environmental responsibility, and economic viability (Hawkes 2001, vii).

Culture as shared beliefs—“shared patterns of behaviours and interactions, cognitive constructs and understanding that are learned by socialisation”—(Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition 2020) is a therefore a form of social glue that keeps people together, in good times and bad.

Hawkes further asserts:

... the sick, hungry and poor can maintain a sense of wellbeing if there is the feeling of being an active part of an organism that is bigger than oneself. This is not said to trivialise Maslow’s hierarchy of basic needs but to redress the balance. Bread alone is simply not enough. Culture is not the decoration added after a society has dealt with its basic needs. Culture is the basic need—it is the bedrock of society (Hawkes 2001, vii).

Culture is not a passive and innate form of identity and behaviour that defines and prescribes a community. Often, in times of disruptions, uncertainty and trauma, cultural actions, drawing on the “cognitive, emotional, sensory, and imaginative” (Ko and Ngiam 2017) can offer a

way for people to find solace, meaning and hope. By cutting “across the realm of the personal to the communal, the societal and national, culture can be a great unifier and a catalyst for building a civic culture of care, cohesion and confidence” (National Arts Council 2018).

In times of crisis, when concerns and needs are immediate and pressing, the salience and value of intangibles such as the arts and culture are often overlooked. In June 2020, *The Straits Times* commissioned a survey on perceptions Singaporeans had, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, of the role that essential workers play, and the discrepancy between their value to society and what they earn. In the survey, respondents were asked which jobs they deemed most essential and non-essential, out of a randomised list of 20 jobs across the spectrum. Artists emerged top of the list of non-essential workers. The results sparked debate and animated discussion about the value Singapore society places on artists.

It is not surprising that periods of trauma and uncertainty give impetus to heightened cultural vitality. Southeast Asian art is replete with examples of expressions that capture the mood of the times. While Singapore has not had these major moments of trauma in recent history, there have been examples where people had turned to cultural expression to manifest a deep-seated mood. The *xinyao* music movement of the 1970s/1980s was a prime example. The movement emerged organically, alongside growing sentiments of nostalgia, attachment to places, and weariness which contested the state rhetoric of unceasing progress. The *xinyao* movement was not overtly political in motive or nationalistic but it reflected an active search for meaning in a changing world (Ho 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic did not only rupture healthcare systems and the economy; it generated immense mental strains and fractured relationships between individuals and within communities. Under such circumstances, cultural activities allowed people to build resilience, heal, and even maintain sanity. Despite being hit hard during the pandemic in terms of jobs and funding, the arts community still resolved to find ways to survive and contribute in their own ways. During the Circuit Breaker, a period of enhanced safety measures to reduce transmission of COVID-19 from April to May 2020, an organisation known as The Red Pencil Humanitarian Mission started using art therapy to strengthen mental health. It initiated free online art therapy experiential workshops to motivate positivity and resilience in the community during this period. The participants overwhelmingly agreed that the workshops helped them cope with stresses arising from the safety measures (The Red Pencil Humanitarian Mission 2020).

“Keep calm, make art”, also launched in April 2020 by the organisation, used social media as a platform to share weekly inspirations and ideas of art therapy prompts in video format, where viewers could follow the simple instructions for home-based activities. A community choir group led by a local artiste dedicated a music video to workers who were required to go to work as usual during Circuit Breaker, such as healthcare

workers, postmen, and people in essential services. The song sent out their message of support and solidarity (Syncroony 2020). The Public Art Trust (PAT), an initiative by the National Arts Council, commissioned public art as part of local urban spaces, motivating Singaporeans to engage, reflect, and imagine a future moving forward post-COVID-19 (Public Art Trust 2020).

Culture is essential in the making of a healthy community. It has been argued that cultural awareness promotes empathy, imagination, improvisation, and a sense of community, the very elements that could bring about positive change (Goldbard 2013). The intrinsic value of culture is self-evident, but its transformative power, and social and economic benefits, especially in times of crisis, cannot be overstated, and it deserves to be supported at all levels.

COVID 19, described as the crisis of our generation, has threatened the health of everyone in all senses of the word. Vaccines and economic policies have saved lives and ameliorated hardships, but the overall health of the community is best preserved when its members are not only free from disease and suffering, but are motivated physically, emotionally, creatively, and spiritually to lead dignified and productive lives (Springboard for the Arts and Helicon Collaborative 2018). Herein lies the special place of culture in crisis. □

About the Author



Professor Tan Tai Yong is Professor of Humanities (History) and President of Yale-NUS College. He has published extensively on the Sikh diaspora, social and political history of colonial Punjab, de-colonisation and the partition of South Asia, and Singapore history. His latest publications include *Seven Hundred Years. A History of Singapore* and *The Idea of Singapore. Smallness Unconstrained*. He is Honorary Chairman of the National Museum of Singapore and serves on the National Heritage Board and National Library Board.

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