

A Case for Building Singapore's Cultural Capacity and Capabilities

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Cultural expression, across its myriad forms, is a vital and unique reflection of individual, community and national identity, and yet is easily taken for granted. Keith Tan delves into the notion of cultural capability and its intangible and unlimited value in bolstering our national economy, global brand positioning and social cohesion.

In his poem “*After the Fire*”, Singaporean-Australian poet, Boey Kim Cheng recounts the sombre memory of collecting his late father’s ashes at the crematorium. This strange experience prods the poet to consider the role his father had played in his life; the ashes represent “all that you were, our lives in you.” His father may well be dead and cremated, existing only in the ashes in the urn. But he is also very much alive and present in the poet’s life:

*I can see you in heaven
materializing from the urn,
the scraps and dust
assembled into a ladder
of bone and flesh, up
on your feet, the limp gone,
dusting the ash off,
and ready to walk
back into our lives.*

Boey wrote this poem in response to his migration to Australia, as a way of invoking the presence of his father as he sought out a new life in a different country. It is an intimate and personal poem, but it resonates with me as a middle-aged Singaporean who grew up in a pre-digital 20th century Singapore, while adapting to the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. Everything around me urges me to look towards the future, which undoubtedly is vital for

Singapore’s prosperity and place in the world. But in our onward journey, what memories do we, as a nation, need to hold close to our hearts? What values ought to guide the choices that we make? What elements of our identity do we need to protect and to celebrate?

In February 2021, the French government designated bookstores as “essential businesses”, together with pharmacies and grocery shops. This unusual move arose after bookstores, like most other businesses, were closed during France’s first two COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020. However, a poll conducted during France’s second lockdown found that 52% of the population considered bookstores as “essential businesses”.

Why did the French consider bookstores as essential as pharmacies and groceries? We can ascribe much of the reason to the French passion for living a “cultured life”—a passion which perhaps few other societies share to the same degree. But even so, I wonder if the French were onto something.

Culture is a broad and amorphous term. But in its broadest sense, it reflects who we are as a society and population, expressed through art, music, storytelling in all its forms, architecture, design, dance, and even our culinary heritage. It is easy to take “culture” for granted; after all, it is easy to download a book or to listen to a piece of music on the Internet, without giving thought to the capacity of a community to produce that content, or the capabilities needed to give expression to that content. And when we take our cultural capacity and capabilities for granted, we risk devaluing and losing them altogether.

However, measuring or explaining the value that cultural capability brings to our society and economy is very difficult, unlike, say, “digital

capabilities” or “manufacturing capabilities”. The French recognised this in their designation of bookstores as essential services, but few other governments followed their example. When we use standard economic metrics such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and labour productivity to measure the contributions of “cultural services”, it is no wonder that culture comes up short. Those metrics are not enough.

Singapore’s future prosperity hinges on our economy’s ability to tap into some key “megatrends”. These megatrends include the rise of Asia (and especially Southeast Asia), digitalisation, urbanisation, and sustainability. In order for policymakers to appreciate the need for building “cultural capabilities” more holistically, we need to explain how strengthening these capabilities can support our economy’s efforts to ride these megatrends and differentiate Singapore from our competitors. As a start, I offer three questions to consider.

First, How Can Cultural Capability Support and Strengthen the Creative and Innovative Capacity of the Singapore Economy?

Economic prosperity in the 19th and 20th centuries was derived from developing good skills in repetitive tasks. Singaporean companies will need new skills to stand out in the 21st century. For example, they will need to anticipate and meet the conscious and unconscious demands of urbanised

consumers around Asia, most of whom will be digitally savvy and environmentally and socially conscious. To do so, they will need to keep raising their creative and innovative capacities, to adapt to new demands and challenges that will arise faster than ever before.

Indeed, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) *Skills for 2030* report (OECD 2019) describes how trends such as globalisation and technological advancements will continue to disrupt and upend conventional jobs and skills. The report goes on to describe the growing importance of “social and emotional skills, such as empathy, self-awareness, respect for others and the ability to communicate”. Other key skills include “emotional intelligence, integrity and ethical responsibility, adaptability and resilience... cultural sensitivity and sense-making... creativity and imagination.”

Successful companies in the 21st century will need people who possess these skills in abundance—people who demonstrate empathy and sensitivity to different cultural norms and practices, and who can build bridges across different interest groups. These skills will find their expression in many different jobs. But, above all, I believe that attention to sensitive, user-centric design will differentiate leaders from everyone else. Well-designed, user-centric products, services, applications, publications and experiences will enable our companies to stand out amid the pack, all competing for the attention and wallets of billions of consumers. Of course, there are many ways to build these skills. But I believe that strengthening our cultural capabilities (not just in school, but throughout our lives) can make a meaningful difference, by deepening our sense of curiosity about other cultures, strengthening our capacity for empathy, and sharpening our attention to user-centric detail.

Second, How Can Cultural Capability Strengthen the Global Brand Positioning of Singapore as a Vibrant Global-Asia City?

By nearly all rankings and indices, Singapore is regarded as a leading “Global City” because of its physical and digital connectivity, its role in global flows of finance, trade, ideas and people, and the presence of thousands of international and regional companies that have headquartered themselves in Singapore. This position has been hard-won through the efforts of many government agencies and their partners, and we cannot take it for granted. Cities rise and fall, and can be eclipsed by others imitating their success.

Cultural capability, however, adds a distinct dimension that is much harder to duplicate. Other cities can dangle business incentives, build roads, airports and industrial estates, and establish museums, galleries, theatres, and creative enclaves, but they will need content and people to make these buildings and precincts come alive. Singapore stands out because we are not a “mono-cultural” city. As a home and host to many different cultures, Singapore has a unique advantage few other cities share. Strengthening our ability to tap into the rich cultural capital present in Singapore (and our immediate region in Southeast Asia) can sharpen Singapore’s distinctiveness and attractiveness for businesses,

as well as for Singaporeans and visitors. After all, Singapore should not look or feel like any other major city. But we will need strong cultural capabilities to differentiate us.

In fact, according to TripAdvisor (TripAdvisor 2019), the most popular tourist attractions in major global hub cities are, invariably, attractions that reflect the unique cultural and historical heritage of that city. The National Gallery and the Churchill War Rooms in London, the National 9/11 Memorial and Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, the Musee d’Orsay in Paris, and the Shinjuku Gyoen National Garden and the Samurai Museum in Tokyo are some examples. To strengthen our position as a Global-Asia hub city in the 21st century, we therefore need to extend our cultural roots to develop richer, more distinctive content and forms of expression that enrich our vibrancy, differentiate Singapore, and elevate Singapore’s global brand.

Third, How Can Cultural Capability Strengthen the Cohesiveness of Singapore’s Diverse, Multi-Cultural Society?

In 1972, then Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam sent a trenchant warning about the risks of Singapore’s growth as a “Global City” in a well-known speech

to the Singapore Press Club. He explained the importance of positioning Singapore as a “Global City”, but also warned that:

“Laying the economic infrastructure of a Global City may turn out to be the easiest of the many tasks involved in creating such a city. But the political, social and cultural adjustments such a city would require to enable men to live happy and useful lives in them may demand a measure of courage, imagination and intelligence which may or may not be beyond the capacity of its citizens. For those people who cannot develop the necessary capacities, the Global City may turn out to be another monster—another necropolis” (Rajaratnam 1972).

Rajaratnam foresaw that Singapore would face daunting societal and cultural shifts in its journey towards becoming a truly Global City. These warnings remain no less true even now as Singapore contemplates its place in a 21st century world at risk of fragmentation and deglobalisation.

I believe that strengthening Singapore’s cultural capabilities provides one of the crucial “adjustments” that Rajaratnam foresaw as necessary for Singapore’s future success. All around the world, governments are facing ever-greater challenges with regards to governing effectively. In fact, according to the 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer (Edelman 2022), nearly half of the population surveyed in 28 countries consider “government” a “dividing force” in society. Trust in Singapore’s government institutions has remained high, but Singapore is not immune to the forces at

work in other countries that have steadily eroded trust between different communities of people, and between governments and their populations.

Strong cultural capabilities can promote empathy and trust across different communities in Singapore, and can mitigate the forces that would otherwise divide and alienate us. The products and experiences of our cultural economy, including plays, visual arts, music, films, literature, and even our hawker centres, provide a way for different communities to communicate, collaborate and find common ground and shared values. We need more of these products at a time when, left on their own, people instinctively retreat into their own echo chambers and sub-cultures. We need strong cultural capabilities in order to build bridges and strengthen societal resilience and coherence in an age of fragmentation. Singapore’s rich, vibrant multiculturalism is therefore a precious asset that all of us must celebrate and safeguard.

In January 2020, on the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic, former Cabinet Minister George Yeo delivered a sobering speech on the occasion of the 24th Gordon Arthur Ransome Oration. Entitled “Human Solidarity in a Fragmenting World” (Yeo 2020), Yeo described how trends such as social media “revolution”, disinformation, and income and wealth inequality were causing societies to fragment and become increasingly dysfunctional, perhaps becoming the “necropolis” that Rajaratnam feared. Yeo concluded his speech with a characteristically humane call to action: “the more complex the world becomes, the more we must affirm that which is at the core of our humanity.”

As a policymaker charged with an economic mandate, I take these words to mean that my work is not just about growing our economy and income levels. It is also about growing our creative and innovative capabilities, elevating Singapore's place in the world, and defending the resilience and coherence of our

society. Singapore's distinct and rich culture provides a deep reservoir for these efforts, but we must keep growing this capacity while also strengthening our capabilities to tap into it, so that the stories of Singapore and who we are will keep on inspiring future generations of Singaporeans. □

About the Author



Keith Tan was appointed as the Chief Executive of the Singapore Tourism Board in late 2018. He has held appointments in the Ministries of Defence, Home Affairs, and Trade and Industry, as well as in the Public Service Division and the Civil Service College, and has also served on the board of the Central Provident Fund Board. He holds a bachelor's degree in English and a certificate in Russian Studies from Princeton University, and a master's degree in Management from the Peter Drucker School of Management, Claremont Graduate University.

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