

The Role of Culture in the Post- Pandemic World

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Many contributors to this volume have explored new practices, platforms, perspectives and partnerships that arts and cultural institutions have developed as they learnt to navigate COVID-19. They all explore the topic of creative self renewal from different perspectives. In this closing essay, Yeoh Chee Yan discusses trends shaping the future environment of the cultural sector and the roles that arts and culture can play for Singapore to re-emerge stronger in the post-pandemic world.

COVID-19 buffeted the cultural sector. Cultural venues and events, artists and arts groups, especially those which depend on live audiences and visitorship, were under a cloud. But, as always, there was a silver lining. The pandemic accelerated the blooming of culture on digital platforms and the metaverse. It also drove home the need to cultivate new business and funding models for greater resilience in the face of future disruptions. We weathered the storm and, hopefully, are in a stronger position to face future challenges.

We now stand at a watershed. Unfortunately, even to the most die-hard optimist, the post-pandemic recovery feels fragile. Brittle economic growth, workforce and supply chain disruptions, inflation, income insecurity—particularly for gig workers—have all exacerbated socio-economic inequalities and consequential social pressures. Society has continued to fragment into subcultures, some

of which have global networks, which nurture the polarisation of views fed by misinformation, amoral algorithms, and emotionally-charged narratives on controversial issues. Geopolitically, the outlook is fraught with uncertainty. The world order remains in flux, with European Union (EU)/North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-Russia relations and United States (US)-China relations yet to reach stable equilibrium. It looks like yet more stormy weather ahead.

Still, tremendous opportunities await those who are ready to ride the wave of re-opening. In this context, perhaps the question about the role of culture can be asked in different ways. Do we in the cultural sector see ourselves as price takers or creators of a better future? Do we see a role for the cultural sector in creating economic opportunities and good jobs in the creative industries and the metaverse? Do we think that there is a role for culture in bringing people together and in growing our collective imagination about how we can forge more sustainable, equitable, healthy, and cohesive societies? Do we consider it a social good that culture can inspire a sense of identity, personal growth, and well-being in good times and bad?

As we look ahead to the next decade, what role can culture play in helping us create a way forward? While there certainly are different ways of posing these questions and answers, here are a few ideas about the role of culture in the coming years.

Culture Can Connect Us to a Broader Perspective

An important role for the cultural sector is to illuminate the big issues of our time (Menon 2021). While the Centre for Strategic Futures (CSF)¹ in Singapore aims to encourage policy makers to take the long view and understand the driving forces shaping the world we live in, COVID-19 showed us that global challenges can affect everyone—and how citizens respond is crucial. Our first Foreign Minister, Mr Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, was prescient when he said in 1979, “we are not only living in a world of accelerating change but also of changes which are global in scope and which permeate almost all aspects of human activity...only a future oriented society can cope with the problems of the 21st century” (Rajaratnam 1979). COVID-19 is a sobering reminder that the prospective capacity not just of policy makers, but also of citizens, will make a difference to how well a society adapts to the forces of change. And this capacity depends on how well-informed the man in the street is about trends and challenges shaping the world we live in, as well as whether a majority of citizens are moved to do something about it.

There are many parts to this equation. But trustworthy sources of public information and civic

platforms where citizens can engage one another in constructive dialogue on important issues must be part of it. As safe spaces, cultural institutions are well-placed to play a role. In addition, the power of culture to ignite the collective imagination, its creative capacity to see solutions, and not just problems, is our special value-add.

How can we better play this role? Partnerships between reputable cultural institutions, civic groups and thinktanks doing futures work could break new ground in engaging the public mind. Thus, with regard to their new arts and heritage plans, the National Arts Council (NAC) and the National Heritage Board (NHB) can explore closer partnerships with the CSF. Moreover, cultural spaces are well-positioned to present content and host conversations about global challenges. As an example, NHB promotes environmental sustainability as part of its new heritage plan. “Rooting for Change: Artistic Responses to Climate Change and Sustainability” will be the first in a series of programmes and exhibitions on environmental sustainability planned by the National Museum of Singapore, during which it will host programmes to engage youth and other segments of the public to discuss societal responses to climate change and other global issues.

While heritage is closely linked to history and the preservation of sites, artifacts and traditions of the past, it is also about the transmission of values, intangible cultural heritage, and the choices each

generation makes which shape the heritage we leave for the future. Thus, the Founders' Memorial does not just commemorate the values of the founding generation of leaders of independent Singapore, it also seeks to inspire future generations of Singaporeans to dream and create anew.

Cultural institutions can play an important role as safe and creative spaces within which the public may explore the big issues of our time, particularly if they are not seen as partisan or captured by special interest groups. Likewise, independent arts houses, collectives and artists can also be powerful voices for responsible national and global citizenship.

Culture Can Connect Us with the Wider Society

Accessibility and Inclusiveness, Diversity and Cohesion

Given the trends towards greater socio-economic fragmentation such as socio-economic inequality, demographic and workforce shifts, the drift towards exclusivity of subcultures and polarisation of views—culture plays a critically important role in bringing people together. The arts and heritage can help us encounter,

understand, empathise with, and appreciate people of different religions, races, perspectives and walks of life. They can do this because of the power of culture to connect us through our shared humanity.

To play this role effectively, we must deliberately design our programmes and spaces for accessibility and inclusivity so that Singaporeans from all walks of life can enjoy their own subculture while also encountering others, both in content and conversation, in ways which engender better mutual understanding. This involves mastering the art of bringing people together, playing the role of honest broker, and inspiring the collective imagination to embrace a wider definition of “us”.

Thus, our heritage institutions have increasingly made it a practice to engage sub-ethnic communities in co-creating exhibitions which re-tell the Singapore story, evoking an open society which celebrates diversity, respects differences and values cohesion. A recent example is the Malay Heritage Centre's (MHC) 2021 series of programmes and exhibitions, “Se-Nusantara: Our Stories, A Shared Heritage”. To create it, MHC collaborated with members of five Malay sub-ethnic communities to highlight the Malay community's diversity and shared history. Another example is the Asian Civilisations Museum which has long partnered academia as well as industry, socio-religious and cultural organisations in discussions of intercultural, interreligious, intersectoral exchanges involving Asia and how this has enriched our shared heritage.

Cultural Relations, Soft Power and Global Citizenship

We may also want to look at the role of cultural diplomacy through a wider lens. Given the trends towards major power rivalries, nativism and demonisation of competitor countries, international cultural exchange at the people-to-people level can make for more resilient ties. The cultural content we present to visitors in Singapore and those abroad can also play a role in capturing the global imagination about Singapore. To be credible, the Singapore narrative must be authentic and unafraid of showing us as we are. At the same time, our cultural relations must also say something about the values we believe in as an open, cohesive, plural society.

Exercising their responsibility as global citizens, BTS (a highly popular South Korean boy band) partnered the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) to campaign against youth violence, and spoke at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 2021 about helping young people find their voice. More recently, they visited the White House to talk about anti-Asian racism (Cruz 2022). The six-Academy-Award-winning dark comedy, *Parasite*, explored the universal pressures of social inequality in Korea's unique context. Credit must go to the Korean artists and creative mavens for giving voice to issues of our time. Moreover, their efforts have undoubtedly helped Korea to accrue soft power and have also enhanced its attractiveness as a cultural

destination. So how can international cultural relations help Singapore be seen as an attractive global citizen who "gets it"? Perhaps we have to be a bit more intentional about the values and issues we curate.

Culture Can (Re)Connect Us with Ourselves

Health and Well-Being

Undeniably, the pandemic took a toll on the mental health of many. It drove home the importance of investing in health and personal well-being as keys to vibrant and resilient living. Research by the World Health Organisation's (WHO) Regional Office for Europe has shown that the use of the arts in health care can have lasting benefits for health outcomes (Fancourt and Finn 2019). There is much more we can do in the cultural sector to realise the positive, preventive and therapeutic value of the arts and heritage for health and well-being. This could involve new partnerships between the cultural, health and social service sectors, between cultural spaces and practitioners of intangible cultural heritage such as traditional medicine, the martial arts, meditation, or promoting the learning of skills like dance or art therapy for therapeutic applications.

The Creative Self

At the end of the day, perhaps the fundamental value of culture is how it connects us to what is important to us as individuals. Culture inspires us to reflect on who we are and who we want to be. It helps us make sense of ourselves, and deepens our sense of identity and personal fulfillment. It is an open invitation to exercise our creative capacity as human beings (Arts Council England 2020). Culture may be perceived as a luxury, something high up on Maslow's hierarchy of needs. But therein lies the irony because, like prehistoric cave paintings or the murals at Singapore's Changi Chapel Museum, the role of culture, even in the most challenging times, is to create, capture and

communicate that—of our human experience—which is of enduring value. And while it may be perceived as a private good, the creative self is arguably the basis of the creative economy and of the making of shared identity, both of which are certainly for the common good.

Undoubtedly, the inspiration and creativity of the individual is necessary to ignite the collective imagination and the creative industries. At the same time, culture can connect the individual to a broader perspective, to the wider society, and to a more expansive, creative sense of self. These are some roles culture can play in the next decade. We must be willing to continue to invest in culture to create the shared path ahead. □

About the Author



Ms Yeoh Chee Yan began her public service career in 1985, and served in various appointments, among them Head of the Scenario Planning Office in the Public Service Division, where her team developed the first set of National Scenarios.

She served as Permanent Secretary (Education Development) from 2008-2012. In 2012, she was appointed Permanent Secretary of the new Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth. Under her leadership, MCCY embarked on new strategic plans for sports, heritage and the arts. MCCY also championed capability building in citizen engagement across the Public Service. She also led the Ministry in several successful national initiatives, including the coordination of the SG50 celebrations, the establishment of the National Gallery, the inscription of Singapore Botanic Gardens as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the successful hosting of the 28th SEA Games.

Ms Yeoh currently serves as Chairman of the National Heritage Board and as Senior Advisor, Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth.

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Note

1. Centre for Strategic Futures (CSF), based in the Prime Minister's Office, is a division of the Singapore Public Service.