

# Thinking through Cultural Policy in our Time

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*Pragmatism has long underpinned Singapore’s policymaking. However, as Singapore progresses in a challenging new era, it is imperative that our cultural policy is grounded in a broader and deeper understanding of the arts and culture in human life and contemporary society. Professor Kwok Kian-Woon discusses three fundamental issues that cultural policymakers may address in order to truly enable our cultural life to flourish.*

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## What is Culture?

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Ploughing through the many official documents on cultural policy in Singapore, I am sometimes pleasantly surprised by the language—the choice of words, the tone of voice, the play of ideas—that is used. The opening lines of *The Report of the Arts and Culture Strategic Review* (2012) were clichéd, referring to “our journey so far” from “fishing village and sleepy outpost” to “dynamic metropolis”—surely a caricature of our complex history. Its next section on “reaffirming the value of arts and culture”, however, drew a quotation from Aristotle to suggest that they “have a unique place in human society” and “differentiate us from animals”, although these terms “have no universally accepted definition”. The report then recalled that that in 1978, “the then-newly appointed Acting Minister for Culture, Mr Ong Teng Cheong, grappled with the question of what culture was” [and] Mr Ong said, “The library gave me some 300 different interpretations as to what culture is”.

Tolerance of ambiguity may not be one of our stronger qualities. The term “culture” is elastic, and its fabric of meanings can be stretched and wrung to serve specific purposes at hand (not least in the formulation of *cultural* policies), but that does not preclude us from clarifying and extending its uses in any instance. We, especially those of us who work in the “*cultural* sector” (and that must include education), can empathise with Mr Ong, who might have earnestly attempted to clarify the meaning of that single word when he contemplated his new ministerial portfolio. Most ministries of culture in countries with secular constitutions are officially concerned with “culture” in relation to the historical context of the nation-state, projecting a vision of its citizenry as a people and addressing practical needs. Hence, in the decades before Mr Ong inquired into what the word “culture” meant, political leaders already held firm ideas on what a desirable nascent national culture should—and *should not*—look like, as reflected in the “anti-yellow culture” campaign (Lim 2019).

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## Culture and Policy Making

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A decade later, Mr Ong was appointed deputy prime minister, and he led the review documented in *The Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts* (1989), which ushered in a series of major initiatives in promoting the arts and heritage (Wong 2019). By that time, there were no apparent definitional difficulties. The report straightforwardly opened with the lines: “Culture and the arts mould the way of life, the customs and

psyche of a people. They give a nation a unique character.” They serve four purposes: “(a) broaden our minds and deepen our sensitivities; (b) improve the general quality of life; (c) strengthen our social bond[s]; [and] (d) contribute to our tourist and entertainment industry”.

This framework, which ascribes “culture and the arts” a fundamental role in shaping collective life and articulates their social benefits and economic contributions, has been demonstrably durable over the decades, allowing for restatements with varying emphases and elaborations in the face of new priorities. A general pattern in cultural policy includes the following elements: a high-level statement on the importance of culture and the arts in human life and society, a profound concern with “national identity” and “social cohesion”, a practical concern with economic growth, and a set of recommendations for implementation. Beneath the aura of coherence in such policy documents, one may detect a “split personality” that is being held together: on the one hand, a deeply aspirational commitment to personal development and collective life and, on the other hand, a patently realist view of economic imperatives.

In a series of studies, Lily Kong (2000, 2012, and 2019) analysed the trajectory of cultural policy in Singapore. Her 2000 article highlighted how “economic and socio-agendas” are constantly “negotiated”, and how “the hegemony of economic development is supported by the ideology and language of pragmatism and globalisation”. This analysis was further developed in her 2012 paper on the emphasis on the role of the arts and culture in the “creative economy” following the global financial crisis and the rise of “creative cities”, surpassing the rather rudimentary thinking about the contributions of the arts and culture to the “tourist and entertainment industry” in the 1989 report.

The 2012 report of the strategic review (see Hoe 2019), which was led by Mr Lee Tzu Yang, noted that “in a world that has become much more complex than in 1978, culture has not become simpler to define” and “it may be more fruitful to describe what arts and culture *do*” rather than to deal with definitions”. “[The] arts and culture enrich our souls and add meaning to our lives. They exercise our creativity, stretch our imagination, and strike a chord with our feelings. They connect us to the past, help us to dream our future, and define who we are. They develop us as a whole person [sic] – as full human beings”.

Stating that Singapore stood “at the brink of another transformation of the cultural landscape”, the report evinced a new-found awareness of the forces of globalisation, engendering the need to “secure our identity amid the multiplicity of global influences today” and “boosting Singapore’s competitiveness”. Highlighting this report in her 2019 (312-314) study on the policy directions geared towards “creative industries”, Kong (2019, 312-314) argued that although “creative economy policies” remained in place, “they appear to be joined by a new emphasis on the social value of the arts and culture” and the “language of... cultural industries is notably muted”. The report highlighted a shift towards bringing “arts and culture to everyone, everywhere, every day” and reaching new audiences “for whom economic growth is not always a primary goal”. This apparent re-emphasis on socio-cultural values led Kong to conclude: “Ironically, turning our gaze that way may address more foundational issues that, in the long run, could support a truly robust creative economy”.

The pendulum swings one way and then the other as Singapore and the world move into the third decade of the twenty-first century. Socio-cultural

and economic agendas, as Kong's work suggests, are not mutually exclusive, and we cannot avoid addressing "foundational issues" and adopting a holistic approach. This task is more urgent than ever today against the backdrop of the global—indeed planetary—experience of the COVID-19 pandemic from early 2020, with its unprecedented speed, scope and scale of disruption and devastation. As the terms "post-COVID", "post-pandemic", and "new normal" emerge in everyday discourse, one senses a collective desire to think that a once mysterious virus that wreaked untold damage has been tamed, that Science has once again triumphed over Nature, and that we can finally return to normalcy. But what would such a return mean? Would socio-cultural agendas be sacrificed in a new era of economic hardship and renewed Cold War politics tragically epitomised by the Russia-Ukraine War?

I sense that we—leaders, professionals, educators, artists, intellectuals, and citizens—might still not have fully fathomed the precious lessons of the pandemic and how our lives and policies must *fundamentally* change. Political leaders have had to do this, and Mr Lawrence Wong (2022), the new deputy prime minister of Singapore, has offered a vision of a renewed "social compact". Not surprisingly, the "Forward Singapore" roadmap covers key pillars: the economy and employment, education and lifelong learning, health and social support, home and living environment, environmental sustainability and "Singapore identity". Where do "the arts and culture", which are not explicitly mentioned, figure in this vision? The short answer must be that they undergird *every* pillar, and the makers of cultural policy will do well to understand and articulate their *pivotal* role in a new era, and in dialogue with citizens and especially artists, arts educators, and cultural workers. This is a collective task, and for my part

here, I will only sketch out three foundational issues that have been either neglected or only hinted at in the evolution of cultural policy in Singapore. It may be something of a luxury to engage in academic discourse, but I think it is worthwhile to strengthen our cognitive foundations as we grapple with the many practical issues.

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## The Way Forward

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First, once again, we must think anew about "culture" and "the arts". In his foreword to a volume on cultural policies and institutions in Singapore, Janadas Devan (2019, xii-xiv) briefly reviewed the etymology of the word "culture" and its official uses, noting that "we have long oscillated between culture as a way of life, as synonymous almost with civilisation... and the other idea of culture as encompassing artistic activities and personal cultivation". He concluded that "The cultural choices we make—including how we define the word 'culture'—are ultimately political choices; and the essence of politics is contestation. For this reason, there has always been and will always be... a tension between the arts and the state. The state has its reasons... as does the arts their own genius". Recognising the grain of truth in this line of thinking, however, I wonder if "culture" can be too easily reduced to a matter of power politics and "the arts" becomes primarily subservient to economic necessity. I see merit in recalling the longstanding ethnographic definition of culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by [persons as members] of society" (Tylor 1871, 1). This definition also complements the anthropological idea of *material* culture that is organically tied to the everyday activities of human beings exercising their capabilities and creating

objects in the process of sustaining and improving their living conditions.

In this sense, what we call “the arts”—as embodied in artifacts, texts, and performances—must also properly be regarded as an integral part of material life, transformed by the capabilities and skills of human agents. Hence, we must avoid any simplistic critique of “economic agendas” in cultural policy, including protecting livelihoods, generating employment, and enhancing employability. At the same time, artistic creation has the characteristic of *transcending* purely practical or utilitarian concerns. For example, there are those who regard soccer as “*the beautiful game*”, fully appreciative of its special aesthetic aspects and its exacting standards of excellence without primarily caring about which team wins in a competition; failure is tolerated, and the losing team can be well-loved and command loyalty. This is what makes the game akin to an artistic activity, a *performance*, rather than a betting sport, offering us a way of thinking that is already suggested in some cultural policies. There will be winners and losers in the creative economy in the short term, but cultural industries cannot flourish in the long run without the support of a multi-ethnic population that lives and breathes in a culturally vibrant environment.

Second, a more expansive notion of culture must contend with the radically new social and material conditions that have come to the fore, most dramatically during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. The health crisis, as many have pointed out, intersected with other major crises. The zoonotic transmission of viruses has its origins in the environmental crisis, and the pandemic has exposed and exacerbated the socio-economic inequality (including the digital divide), political polarisation, and failure of leadership in many countries, even in the developed West. Indeed,

the very idea of the “wholeness” of culture—and the experience of sharing a *common* culture—has come into question at a time of pervasive volatility and divisiveness. But the *fragmentation* of culture is also rooted in the massive global transformation in the early twentieth century, in our “fractured times”. As Eric Hobsbawm (2014, xii) highlights: “The development of societies in which a techno-industrialised economy has drenched our lives in universal, constant and omnipresent experiences of information and cultural production—of sound, image, word, memory and symbols—is historically unprecedented.”

In terms of material culture, the “objects” that are produced under such conditions are “de-materialised”, and yet they shape worldviews and social relations indelibly. Extensive inequality and intensive polarisation, in turn, engender a “reality crisis” or a “crisis of truth”, as reflected in the fake news, conspiracy theories, and falsehoods that have proliferated in recent years. Here, too, we must ask how artists and cultural workers can play a significant role, for a key feature of the arts, and this is allied with intellectual life, is the need for critical evaluation of multiple interpretations. As Denis Dutton (2009, 54) puts it, “Wherever artistic forms are found, they exist alongside some kind of critical language of judgment and appreciation, simple, or, more likely, elaborate.”

Third, I return to the high-level statements in our cultural policies that reaffirm the arts as a uniquely human phenomenon and aspire to support our people in their personal development and collective life. We must take these articulations—and the larger socio-cultural agendas—*seriously* and not cynically write them off as mere rhetoric to dress up the economic agendas. It is not in the typical policy document in a famously pragmatic nation-state that one

would find references to the arts and culture having everything to do with “our minds”, “our sensitivities”, “our social bonds”, “our souls”, “our imagination” or “our feelings”. Indeed, what would it mean to take the idea of developing ourselves as “whole persons” and “full human beings” *seriously*? It would entail a perspective close to what Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum have called the “capabilities approach”, which has been adopted in the Human Development Reports of the United Nations Development Programme.

The “central human capabilities” include “sense, imagination, and thought”, that is, “being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason—and to do these things in a ‘truly human’ way informed and cultivated by an adequate education” (Nussbaum 2017, 215). Here, I would add the capabilities of self-reflection and intercultural understanding, which place value on a predisposition “for working *with* and working *out* difference” (Sasitharan, 2019, 18), so much lacking and so sorely needed in multi-ethnic Singapore and many parts of the world. And again, would the development of these human capabilities not only enhance the creativity of a people, but also build social cohesion and resilience, all of which are preconditions for sustainable economic development?

And where does “politics” figure in this re-thinking of cultural policy? The economist Mariana Mazzucato (2021, 7-8) has criticised the conventional portrayal of government “as a clunky bureaucratic machine that cannot innovate”, and she advocates a bold “mission-oriented approach” in which the “scale of reinvention calls for a new narrative and a new vocabulary for our political economy”. This requires ambition and a commitment to inclusiveness, “involving many

value creators” in a time of crisis, which is “exactly the moment to reimagine what type of society we want to build, and the capabilities and capacities we need to get us there”. Artists will continue to make art under the most inhospitable conditions. The question is not whether the government has a role in the arts and culture, but what kinds of “value-creating” role its agencies can play in a truly innovative partnership with non-governmental value creators, especially artists and art groups, who in exercising autonomy, as Kuo Pao Kun (2008 [1999], 197) urges, “must also endeavour to develop a commanding fortitude, a deep sense of discipline and responsibility as well as courageous critical integrity”. This has important implications for arts education and demands a corresponding set of skills and attitudes among our arts policymakers and administrators.

Pragmatism, which has been defined as “a focus on what works in practice rather than principle” (Menon 2021, 30), has arguably served Singapore well for more than half a century. Can practice and principle truly be divorced from each other? We need to think our way through the complex crises of our time, both realistically and imaginatively, and it is in the realm of the arts that the back-and-forth *interplay* between reality and make-believe is creatively enacted, opening new ways of looking at the world. The essence of politics may well be contestation, but politics is the art of the possible, and here we are reminded of the words of Max Weber (2020 [1919], 115): “Politics is a slow and difficult drilling of holes into hard board, done with both passion and clear-sightedness. To achieve what is possible in the world, one must constantly reach for the impossible”. □

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## About the Author



Kwok Kian-Woon is Vice-Chancellor, University of the Arts Singapore. From 1 January 2023, he will relinquish his appointment as Professor of Sociology at the Nanyang Technological University, where he has served as a founding member of the former School of Humanities and Social Sciences, the first Head of Sociology, Senate Chair, Associate Provost of Student Life, and Associate Vice President (Well-being). His research areas include the study of social memory, mental health, the Chinese overseas, and Asian modernity. He has been actively involved in civil society and the public sector, especially in the arts and heritage.

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