

# The Future of Culture and the Arts in Singapore: A 30 Year Perspective

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*This opening essay by Professor Tommy Koh recalls the Singaporean policymakers and government initiatives that helped to shape and advance the development of the local cultural and arts industry over the past three decades, and expresses hope for its future.*

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30 years ago, many people criticised Singapore as a cultural desert. However, no one can make such a statement today. Singapore now has a vibrant arts scene, and it would not be wrong to say that Singapore has been transformed from a cultural desert to a cultural oasis. This essay will explain how that transformation was accomplished, and will conclude with my view of the future.

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## Government Leadership

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In 1990, after 31 years as Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew voluntarily stepped down. Mr Goh Chok Tong succeeded him and became our second Prime Minister. It was Prime Minister (PM) Goh who decided that it was time for Singapore to develop a neglected sector, that of culture and the arts. He also wanted to liberalise our very strict censorship laws and policies.

PM Goh chose a brilliant young Minister, George Yeo, to helm the newly-created Ministry for Information and the Arts (MITA). Minister Yeo created three statutory boards to carry out the functions of the Ministry: National Arts Council (NAC) in 1991, the National Heritage Board (NHB) in 1993, and the National Library Board (NLB) in

1995. He asked me to be the founding chairman of NAC. In his nine years as Minister for Information and the Arts from 1990 to 1999, George Yeo transformed Singapore culturally.

During that period, the fifth President of Singapore, Ong Teng Cheong, was also a champion of culture and the arts. Before his presidency, he chaired the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts whose 1988 report served as a road map which guided Singapore's cultural and arts development over the following decades. The report recommended the establishment of the NAC and the NHB. It also recommended the building of Esplanade-Theatres on the Bay, and the expansion of our network of museums.

There is a saying in Chinese that translates as: "when we drink water, we must remember its source." Certainly, when we enjoy the arts in Singapore, we must remember Ong Teng Cheong, Goh Chok Tong and George Yeo, and their indispensable contributions for which we owe a debt of gratitude.

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## Building World-Class Infrastructure

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The government has since devoted substantial resources to improving the infrastructure for the arts. The building of Esplanade-Theatres on the Bay has given Singapore a world-class venue for the performing arts. Its concert hall's excellent acoustics have attracted many of the world's most famous orchestras to perform there. In the same way, the building of the National Gallery Singapore (NGS) has provided us with a visual arts venue which

compares favourably with the best in the world. Esplanade and NGS have undoubtedly enhanced Singapore's reputation in the cultural world.

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## Supporting our Artists and Flagship Companies

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There is no art without artists. For that reason, at that time, our number one priority was to help our artists, young and old. We wanted to raise their status in society, and create an environment in which it would be possible for them to make a living as artists. We gave them grants to hold their exhibitions and concerts, and offered scholarships to our young artists to study abroad. Because of the high cost of rent in Singapore, we had to provide affordable housing to our artists and arts groups. We introduced the Cultural Medallion and the Young Artist Awards. A small elite group of artists was given the established Meritorious Service Medal. In these many ways, we tried to help our artists.

When I was the chairman of the NAC, we pursued a two-prong policy in awarding grants. The first prong was to nurture a number of flagship companies such as the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, the Singapore Chinese Orchestra, the Singapore Dance Theatre, and several others. The second was to support promising companies such as Theatreworks, the Necessary Stage, the Practice Theatre, the Singapore Lyric Opera, the T'ang Quartet, and many others. We also supported young artists and those who were engaged in bold and experimental art. I was the patron of

The Substation, and worked closely with Kuo Pao Kun and his successors in making it a home for all artists, especially the young and the experimental.

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## Education in the Arts

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When I was the chairman of NAC, another very important aspect of our work concerned education in the arts. We have two art colleges: the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and the LASALLE College of the Arts. As NAC's chairman, I received an offer from the Ministry of Education (MOE) which proposed the provision of financial aid to the two colleges. However, the amount offered was only half of that given to students in our polytechnics. George Yeo urged me to accept the offer, but I rejected it because it implied that an arts student is only half as valuable as a poly student. It took us many years before we succeeded in convincing MOE to offer the two colleges the same financial support it offered the polytechnics. I am very pleased with the recent decision of the government to ask the two art colleges to collaborate in establishing a university for the arts in Singapore. [Editor-in-Chief's Note: As of 30 August 2022, it has been announced that Universty of the Arts Singapore (UAS) will accept applications from 2023, and open its doors in August 2024.]

In 2003, the founding of the National University of Singapore's Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music was another excellent achievement, offering music students an abundance of educational, performing, compositional and collaborative opportunities. Additionally, MOE decided to establish a high school, the School of The Arts (SOTA), with a special focus on the arts. Thus far, SOTA has been a great success.

At NAC, we were able to obtain money from the Tote Board to enable every student in Singapore to have the experience of attending a concert and an exhibition. We were also able to bring artists and art groups to perform in our schools. Over the decades, this has helped to nurture a love for the arts in our students, and to expand the audience base for the arts in Singapore.

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## Cultural Philanthropy

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When I first became chairman of NAC, there was no such thing as cultural philanthropy. When I approached business leaders for help, they replied that support for culture and the arts was not on their corporate agenda. In the past 30 years, NAC and NHB have worked very hard to change the mindset of our friends in the private sector. I am happy to say that cultural philanthropy is now well supported by our private sector, collectors and wealthy citizens.

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## Expanding the Museum Network

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During my tenure as the chairman of NHB, we built four new museums: the Asian Civilizations Museum, the Peranakan Museum, the World War II Museum at the Ford Factory, and Reflections at Bukit Chandu. In my first year as chairman, I found, to my disappointment, that collectively,

our museums attracted only half a million visitors. I was determined to raise the number of visitors to one million in three years, two million in six years, and three million in nine years. My objective was to make our museums accessible to the people, and not just the elite.

I am happy to say that we succeeded in achieving our ambition. I was also very happy that we managed to produce a few blockbuster exhibitions. All this would not have been possible without the invaluable contributions of Michael Koh, Kenson Kwok, Kwok Kian Chow, Lee Chor Lin, Pit Kuan Wah, Thangamma Karthigesu, Loh Heng Noi, and Tresnawati Prihadi.

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## Censorship

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The first censorship review committee, which reviewed and determined Singapore's censorship policies and practices, was set up in 1981, and chaired by the then Minister of State for Law and Home Affairs, Professor S Jayakumar. In 1991, I was asked to chair the second censorship review committee. Subsequent review committees were set up in 2002, chaired by Liu Thai Ker, then chairman of the National Arts Council, as well as in 2009, chaired by Goh Yew Lin.

My conclusion is that we will always have some censorship on such emotional issues as race and religion, while, on other matters, we have become an increasingly tolerant society. The trajectory is towards a more open and tolerant Singapore. The trend is to give our artists a larger space for creativity.

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## Art is Essential to Life

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I believe that art is essential to life. During the circuit breaker, many of us survived the isolation and maintained our mental health by reading books, listening to music, watching theatre and dance on our screens, and listening to stories on our radios. We do not live by rice or roti alone; we also need nourishment for our hearts and souls. I believe that culture and the arts provide such nourishment.

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## A Bright Future

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I am very optimistic about the future. We have a new generation of young Singaporeans who are well educated, well-travelled, and much more culture-loving than their parents are. Whenever I attend a concert in Singapore, I am happy to note the large number of young people in the audience. I am also very encouraged by the public's support for our writers and poets, playwrights and composers, actors and dancers, singers and instrumentalists. Singaporeans are globally-minded but rooted in Singapore. This is reflected in their cultural preferences. The future of culture and the arts in Singapore is a very bright one. □

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### About the Author



Tommy KOH is currently Emeritus Professor of Law at NUS; Ambassador-At-Large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and Chairman of the International Advisory Panel of the Centre for International Law at the NUS.

He had served as Dean of the Faculty of Law of NUS, Singapore's Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York, Ambassador to the United States of America, High Commissioner to Canada and Ambassador to Mexico. He was President of the Third UN Conference on the Law of the Sea. He was also the Chairman of the Preparatory Committee for and the Main Committee of the UN Conference on Environment and Development (Earth Summit). He was the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy to Russia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. He was the founding Chairman of the National Arts Council, founding Executive Director of the Asia-Europe Foundation and former Chairman of the National Heritage Board. He was Singapore's Chief Negotiator in negotiating an agreement to establish diplomatic relations between Singapore and China. He was also Singapore's Chief Negotiator for the US-Singapore Free Trade Agreement. He acted as Singapore's Agent in two legal disputes with Malaysia. He has chaired two dispute panels for the WTO. He is the Co-Chairman of the China-Singapore Forum and the Japan-Singapore Symposium.

Professor Koh has received awards from the Governments of Singapore, Chile, Finland, France, Japan, Netherlands, Spain and the United States. Professor Koh received the Champion of the Earth Award from UNEP and the inaugural President's Award for the Environment from Singapore. He was conferred with honorary doctoral degrees in law by Yale and Monash Universities. Harvard University conferred on him the Great Negotiator Award in 2014.