

In Conversation with Leaders at the Helm of the National Arts Council and National Heritage Board

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Singapore's national masterplans for arts and heritage were launched in 2023. These important documents outline the broad strategies and priorities for the government in building a vibrant culture for the citizenry, anchored in a strong sense of an identity. Engaging extensively with government agencies, non-government organisations and members of the public, these plans point to new and continuing initiatives as well as the deployment of resources for desired outcomes.

Cultural Connections caught up with the leaders of the two statutory boards in late June 2023 to gain a deeper understanding of the plans. Low Eng Teong assumed the role of National Arts Council (NAC) Chief Executive in March 2023 while Chang Hwee Nee has been Chief Executive at the National Heritage Board (NHB) since 2017. This transcript is an edited version of the conversation.

Cultural Connections (CC): Thank you for spending your time with us today. To kick off, can you summarise what the Arts and Heritage plans are?

Hwee Nee: Our SG Heritage Plan 2.0 is a roadmap that guides Singapore's heritage and museum landscape from 2023 to 2027 and beyond. Our vision is to create an enriched heritage landscape that celebrates the cohesive, multicultural, and multi-racial identity of Singapore, while connecting us across time, space and cultures. Our heritage is a collection of many voices, each telling the Singapore story in their unique way.

This second masterplan builds on what we have achieved under the first heritage plan and focuses on four strategic areas of growth: identity, community, industry and innovation. Collectively, what we are trying to achieve is to create a stronger sense of national identity and pride, foster creativity and innovation, unleash the economic potential of heritage, and strengthen the partnership between the public institutions as well as the wider society.

CC: What about the Arts Plan?

Eng Teong: Similarly, this Arts Plan builds on the foundation of our first plan. Essentially, it looks at how we continue to build a vibrant and more sustainable arts ecosystem. What we mean by a more sustainable ecosystem is the need to grow our arts audiences. This was one of the core priorities of the first plan. We also wanted to build diverse capabilities within the sector as well as better harness technology. These themes are carried through in the new plan.

In the new plan, another key consideration is thinking about how the arts brings people together to create a more connected society. We also want the arts to be an integral part of an enriching environment where we live and work. Another new emphasis is the creative economy. That's important because it is about building a more sustainable arts ecosystem.

CC: How would you explain the arts and heritage plans to the middle-aged auntie in Singapore's Ang Mo Kio public housing estate?

Hwee Nee: To the proverbial auntie in Ang Mo Kio, I would begin by emphasising the importance of recording and sharing the stories of our time, our journey, triumphs, and challenges with our children and grandchildren. These stories, including the auntie's own personal experiences, are all



Figure 1. Larry Yeung, producer of *Better2Gather*, with artist and illustrator Cheryl Teo, sharing about the participants' process at the launch of the exhibition with Rachel Ong, MP for West Coast GRC (Telok Blangah). Image courtesy of Participate in Design.

integral parts of the larger Singapore story. They offer valuable insights into how we have grown and evolved as a nation, and we want to pass them down to future generations.

But it's not just about preserving our own stories. We also want to celebrate the stories of our forefathers, even in areas that are lesser known or that we are still discovering. We want to present these stories in ways that can be easily understood and experienced by people of all ages and from all walks of life.

So, what are some of the ways we can do this? We can start by asking questions like: what are your cherished memories? What are your connections to your neighbourhoods? How can we share your stories—your family recipes, for example, or your favourite local hangout—with others? And what do you want to learn about your neighbours and the wider community?

We are doing something similar through initiatives such as the Heritage Activation Nodes where we work with local communities to bring out the stories of their neighbourhoods. This gives many people a chance to contribute to Singapore's heritage and share their stories and legacies with others, making heritage more present in their daily lives.

Eng Teong: I hope it's not about providing a theoretical explanation of the arts to the auntie! I would explain that we want everyone in Singapore to see and feel the arts because in the end, it's about the experience. Whether you are an arts-lover or someone who incidentally encounters the arts from time to time, or even someone totally not interested in the arts, as we continue to build on the plan, you will see more and more arts, such that it becomes part and parcel of people's lives. The arts won't just be in the city centre; we will see more public art in the neighbourhood, for example, the Land Transport Authority's Art in Transit programme which aims

to commission artworks by Singaporean artists for every MRT station. We're hoping that, in time to come, when you enter an MRT station, you will get to hear Singaporean music as well.

Much as we want more people to go to the concert halls and museums, we want the arts to be accessible, for more people to encounter the arts. This could be through reading Singaporean literature, participating in a reading, taking part in a sketching or zine-making workshop. Participation is a way people can experience the arts as a shared experience. For me, one of the bigger joys of art is that it allows people to transport themselves to a different world, and, in so doing, enrich and learn something about themselves.

CC: What synergies are there between arts and heritage, and specifically between NAC and NHB?

Hwee Nee: When it comes to the arts and heritage, there's a lot of potential for us to express our shared values. Take the Singapore Night Festival, for instance. It is an excellent example of how we can engage local artists and arts groups to draw inspiration from our history and heritage to tell engaging stories.

One of the things we're doing under Our SG Heritage Plan 2.0 is partnering up our local museums with different industries, like fashion, craft, product, and industrial design. This synergistic presentation through these deliberate partnerships greatly expands people's understanding of Singapore and its connection with the world. It's an opportunity for all sorts of diverse collaborations to take place.

One good example is the Craft x Design showcase which paired traditional craftsmen with modern designers to reimagine traditional crafts. The first

edition featured new modern products inspired by ketupat weaving, traditional Chinese lanterns, rangoli as well as Peranakan beadwork and embroidery. Ketupat weaving, for example, inspired the design of a bench and stool. But we have not gone to the next step to internationalise or commercialise these projects. This is just a pilot, and there's a lot of potential to be explored.

Eng Teong: We should view arts and heritage holistically. There are many practitioners who cross both sides; it's about aesthetics, design, craft, structure, materials and ideas which create value for the people. The public doesn't make a distinction. When they go to Asian Civilisations Museum to see Andrew Gn's exhibition, they see art, fashion, design and heritage all rolled into one.

With traditional arts practices, NAC and NHB work closely to ensure that these arts practices are preserved, documented, or continue to be practised. Awards such as the Stewards of Intangible Cultural Heritage are important.

NAC and NHB have an agreement to do more traditional arts documentation. Over the course of this collaboration, we hope to cover at least 20 types of traditional art practices across all the different ethnic groups. This could be Malay artforms like zapin or bangsawan, Chinese dance, or classical Indian performing art forms such as odissi.

Another initiative which we piloted with Singapore Tourism Board (STB) was the Performing Arts Tours Pilot Grant, which aimed to encourage collaboration and experimentation between tour companies and arts companies. The pilot grants featured interesting projects with a focus on heritage, delving into the culture and heritage of Singapore in places such as

Haw Par Villa and Katong. Art is a language which can bring these stories to life.

Hwee Nee: I believe reinterpretation and innovation can breathe fresh energy to heritage and appeal to wider audiences. Look at The Theatre Practice's *Four Horse Road*, for example, which showcases the heritage of Waterloo Street. Increasingly, young people are taking a greater interest in heritage. The world is moving so fast; our heritage provides us with an anchor and grounds us.

Eng Teong: I liked the recent exhibition at the National Museum of Singapore, *Semangat yang Baru: Forging a New Singapore Spirit*. An artefact I found fascinating was then-Deputy Prime Minister Dr Goh Keng Swee's note to founding Singapore Symphony Orchestra Director Emeritus Professor Bernard Tan about the resourcing needed to form the orchestra. It clearly shows the level of thought and attention given to the culture scene even then.

CC: In the Heritage Plan, there was a mention of Singapore's maritime heritage and more focus on research. Can you elaborate?

Hwee Nee: Our maritime past is an important part of Singapore's history, and we are very excited about what we will learn from our archaeological finds. (Editor's note: Two shipwrecks, dating from the 14th and late 18th centuries, were found in Singapore's waters within the last decade.) Currently, we are focusing on post excavation-work, such as the research, documentation, and conservation of the artefacts. Some are already on display at the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM), and we hope to introduce more programmes that will share the importance of these treasures with Singapore and the world over the next few years.

At the National Museum of Singapore, we showcase our maritime past which traces how Singapore grew from a precolonial settlement to a contemporary international port city. We also work with our museum roundtable partners like the Maritime Port Authority, which also has its own gallery and education programmes.

All this reminds us that our history goes back much further than Raffles' arrival in 1819. These artefacts are also evidence that our history dates to the 14th century when our island was already at the crossroads of cultural interaction.

CC: Is there a piece that stands out, or which you personally like?

It's a blue and white piece at ACM that dates from the Yuan dynasty, sometime in the 14th century. This is one of the rare pieces that was found intact. Its unusual shape suggests it may have been used as a hookah (water pipe) base. There are also many others with interesting shapes and patterns among the recovered ceramics that point to regional exchanges between East and West, not unlike what we see in the Tang Shipwreck. (Editor's note: this earlier shipwreck was found off Indonesia's Belitung Island in 1998 and its artefacts are on display at the Khoo Teck Puat Gallery in the Asian Civilisations Museum.)

CC: This latest iteration of the Arts Plan speaks of a Creative Economy, which did not feature as much in the earlier plan, which focused more on social capital. Can you elaborate more on this?

Eng Teong: Our SG Arts Plan (2023 – 2027) has a focus on building social capital, in which the arts can bring about a more connected society. As part of our public consultation efforts, we gathered over 2,000 responses, and many have expressed the belief that the arts have the role of bringing people together.



Figure 2. Bottle-shaped vessel. China, *Jingdezhen*, 14th Century, Porcelain. Image courtesy of Asian Civilisations Museum.

At the same time, there was also interest in the distinctive city and the creative economy strands. Many of us know the arts form the basic impetus, and an engine to drive creativity, because the arts entail the creative process. If we want part of the economy to be fuelled by creativity, the arts can play a role. Of course, the question is how do we harness this creativity? Hwee Nee spoke about the ketupat-inspired chair, reinterpreting heritage, and improving craft skills. We know that some of our artists have been exploring and working across sectors—fashion and product design, for example. So how can we create a scaffold, a structure that supports some of these collaborations?

We are also thinking about how to harness technology. Technology has changed what we do in all aspects of development, including the arts. Since the last plan, we have been trying to bring arts and tech practitioners together: how do we harness technology so that the creative work can bring greater value?

For example, we previously launched the Create, Remake or Adapt? initiative, which brought writers together with media practitioners to explore the business of transmedia adaptations, including adapting across games and other media platforms. This represents huge potential. We want to see how we can further develop this.



Figure 3. Shubigi Rao, *Pulp III: A Short Biography of the Banished Book*, 2022. Installation view, Singapore Pavilion, 59th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia. Commissioned by National Arts Council, Singapore, curated by Ute Meta Bauer; exhibition design by Laura Miotto. Image courtesy of Alessandro Brasile.

We must collaborate more with the private sector, whether the tech companies or small start-ups. We also need to collaborate with academic institutions. In the first run of our Arts x Tech Lab, we partnered with Keio-NUS CUTE Center, private technology companies and artists. For such initiatives, we must exercise some patience because this work takes time to grow and evolve. Of course, all of us hope to see the next big outcome. But it doesn't work like that. It's about giving that space to experiment and try. We may not get it right the first time, but it's about testing and seeing which idea has the potential to move beyond the prototype, and eventually to market. This is long-term work.

For some of these projects, it's hard to set a hard numerical target—10 new products for instance—by the end of timeline. What's more important are the learnings and what we need to do differently or adjust to reach the next stage.

One of the perennial challenges is how we measure the outcomes of our efforts to grow the arts sector. We must study this further, given the intangible nature of culture.

CC: Since we're moved to the topic of performance indicators, what are your thoughts on measuring and evaluating outcomes?

Hwee Nee: Singapore's heritage and museum landscape has grown considerably in the past few years. We are quite pleased that the most recent Heritage Awareness Survey shows that more and more people are recognising the importance of heritage, and we are heartened that people are actively supporting heritage causes. The survey measures people's attitudes, and the general trend is positive.

But there are some challenges measuring outcomes at the programmatic level as programme evaluation is complex, especially when it comes to impact measurement of intangible outcomes such as changes in attitude, values and belief. It can also be costly and time-consuming. So, with limited resources, the question we're often faced with is how to strike a balance.

Eng Teong: On the arts side, our Population Survey on the Arts 2021 shows that eight in 10 Singaporeans are proud of our arts and culture. Still, the true test is not attendance alone, but support as demonstrated by the buying of tickets, artworks, or books. Without that support, it's hard for the sector to sustain itself. It cannot just rely on public funding and private donations alone.

Of course, we need the audience to first give their time to the arts, and to invest their time because they value the arts. For those who have the means, they should consider “investing”—I prefer that to “spending”—in the arts. If I buy a ticket to a show, I'm investing in myself because I may get something from the show. But even if I am disappointed and don't like the show, I may also learn something, right? The question is how we measure such outcomes.

Hwee Nee: In terms of measurements, we also hope to engage in more specific research such as heritage-based intervention for dementia patients. We are looking to work with healthcare providers to track the impact of our work, and this can be very tangible. Our dream is to move toward social prescribing where healthcare providers can advise patients to visit the museum or go for art therapy to replace or complement medications. I think heritage is a tremendous asset to dementia-related work.

Eng Teong: Similarly, the arts can play a critical role in the mental well-being space. We have seen how the arts can help build ties within families and strengthen relationships. What we need to better understand is its impact, and this has to be done with those in the healthcare field, including seniors' homes and care agencies.

Another thing to work on is building capabilities for artists who want to do work in this field. This requires more than creating an artwork for audience appreciation.

CC: Do you think we have spoiled Singaporeans by providing so much of arts and heritage free of charge? Have we dulled Singaporeans' propensity to pay?

Hwee Nee: I wouldn't necessarily call it that. We do want to make heritage accessible to all Singaporeans. To me, it's not so much an issue of propensity to pay, but rather, the perceived value of heritage. When something is provided for free, people don't always appreciate its value.

Eng Teong: On some level, I think it's important to provide free access. For example, I appreciate how our museums are free for Singaporeans. The challenge is that you can't make everything free, and we should be mindful how behaviours are shaped through pricing. I think Singaporeans should have access to see the artworks in the permanent exhibitions or be able to go to the Esplanade to see a free performance. This level of arts offerings is essential. It reduces the barriers for arts participation, and it depends on one's willingness to invest time to visit. Hopefully over time, when people have the means, they will pay to see ticketed shows, which require a lot more resources to be staged.



Figure 4. Park visitors viewing the public art commission, *Can You Hear Me*, by Quek Jia Qi and Aaron Lim at Bishan-Ang Mo Kio Park. Image courtesy of National Arts Council.

CC: I imagine that you envision similar tiers of access regarding heritage...?

Hwee Nee: Of course, we are not suggesting that we charge for everything. It is important to us that heritage is accessible to everyone. For instance, access to our museums' permanent galleries is free for Singaporeans and should remain so. Even for special exhibitions, if a large proportion of the exhibits comes from our National Collection, admission is free. But if an exhibition is a travelling one with loans from other museums, then we do need to exercise financial discipline and explore admission fees. Similarly, with programmes, most of our programmes are free of charge. But if a programme requires a lot of logistics and is designed for a small group, like a trip to an offshore island, we must also consider selling tickets to cover the costs. For these kinds of programmes, it helps if we can secure resources from corporations to make them available to those who cannot afford them.

CC: What keeps you awake at night? Are there "wicked problems" in your sectors?

Eng Teong: I think the world has become a more complex, complicated place, and there are many driving forces undergirding this. For a start, how do we make sure the public continues to have good access to the arts? We cannot assume that this will always happen. We are fortunate that our government has consistently provided resources to the arts sector. The pandemic has shown that a disruption can be sudden and drastic. Resourcing is an inherent issue for our arts sector. So, how do we build a resilient arts sector that can grow and continue to do the best work possible? We can't take this for granted.

Hwee Nee: An increase in public recognition of the value of heritage has also led to rising expectations about preserving our heritage—both tangible and intangible. How do we meet these expectations with limited resources and in a highly urbanised country like Singapore?

While we certainly want to recognise the social significance of our architecture, we also must contend with the pressing need for land in Singapore. That's why we work closely with the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) to identify upstream areas of heritage interest. To me, the most important thing is to plan early. If we do this early enough, we can have the best of both worlds. We can preserve historically significant buildings and integrate them into the overall design of new developments, and even make them more desirable. An example is the sale of the recent Golden Mile site. Because we planned early, URA was able to redraw the boundaries in a way that allowed for intensification while also ensuring the conservation of the building.

For the Old Police Academy site, we managed to retain six historic buildings in and around the site; these will be integrated with the Housing and Development Board (HDB)'s plans for a new housing estate. HDB will also explore ways to incorporate other heritage features into the future estate.

That said, this is not always possible in every case. The reality is we cannot preserve everything. And we will continue to face increasing pressure.

As for intangible heritage, many practitioners face challenges in transmitting their knowledge and skills to the next generation. Even the UNESCO-inscribed hawker culture is under pressure. It's hard for hawkers to find successors who are willing to take over their stalls. To a large extent, the consumer must be willing to pay more. Otherwise, how can we expect young people to continue the trade?

Speaking of heritage trades, we recently worked with URA on Kampong Gelam and the documentation of heritage businesses there. It's

not a full implementation plan yet but we want to give support to heritage businesses to sustain them. We're working on the details. We already introduced the Organisation Transformation Grant during the pandemic and provided grant funding to heritage businesses to help them transform in various ways—for example, creating educational programmes for different audiences, and even developing new product lines. One example is a Chinese effigy business which used 3D technology to create a digital database of their sketches and photos to replace a previously manual system.

So, we have to think out of the box, such as working with partners including Enterprise Singapore, to come up with new ideas to support the viability of these heritage trades.

Eng Teong: Another immediate challenge in the arts sector is the livelihood and careers of our arts workers. Coming out of the pandemic where the government provided strong support, it's important for us to think about how to help these arts workers—not only artists, but also arts administrators, and people who work behind the scenes. How do we support them in terms of well-being and how do we make sure the whole industry is more professionalised?

For example, I'm always concerned that our Self-Employed Persons (SEPs) who make up over a third of the arts workforce may not be contributing to their CPF or Medisave. (Editor's note: CPF, the Central Provident Fund and Medisave are national saving schemes to help Singaporeans plan for retirement and future health expenses). It might be fine now because many of them are young, but we worry about their well-being and ability to sustain themselves in the long term. We need to think about how to

encourage them and how to make the process more seamless and less onerous, so they are more willing to plan for the long term.

Hwee Nee: Another long-term challenge we face is climate change. Museums are typically quite energy intensive. We're now trying to work with potential partners to explore ways to raise the temperature in the galleries a little, while keeping it optimal for the preservation of our artefacts. We also need to seriously consider the climate impact of travelling exhibitions.

CC: Can I move on to talk about leadership? Do you think leadership in the cultural sector is different from that in the rest of the corporate world or other parts of public service?

Hwee Nee: We have talked a fair bit about challenges and external driving forces: limited resources, rising expectations, polarisation, technology. Many leaders face similar challenges. We need to be entrepreneurial and keep thinking of new ways of dealing with issues while navigating ambiguity. The ability to respond nimbly to a fast-changing environment, almost like a startup, is crucial.

Of course, every domain is different. There are sector-specific challenges which we highlighted earlier. But the skills sets and mindsets of leaders are quite similar.

Eng Teong: As a public institution, we have the responsibility to engage widely. Even those who don't consume the arts have their views, and we must engage them too.

Also, the arts aren't just about the product or artwork, they are also about emotions and memories. People respond to art differently; some may like an artwork while others may feel disturbed by the same piece. We must work to build understanding between the arts and audiences.

In cultural leadership, I think it's important for leaders to work in partnership as much as possible. An example is the Culture Academy's work to bring leaders together. In view of finite resources, we must learn how to harness synergies.

Hwee Nee: Yes, one important part of leadership is partnership and collaboration. Even in coming up with the heritage plan, we engaged more than 50 focus groups and around 650 participants, and organised a public engagement campaign, and so on. This aspect of engagement and consultation with stakeholders and the public is essential.

CC: Finally, what is your definition of success? What outcomes do you hope to see if the sectors develop according to plan?

Eng Teong: The whole plan is about sustainability, and not just in financial terms. The sector must be able to manage costs, think about how they operate, harness technology, and reach out to more people. Certainly, one of the significant shifts I hope to see within the sector is increased and deeper collaborations amongst the different stakeholders.

Hwee Nee: Yes, we definitely need more collaborations within the ecosystem, including those with public institutions, the tech community and the

corporate sector. The Heritage Activation Nodes I mentioned earlier will also require involvement from the local community. If we can achieve this level of collaboration, we'll be well on our way to success. When the public is engaged and invested in exploring and participating, they will have a sense of ownership over their heritage.

CC: I'm sure many in Singapore are looking forward to these new developments in the arts and heritage sectors. There are so many exciting possibilities ahead. Once again, thank you for spending your time with us this afternoon. □

About The Interviewees



Low Eng Teong is the Chief Executive of the National Arts Council (NAC) where he oversees the policies, planning and implementation of Our SG Arts Plan (2023 – 2027) to champion Singapore’s arts sector. He also stewards the development of policies and programmes to bring quality arts education to schools and the establishment of training and career pathways for arts practitioners. Low previously served in Singapore’s education service where he held senior leadership positions in schools as well as in curriculum planning and development. He serves on the boards of the Singapore Art Museum, Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre and Singapore Chinese Orchestra.



Chang Hwee Nee is the Chief Executive of the National Heritage Board (NHB). Since joining in 2017, she has worked on promoting and safeguarding Singapore's tangible and intangible heritage, developing museums and the heritage sector, and fostering community partnerships to promote national identity, social cohesion and well-being. Prior to NHB, Chang held senior positions in the Ministries of National Development, Education, Health and Finance, where she formulated and implemented policies, plans and programmes for the physical development of Singapore, covering the areas of land-use planning, urban development, park development and management, and nature conservation; educational strategies and policies; healthcare financing, manpower and infrastructural development; and taxation.