

# Charting the Way Forward for Singapore's Media Industry

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*The agency that champions Singapore’s media industry, the Infocomm Media Development Authority, navigates two seemingly opposed ideals: cultural relevance and economic viability. In this essay, IMDA’s Justin Ang explains why the two are intertwined, and lays out the guiding considerations for nurturing the local media industry’s storytelling capabilities.*

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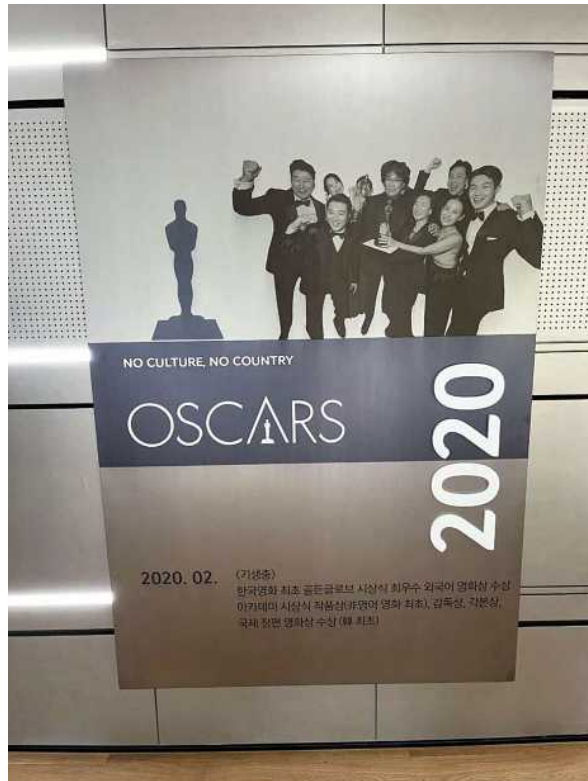
In a global landscape where South Korea, with the ubiquitous Hallyu or Korean Wave, has become the dominant Asian powerhouse in almost every avenue of entertainment, one could easily forget that this success didn’t come naturally or overnight. Indeed, the South Korean government and its relevant agencies have invested decades and billions into Hallyu; investments from domestic conglomerates, the garnering of support from its local populace, and numerous internationalisation efforts form some of their strategies. Beyond the positive spillover effect on the usual media and tourism sectors, corporate Korea knows full well Hallyu has also catalysed Korean brand recognition and product penetration.

What can Singapore learn from Hallyu’s success? Would it be reasonable to say that the Korean ability to tell riveting stories stems from the country’s distinctive cultural capital? Miky Lee, Vice Chair of South Korean entertainment giant CJ ENM and Executive Producer of Oscar-winning film *Parasite* (2019), once quoted a simple dictum from her grandfather, Samsung founder Lee Byung-chul, as the guiding principle in her work: “no culture, no country”. What does her quip, which points to the inextricable link between culture and country, mean for Singapore?

Singapore’s culture is often compared to the dish *rojak*, a piquant salad of fruit and vegetables. And I argue that this eclectic mix in our culture will be the basis of tomorrow’s successes in the media industry, and that nurturing storytellers, these ambassadors of culture, is of paramount importance. I also hope this article will shed some light on how the Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) aims to help move us forward in the right direction.

To use a boxing metaphor, Singapore has characteristically punched above its weight in many areas, from governance and diplomacy to business. While less apparent, the same can be said for our media sector and how our stories and culture have been told and presented by our storytelling talents. This has been proven multiple times over the years. In April, Mediacorp, our national broadcaster, clinched 65 accolades at the New York Festivals TV & Film Awards 2023, which honours the best in news, sports, documentary and infotainment, a landmark achievement.

This landmark year of 2023 continued at the Cannes Film Festival, acknowledged as the pinnacle in the international film festival circuit, with three selections for Singapore, the highest ever in the same year. Two of these, *Tiger Stripes* (2023) and *Inside The Yellow Cocoon Shell* (2023), are among the latest in regional feature film projects supported under IMDA’s Southeast Asia Co-Production Grant (SCPG)<sup>1</sup> that have been released to critical acclaim, winning accolades at top platforms, namely the Cannes Critics’ Week Grand Prize and the *Caméra d’Or* award (Golden Camera) respectively. This is proof that Singapore has the ability to compete at the highest level, especially when we join forces with our regional neighbours. It also underscores the importance of nurturing storytellers.



**Figure 1.** “No culture, no country”, as displayed in CJ ENM’s Singapore office. Image courtesy of Anthony Chen.

## Building Storytelling Capabilities is the Long Game

Singapore’s success at Cannes in 2023 is timely. This year marks the 25th anniversary of the Singapore Film Commission (SFC).<sup>2</sup> Since its establishment in 1998, SFC’s mission to develop Singapore’s film industry and nurture filmmaking talent has remained unchanged and has expanded over time to include new initiatives such as the New Talent Feature Grant (NTFG)<sup>3</sup> and the SCPG. Clearly, the steadfast efforts of nurturing talent for over two decades have sown seeds of success.

Anthony Chen, whose film *The Breaking Ice* (2023) was in competition at the Un Certain Regard section of Cannes this year, won the *Caméra d’Or* award for *Ilo Ilo* (2013) exactly 10 years ago. Further back in time, 16 years ago, the Media Development Authority (IMDA’s predecessor) awarded him a scholarship to pursue a Masters in Film & Television (Film Directing) from the National Film & Television School in London. This underscores my point: becoming a master storyteller is a long game, one that IMDA and SFC have been willing to invest in. The respective Singaporean co-producers/producers of *Tiger Stripes* and *Inside The Yellow Cocoon Shell*, Fran Borgia and Jeremy Chua, each had similar tenures, building their reputation and producing capabilities over a decade to become the veterans of today.



**Figure 2.** Singapore Producer Fran Borgia (second from right), Director Amanda Nell Eu (second from left), the lead actors of *Tiger Stripes* (in pink and black), and the rest of the team at the premiere of the film as part of the 62nd Semaine de la Critique (International Critics' Week), taking place in parallel to the Cannes Film Festival 2023. The film won the top award, the Grand Prize.  
Image courtesy of Akanga Film Asia.

Content creation in all disciplines, from directing to sound design to visual effects, is by nature a craft-based, collaborative endeavour. All talented maestros start as juniors, observing and honing their craft, even as they take coffee orders. It is heartening to see today's veterans mentoring their younger counterparts. Grace Wong Hui, dialogue editor for *The Breaking Ice* and IMDA scholar, comes to mind, having worked with Anthony on multiple projects, and now sharpening her talents as a sound designer. The long game for her is just beginning.

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## Taking It Back to the Basics of Storytelling

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In February 2022, IMDA partnered with Netflix to run a five-day Series Writing Workshop led by Hollywood and South Korean writers for

Singaporean and regional creative talents. What is the secret behind the storytelling techniques of successful series and films? One recurring feedback was that, while everyone recognised that the “story is king”, development techniques such as the writers’ room were often rushed or even bypassed.

This is something both the industry and IMDA have been striving to change. There have been industry-led initiatives like the RisingStories Screenwriting Competition organised by Weiyu Films and Taiwan production company Studio76, as well as IMDA’s Development Grant, under the Media Enterprise Programme (MEP). IMDA’s programme is new, but it has seen overwhelming interest, signalling recognition of the need for meaningful development of stories. With IMDA’s support, our local enterprises can adapt development methodologies used by mature content industries and deliver stories of international quality that can help them break onto the global stage.



**Figure 3.** Director Pham Thien An (3rd from left) celebrates winning the *Caméra d'Or* (“Golden Camera”) with Producer Jeremy Chua (2nd from right) and the rest of the team behind *Inside The Yellow Cocoon Shell*, during the Cannes Film Festival 2023. The award was presented to the best first feature film in the festival’s Official Selection, Directors’ Fortnight or International Critics’ Week. Image courtesy of Pötocol.

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## Opening Up to the World

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Used the right way, technological advancements can help us overcome limitations, including Singapore’s geographical size. Virtual production seen in Disney’s *The Mandalorian* series is by no means new—having been widely used in the gaming industry for over a decade—but it is certainly picking up traction in film and broadcast. This form of technology has proven to be versatile beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. To this end, IMDA launched the \$5 million Virtual Production Innovation Fund in December 2022 to strengthen our position as a hub for content and creating stories. I am glad to see that the industry has embraced these opportunities, with local companies like Aux Media Group announcing partnerships with XON Studios and SK Telecom to advance our capabilities in this area.

As part of a dynamic global media industry, Singapore has become more conducive to location filming over the years. Nevertheless, there is still a long way to go. Our national broadcaster and smaller production houses often find themselves having to strike a fine balance between operational needs and their impact on residents and businesses. However, when agencies come together to mitigate such challenges, the results can be astounding—as evidenced by the third season of HBO’s *Westworld* which featured our country’s unique blend of futuristic architecture and rich heritage to great effect.

To remain competitive as a hub for visual storytelling and give our local media talent the chance to work on more international projects, IMDA has teamed with the Singapore Tourism Board to launch the \$10 million Singapore On-Screen Fund.<sup>4</sup> The idea is simple: shine a spotlight on Singapore through content projects made for the global audience,



**Figure 4.** Director/Producer/Writer Anthony Chen (on stage in grey) presents his latest feature film, *The Breaking Ice*, in competition as part of the Un Certain Regard section of the Cannes Film Festival 2023. Image courtesy of Giraffe Pictures.

while expanding the horizons and demand for our storytelling talent.

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## Keeping the Audience in Mind

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The importance of audiences in these strategies cannot be understated, as Hollywood blockbusters remain a standard some countries still strive to match. Over decades, countries such as South Korea, Indonesia, and Thailand have nurtured domestic audiences to appreciate homegrown content, ensuring constant levels of high local demand. In Singapore, audiences enjoy one of the most diverse range of content offerings from around the globe through over-the-top (OTT) platforms and cinemas, while having one of the smallest domestic markets. The struggle for Singaporean storytellers

is known to be an uphill one, and unflattering comparisons to South Korea, China, and Hollywood productions have sometimes been made. How can we overcome this?

My view is that we stand the best chance by improving the quality of our storytelling. I am not arguing for the creation of our own cinematic universe, populated with superheroes and parallel dimensions. Today's cultural *zeitgeist* provides sufficiently rich material with everyday stories, life, and emotions that can inspire our storytellers. Art is, after all, about the human condition. From a story about a mother whose working son has no time to travel with her, to a documented real-life conflict between generations and their values, to a series depicting a teenage superhero struggling to juggle multiple responsibilities, these are all relatable stories. What elevates them is the authenticity of storytelling, as well as how characters and subject matter are presented to audiences.



**Figure 5.** Signing of partnership agreement between Weiyu Films (Singapore) and Studio76 (Taiwan) for the RisingStories 2023 International Scriptwriting Competition. Pictured beside Justin (left to right) are Lee Thean-jeen (Managing Director, Weiyu Films), Dennis Yang (CEO, Studio76), Izero Lee (Former CEO, TAICCA). Image courtesy of IMDA.

The media industry and its adjacent creative sectors such as the arts share a foundational need for authentic and well-told stories, and audiovisual platforms enable these stories to transcend mediums in the form of intellectual property. This has been demonstrated through countless media projects rooted in literary works, comics, and theatre, and has only begun to be explored in Singapore. To this end, the National Arts Council’s Create, Remake or Adapt? transmedia adaptation initiative is a great starting point. The IMDA will continue to provide support to give our storytellers a bigger transmedia sandbox to play in, to build a more vibrant creative ecosystem.

IMDA’s mission to develop the media industry is usually set in the context of navigating two seemingly opposed ideals: cultural relevance and economic viability. For anyone who has worked in the media industry, the two are intertwined and not mutually exclusive. Our challenge then is to navigate that

balance which informs our thesis: that well-told stories will draw audiences, regardless of setting, language, budget, or medium.

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## Building Soft Power Through Well-Told Stories

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Singapore can succeed and, in the long run, be on par with other content powerhouse countries if we continue investing in our talents’ storytelling abilities. Our country has proven, through the successes of regional co-productions as supported by SCPG, that we can galvanise and become a thought-leader for the region. This philosophy of joining forces to collectively punch above our region’s weight will build our region’s soft power, as successful co-productions form the rising tide that raises all boats.

South Korea has certainly succeeded in projecting its country's soft power through its media and audiovisual content. Now audiences the world over clamour for their culture. *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), supported by IMDA and involving contributors from Singapore, was a golden opportunity to find ways to tell stories which will fascinate international viewers, even if aspects of our culture may have to be translated for a global audience base. Through a well-told story, Singapore is now known to the world as being able to co-produce a Hollywood blockbuster of global standing, and international audiences now know more about our culture than they previously did. I hope that IMDA's various initiatives and support schemes will enable the industry to re-capture that proverbial lightning in a bottle and replicate many more successes.

To come full circle, in his acceptance speech for Best Director at the 92nd Academy Awards, Bong Joon Ho said, "once you overcome the one-inch-tall barrier of subtitles, you will be introduced to so many more amazing films." My take-away from Mr Bong's quote is that global audiences will always be hungry for authentic and well-told stories regardless of differences in language. We must aspire to deliver the amazing stories he talks about, rich in imagination and connected to our shared humanity... and keep audiences coming back for more. □



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## About The Author



Justin Ang is currently Assistant Chief Executive at IMDA where he heads the Media, Innovation, Communications and Marketing Group. In this role, he leads the group in establishing strong and strategic partnerships with key technology and media players as well as government agencies to grow Singapore’s ICM ecosystem and capabilities. He is also responsible for developing and implementing strategies to drive innovation in the converged ICM space. As Chief Marketing Officer, he oversees the various teams across Brand, Corporate Communications and Digital, Media Relations, Marketing and Customer Service.

### Notes

1. Introduced in 2019, the Southeast Asia Co-Production Grant (SCPG), now known as the Long-form Content Grant—Southeast Asia Co-Production under IMDA’s Media Talent Progression Programme, aims to support long-form content projects (feature films, broadcast series) originating from the Southeast Asian region, and in collaboration with a Singaporean co-producer (through a Singapore production company).
2. The Singapore Film Commission (SFC), part of the Infocomm Media Development Authority, is charged with developing Singapore’s film industry and nurturing film talent. Advised by a committee comprising members from the film, arts and cultural community, the SFC has since 1998 supported over 800 short films, scripts, feature films, as well as film-related events in Singapore.
3. Introduced in 2012, the New Talent Feature Grant (NTFG), now known as the Long-form Content Grant—New SG Director under IMDA’s Media Talent Progression Programme, aims to support long-form content projects from a first or second-time long-form Singaporean director.
4. Launched in April 2023, the Singapore On-Screen Fund (SOF) is a joint initiative between the Singapore Tourism Board and IMDA, to support the production of television and film productions that reach a global audience, and shine a spotlight on Singapore. Projects must provide opportunities for Singapore media enterprises and talent to work alongside global media and entertainment partners in creating content for international audiences.

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