

Cultural Connections

Volume VIII

2023

Of Tailwinds And Turbulence

About Culture Academy Singapore

The Culture Academy Singapore (CA) champions the development of the next generation of Singapore's cultural leaders in the public and private sectors. CA's work focuses on three inter-related areas: Leadership and Capability Development, Research and Scholarship, and International Partnerships, which cut across all of CA's strategic priorities.

Cultural Connections is a journal published annually by Culture Academy Singapore to nurture thought leadership in cultural work in the public sector. This journal encourages scholarship and the exchange of ideas in the sector. It thus provides a platform for our professionals and administrators in the sector to publish alongside other thought leaders from the region and beyond.

The views, opinions and positions expressed in this publication are strictly those of the authors only and are not representative of the views of the editorial committee, the publisher or the Government of the Republic of Singapore.

Editor-in-Chief: Paul Tan

Culture Academy Editorial & Production Team:

Sophia Loke, Esther Huang

Editorial & Design Agency: Natalie Foo, Magicfruit Pte Ltd

Printer: AC Dominie

Published and distributed by Culture Academy Singapore,
a division of the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth,
Old Hill Street Police Station, 140 Hill Street, #01-01A, 179369

© 2023 Government of the Republic of Singapore. All rights reserved.

The Government of the Republic of Singapore does not accept any responsibility for the accuracy, correctness, reliability, timeliness, non-infringement, title, merchantability or fitness for any particular purpose of the contents of this publication, and shall not be liable for any damage or loss of any kind caused as a result (direct or indirect) of the use of the contents in this publication, including but not limited to any damage or loss suffered as a result of reliance on the contents of this publication.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

This publication provides URLs to websites which are not maintained by the Government. Hyperlinks to other websites are provided as a convenience to the user. The Government is not responsible for the contents of those websites and shall not be liable for any damages or loss arising from access to those websites. Use of the URLs and access to such websites are entirely at your own risk.

In no circumstances shall the Government be considered to be associated or affiliated in whatever manner with any trade or service marks, logos, insignia or other devices used or appearing on websites to which this publication is linked.

ISSN number 24249122



Cultural Connections

Volume VIII
2023

Contents

Foreword	07
Rosa Daniel	
Editor-in-Chief's Note	09
Paul Tan	
Building Back Better	11
John Newbiggin OBE	
In Conversation with the Leaders at the Helm of the National Arts Council and National Heritage Board	16
Low Eng Teong, Chang Hwee Nee	
Artificial Intelligence as Artist: Copyright and the Rise of Creativity	29
Professor David Tan	
From Polycrisis to Collective Solutions: How Art Funders Can Help Build a Better World	37
Simon Brault O.C., O.Q.	
The Future of our Arts and Culture: A View from Hong Kong	43
Winsome Chow	

Contents

Charting the Way Forward for Singapore's Media Industry	49
Justin Ang	
Building Bridges and Celebrating Diversity in a Turbulent World	58
R Rajaram JP	
A Minnow Navigates the Torrents	68
Mervin Beng	
Winds of Change: Three Pre-Independence Debates which Shaped Singapore Chinese Literature	76
Associate Professor Tan Chee Lay	
Preserving Human Culture in an Age of Technological Disruption: Reflections on Knowledge, Education, and the Role of Universities	85
Professor Joseph Chinyong Liow	

Foreword

2023 has been a dynamic and eventful year for Singapore arts and culture. Like many other countries, we have put the shadow of the pandemic behind us. Our museums, galleries and performing arts groups have resumed efforts to grow and engage audiences, visitors and stakeholders. But is it as if the pandemic never happened? It is clear that, even as activity in the sector picks up, COVID-19 has left an indelible mark on how work is done in the sector and how to think about risks and opportunities. This observation recurs in many of the 10 essays in this year's edition of *Cultural Connections*.

"Of Tailwinds and Turbulence" focuses our minds on the shifts in our operating context for this eighth edition. The fallout from the pandemic, new economic pressures, the war in Ukraine, the polarisation of values and identities all represent the turbulence that will continue to impact any plans in the cultural sphere. But in the same breath, these same tailwinds point to global, regional and national factors as well as advances in technology that could represent new energies and exciting possibilities.

This edition of *Cultural Connections* also underscores the importance of cultural policy. Governments can and do shape how culture is experienced by its citizens and is projected to the rest of the world. Through their education, developmental policies as well as conceptual and regulatory frameworks, culture can become an integral part of day-to-day life, even as national and ethnic identities continue to evolve with the passage of time.

As Singapore has launched its latest five-year strategic roadmaps for the arts and heritage this year, we feature the Chief Executives from the National Arts Council and National Heritage Board in an exclusive conversation. This new reader-friendly format should be a rewarding read for those who want insights on how Singapore's cultural landscape will advance in the coming years. From our counterparts in the media sector, the Infocomm Media Development Agency outlines the thinking about the film and television sector and the strong connections with Singapore's artistic and cultural DNA. We also have a powerful argument about the role of humanities and social sciences in today's complex world from Nanyang Technological University. From the National University of Singapore, the other top university in Singapore, there is a timely contribution that will help us navigate the complexities of intellectual property law in the time of generative AI.

(Continued on next page)

As with previous editions, we have also cast our nets wider to invite thinkers from around the world. For more global insights on the direction of arts policies, we have excellent contributions from the leaders of Canada and Hong Kong's arts councils as well as a veteran in the creative economy who frames COVID-19 as an opportunity for us to look beyond the horizon, including thinking about long term issues like inclusivity and sustainability.

Finally, all the editions of *Cultural Connections* aim to provide a diversity of voices, including perspectives from new players, and those working on artistic creation and heritage preservation. This year, we will learn more about the evolution of Chinese literature in Singapore and Malaya during colonial times, reflect on celebrating minority culture in a multicultural society, and understand the role of chamber music in the community music scene.

I hope you will enjoy reading these thoughtful essays and will recommend them to other interested readers as well. Wishing you new creative energies for the rest of 2023!

Rosa Daniel (Mrs)

Dean, Culture Academy Singapore

Editor-in-Chief's Note

Being invited to edit this issue of *Cultural Connections* was an opportunity for me to reflect on the importance of discourse, and how it is critical in a mature society like Singapore to have a diverse expression of ideas and arguments. In fact, one could easily argue productive discourse as well as the ability to hear/read/internalise different perspectives empathetically is the foundation of any enduring civilisation.

Essays we read in journals like *Cultural Connections* are, for sure, part of our national discourse. They offer deeper reflections on the cultural issues of the day, from the lens of thought leaders. These are not specialist essays targeted at academia which often require substantial foreknowledge, nor are these like the opinion pieces we see in the broadsheets; newspapers simply do not have the space for lengthier expositions. Certainly, these essays won't have clickbait as headlines or the snappy feel-good wrap-ups we have come to associate with social media platforms.

Rather, quality discourse asks thoughtful questions, offers more than one interpretation or conclusion and strives to steep in our minds, long after we have finished reading. Indeed, the most effective arguments can rewire our assumptions and challenge our own biases. What follows may be at a subconscious level but somewhere nestled in our brain must lie the seed for change, and all the good it portends.

Targeting cultural policymakers as well as experienced practitioners, *Cultural Connections'* essays will help us take stock of where we are in the cultural development of Singapore while encouraging us to look at alternate models of working and thinking.

Arts and heritage, of course, touch the lives of every Singaporean and, over the years, other government agencies have also come to realise they have a stake in the well-being, quality of life and rootedness that culture puts on the national agenda. Thus, while *Cultural Connections* adds depth to public policy discourse in general, voices from the rest of the public service who are vested in Singapore's culture have been very welcome. This also underscores the importance of inter-sectoral approaches in our work.

(Continued on next page)

At the same time, we must keep an open mind and appreciate how any discourse is created in a specific context. As a MCCY publication, *Cultural Connections* must grapple with the realities of good governance in Singapore, including the economic, demographic and geopolitical challenges that confront the country. It is also the hope of the editorial team that we can build a fuller understanding among readers of the trade-offs and desired outcomes behind cultural policymaking in a country as unique as Singapore.

Finally it leaves me to thank my predecessor Thangamma Karthigesu for helming *Cultural Connections* since its very first issue and building a strong foundation for the editorial team. The fact that working on this edition has been so smooth is in no small way thanks to the processes and the team she has put in place.

I hope readers will enjoy this edition's essays. Digital copies are also easily available via the QR code below or <https://go.gov.sg/culturalconnections8>. I look forward to your thoughts on how we can make this journal even better. Do share any feedback or suggestions with us at culture_academy@mccy.gov.sg. Thank you!

Paul Tan (Mr)

Editor-in-Chief, *Cultural Connections*

Culture Academy Singapore



Building Back Better

John Newbiggin OBE

Creative Industries Ambassador for the Mayor of London, UK
Chairman, Global Creative Economy Council

The world's creative economies undoubtedly saw unprecedented challenges from COVID-19, including the loss of livelihoods. But John Newbigin reminds us in this essay that it was the inherent resilience and innovation found in culture that uplifted lives during the worst of the pandemic, and which now point the way toward a more creative, equitable and sustainable world as catalysts for change.

Before the COVID-19 crisis, creative and cultural industries constituted one of the fastest growing sectors of the world economy, confidently forecast to be 10% of global GDP by 2030. Hundreds of cities were promoting themselves as “creative”, sponsoring festivals of design, music, film, fashion and food in ever growing numbers, celebrating their cultural distinctiveness and, at the same time, growing their economies and promoting their international profiles. The impact of the pandemic on all this activity and growth was immense. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) estimated that, in 2020 alone, the creative industries declined in value by USD\$750 billion and 10 million people were left without work. Any cultural activity that depended on live audiences or face-to-face interaction stopped, with severe long-term consequences for theatres, museums and concert halls, as well as the people who worked in them. On the other hand, online activity, or any activity that could make the switch to online, prospered. The already vast video games industry grew faster than ever, by some estimates increasing its value by 14% in a single year. And, paradoxically, while the pandemic illustrated the fragility of most creative and cultural *industries*, it proved the strength and resilience of *culture*.

In fact, it could be said that as the whole infrastructure of the global economy ground to a halt, it was the informal cultural infrastructure of communities that came to the rescue. Neighbours played music to entertain their neighbours. The online world was alive with games and gags. The *Jerusalema* dance challenge inspired people, especially public service workers, in every part of the world. As the mighty engines of global production and trade ground to a halt, it was the intangible cultural networks of communities and neighbourhoods that turned out to have the greater resilience and the most practical and nimble responses to a rapidly changing crisis—social capital rising to a challenge that finance capital was unable to meet.

We know that the negative impact of the pandemic has been almost incalculable in lives lost and livelihoods destroyed. But, as it slowly recedes, it is important to consider whether this extraordinary period we have all lived through has also had a positive impact on the relationship between cultural activity and economic activity, and the way in which culture is perceived as an aspect of public policy. Having survived the turbulence of financial and health crises, are there now some more benign tailwinds that can carry cultural and creative policy to new heights?

To start with a very simple observation, COVID-19 certainly proved to be a powerful driver of creative solutions, nowhere more so than in the pace of digitisation, epitomised by the shift to remote working and the transition of ever more businesses to the online world, evidenced by the US Bureau of Labour Statistics which suddenly doubled its pre-COVID projections for employment growth in web development and digital interface design.

While some of this change was already being driven by developments in technology, the pace of it was dictated by the pandemic. In other words, it was driven by necessity and, as ever, necessity proved to be the mother of invention. A women's co-operative in Rajasthan that had been making traditional embroidered bags for the international tourist market turned their business model upside down and began to run online courses that showed their absent customers how to make the bags for themselves, spawning an altogether new and highly profitable business. A small software company in England, realising that car buyers could not visit showrooms or test-drive cars, developed bespoke and highly detailed visualisations that allowed potential buyers to virtually drive a variety of cars with what they called "personalised buying journeys." A group of street-food vendors in Indonesia linked their food stalls to create a 'treasure hunt' that required players to decode clues and work their way across the city, sampling different local delicacies at each stop. When lockdown was imposed, they kept themselves in the public eye by re-creating the treasure hunt online with 360-degree visualisations of the city streets, and a guide who could be accessed on Zoom to comment on the city's sights, offer clues, and set occasional quizzes.

Millions of such stories of agility, imagination and innovation at every level, from informal local businesses to transnational corporations, have helped put the world's creative economy back on track as a fast-growing sector. A recent Deloitte survey of creative industry activity commissioned by Netflix, came to the optimistic conclusion that "the creative economy could grow by 40% by 2030 and add eight million jobs" in the nine countries that were studied (six in Europe and three in Asia). The researchers offered the opinion that this would be substantially

based on greater collaboration between creative businesses and tech businesses.

All that is very welcome but, as well as the prospect of returning growth and jobs, there have been calls not just to "reset" the global economy, but to "build back better". Does that imply the need for a more humane, people-centred economy, finance capital rebuilding on the foundation of social capital? If the outpouring of creativity and imagination during the pandemic—much of it informal, and much of it generated in communities at neighbourhood level—helped the world cope with an unexpected and unprecedented crisis, has it also inadvertently prepared us for some of the crises, known and unknown, that we now face, such as intensifying urbanisation, increases in mental and emotional disorders, declining biodiversity and, most of all, climate change?

It has become something of a truism that COVID-19 has made many people re-evaluate their personal priorities. So it's interesting to note that a leading international communications and branding agency, Hotwire, recently offered the opinion that "in 2023 brands will craft campaigns which clearly advertise how their customers can be more than just buyers—they can be catalysts for change." Is that shift in personal perspectives reflected at a societal level?

Earlier this year, the Asian Development Bank Institute published a collection of essays under the title *Creative Economy 2030* for which, in his introduction, the Institute's Director wrote "creative industries are critical to the sustainable development agenda, as they have the potential to support inclusive, sustainable and equitable economic development." This observation, reflected in the essays themselves, by economists, government officials, investors and

community entrepreneurs, was based on an analysis of what had happened during the pandemic and on the evidence generated during 2021 which was the United Nation's "International Year of Creative Economy for Sustainable Development, 2021", an initiative driven largely by countries of the Global South, and of historic importance, despite being overshadowed by the pandemic. It highlighted the way in which economic, social, cultural and environmental goals are inextricably bound together, and can leverage added value from each other, often with culture as the essential catalyst.

These themes of inclusivity, sustainability and creativity are also reflected in a new report, *Creative Recovery? The Role of Cultural Policy in Shaping Post-COVID Urban Futures*, commissioned by the World Cities Culture Forum, and based on data gathered during the pandemic from 39 of the Forum's 40 member cities spread across five continents. Its authors, a group of academic researchers from King's College London, concluded that "within the emergency conditions that COVID-19 brought about, there were opportunities to experiment, iterate and innovate. Alongside the enormous difficulties and lessons experienced, policymakers often appreciated being forced to look at their ways of doing things, and to do things differently—and for greater freedom to develop ideas and take action at speed."

They also noted that city authorities saw these lessons as having a positive future relevance, "a key challenge, raised strongly by some research participants, is how to maintain the momentum of these exceptional periods of 'policy entrepreneurship' and innovation". The researchers reported that "75% of the cities responding to our survey worked with local communities in new ways", and their report gives many examples of innovative partnerships between city authorities and cultural organisations,

individual artists, community organisations and urban developers. They also noted that "closely connected to this, the pandemic led to innovation in the use of public space, raising important questions regarding public culture." This innovation included the extension of initiatives already widely shared between cities such as Creative Enterprise Zones, the involvement of artists in designing and animating public spaces, and the establishment of Creative Land Trusts that aim to safeguard affordable spaces for cultural and creative enterprises, not just during the immediate post-pandemic recovery period, but for the longer term, so that commercial developers cannot unfairly exploit the way in which artists and creative entrepreneurs are often the pioneers who bring new life and energy to dilapidated urban neighbourhoods.

70% of World Cities Culture Forum's member cities agreed with the statement that the pandemic "raised awareness of the importance of culture and creativity in my city". And all but one of them agreed with the statement "the disruption caused by the pandemic provided an opportunity to imagine a better way of doing things in the cultural and creative sector."

None of this minimises the reality of intensifying international tensions and the accelerating impact of climate change. Nevertheless, it is evident that COVID-19 has made individuals, institutions and governments—at every level, local and national—do some fundamental rethinking. The COVID crisis summoned up unexpected resources of creativity and imagination all around the globe. Quite coincidentally, it also helped drive transition to the digital world at exactly the moment that the digital world was itself on the brink of radical change because of artificial intelligence.

The problems, threats, crises and dangers have not disappeared. But perhaps the world has gained some

new capacity—and confidence—in addressing them, not just providing “an opportunity to imagine a better way of doing things in the cultural and creative sector” as the World Cities Culture Forum report asserted, but by putting the cultural and creative sector at the heart of the solutions we need for a more creative, equitable, and sustainable world. □

About The Author



John Newbiggin OBE chairs the PEC International Advisory Council on the creative economy and is the London Mayor’s Ambassador for the creative economy. He is also Chair of the British Council’s Advisory Board for Arts and Creative Economy, and is a Visiting Fellow at Goldsmiths, University of London. As Special Advisor to the UK Minister for Culture, Newbiggin was part of the team that developed the first definition of the creative industries, adopted by the UK government in 1998, and was co-founder and first Chair of Creative England.

Bibliography

Deloitte. 2021. “The Future of the Creative Economy: A Report by Deloitte.” June, 2021. Accessed August 8, 2023. <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/uk/Documents/technology-media-telecommunications/deloitte-uk-future-creative-economy-report-final.pdf>.

Tribin, Camilo Lascano, 2022. “Creative industry trends to watch out for in 2023.” Hotwire Global. Accessed August 16, 2023. <https://www.hotwireglobal.com/blog/creative-trends-to-watch-out-for-in-2023/>.

Sonobe, Tetsushi, Nicolas J. A. Buchoud, Jonathan Tan Ghee Tiong, Seungju Baek, Nella Sri Hendriyetty, and Erica Paula Sioson, eds. 2022. *Creative Economy 2030: Imagining and Delivering a Robust, Creative, Inclusive, and Sustainable Recovery*. Japan: Asian Development Bank Institute.

Gross, Jonathan, Lucy McFadzean, Kirstie Hewlett, Luke Dickens, Philip Hubbard, Roberta Comunian, and Niall Sreenan. 2023. *Creative Recovery? The Role of Cultural Policy in Shaping Post-COVID Urban Futures*. London: King’s College London. <https://doi.org/10.18742/pub01-137>.

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

Low Eng Teong

Chief Executive Officer, National Arts Council, Singapore

Chang Hwee Nee

Chief Executive Officer, National Heritage Board, Singapore

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.

Artificial Intelligence as Artist: Copyright and the Rise of Creativity

Professor David Tan

Co-Director of the Centre for Technology, Robotics, Artificial Intelligence & the Law (TRAIL)
Head (Intellectual Property) at the EW Barker Centre for Law & Business
Faculty of Law, National University of Singapore

The meteoric rise of the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in the arts has sparked fierce debate globally about ethics, copyright, fair use, and authenticity. David Tan, from the National University of Singapore, addresses some of the most salient issues on the use of AI in the creative process, including how the licensing markets of literary works could be adversely impacted. Nonetheless he makes a case that AI could ultimately be harnessed by working artists as a tool to further their creative potential and artistic vision.

Introduction

In May 2023, artists in Singapore were reportedly outraged when a Twitter user posted about DBS Bank employees using an artificial intelligence (AI) tool to generate art. The activity, albeit part of an internal DBS event, involved employees producing a picture using the tool and having it printed on a tote bag, unsettling local artists concerned with a displacement effect. Illustrator Nur Sabrina commented: “AI art in Singapore will essentially destroy local art talents and urban culture to an extent.” Ahmed Elgammal, founder and director of the Art and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory at Rutgers commented that: “Everybody is now talking about generative A.I., and ‘A.I. Art,’ about the dawn of a new era of creative A.I. that will take the jobs of artists. We see a huge backlash from artists and the art community.”

Globally, and in Singapore, there is certainly significant public interest in what ChatGPT can deliver, whether in assisting students with writing school assignments or in generating scam emails. It

has been reported to be the fastest-growing consumer application in history, far surpassing the success of TikTok, Facebook and Instagram. In addition to ChatGPT, OpenAI also operates DALL-E which is an artificial intelligence (AI) system that can create realistic images and art from a description in natural language. These sophisticated AI technologies which train on vast quantities of authorial works to generate new content in response to text prompts are often described as “generative AI”, and the manner in which these copyright-protected works are employed in training the AI has attracted a number of high-profile lawsuits since the start of 2023.

The new GPT-4 by OpenAI, touted to be revolutionary in how it can respond to both text and image commands, is available for a modest fee of USD\$20 a month to ChatGPT Plus subscribers in the United States (US). Not too long ago, many of us were obsessed with apps that could make us look like superheroes; today we are using a chatbot to help us write school essays and magazine articles, compose poems, and create artworks.

While the debate on whether autonomous AI-generated works deserve copyright protection appears to have momentarily taken a backseat, the present legal issues with AI systems that can produce essays or create realistic images and art from a description in natural language text prompts are very much occupying the centre stage in copyright law discussions as well as within the arts community in Singapore.

Singapore made headlines when it ambitiously revamped its Copyright Act in 2021 that consolidated all previous amendments, rewrote the legislation in plain English and positioned the Act to be future-ready. The new Act was carefully calibrated to negotiate the complex relationships between protecting rights owners and artists and enabling

the public and other users to have access to these works to create new ones. Significantly, by codifying an open-ended fair use provision akin to that in the United States, works protected by copyright—which include music, videos, images, lyrics—may just be more readily available for transformative repurposing on social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and Facebook. However, at the time of public consultation in the mid-2010s, the generative AI applications such as ChatGPT, DALL·E and Stable Diffusion were not even in the public consciousness.

This article discusses how Singapore copyright law is poised to tackle two issues relating to generative AI and the creation of artworks:

1. Whether AI may be recognised as author;
2. Whether the use of copyright-protected works for machine learning (“input”) and the works created from natural language command (“output”) are infringing copyright;
3. Whether a fair use defence applies to such uses.

Authorship of Works— The Author Must Be a Human Being

In April 2016, advertising executive Bas Korsten unveiled *The Next Rembrandt*, a computer-generated 3D painting that had been created by a deep learning algorithm with facial recognition software that had spent 18 months examining 346 known paintings by the Dutch painter, using 150 gigabytes of digitally

rendered graphics. It was the result of a partnership between several industry leaders like ING, Microsoft and T.U. Delft. In 2018, Obvious, a Paris-based collective, developed its painting *Portrait of Edmond de Belamy* through Generative Adversarial Networks (GAN), which used a sample set—in this case, thousands of portraits—to recognise patterns before creating new pieces with that knowledge. In October that year, revered auction house Christie’s in New York marketed the painting as the first portrait generated by an algorithm to come up for auction, and sold it for USD\$432,500, over 40 times its initial estimate. Although the price paled in comparison against traditional masterpieces like Claude Monet’s *Meules* or Pablo Picasso’s *Le Rêve*, *Portrait of Edmond de Belamy* was noteworthy for its claimed artist: it was not a person but an algorithm (min G max D $x [\log(D(x))] + z [\log(1 - D(G(z)))]$). In the field of music, the composition of polyphonic chorale music in the style of Johann Sebastian Bach by a deep learning neural network called DeepBach, developed by Gaetan Hadjeres and Francois Pachet at the Sony Computer Science Laboratories in Paris, has also made headlines in respect of AI-composed music.

Today, rapid advancements in AI capabilities to create art continue to redefine the human role in the creative process. Most of these works of art generated by computers rely heavily on the underlying algorithm and creative input of the programmers; the computers are akin to paintbrushes or chisels—they are tools used in the creation of the artworks. Many online commentaries, however, do not make a clear distinction between whether the AI is used as a tool by a human individual or the AI independently and autonomously produces a work without supervision or significant human intervention. For the services provided by OpenAI, which includes ChatGPT and DALL·E, the terms of use state that “OpenAI hereby assigns to you all its right, title and interest in and to Output” but cautions that “[d]ue to the

nature of machine learning, Output may not be unique across users and the Services may generate the same or similar output for OpenAI or a third party.” What this means is that, *assuming* the work generated by ChatGPT or DALL·E is capable of attracting copyright protection, the copyright owner is the user who inputs the text prompts. Under the DALL·E Content Policy help section of OpenAI’s website, it is stated that “subject to the Content Policy and Terms, you own the images you create with DALL·E, including the right to reprint, sell, and merchandise— regardless of whether an image was generated through a free or paid credit.”

But the assignment of copyright to the user who provides the text prompts is valid *if and only if* the AI-generated output may be attributed to a human author/creator in the first place. The Singapore Court of Appeal had said that for copyright to exist in any literary work, the authorial creation must causally connect with the “engagement of the human intellect.”¹ The Court then proceeded to define human intellect as “the application of intellectual effort... or the exercise of mental labour,” which a non-human author is deemed to be unable to provide.² Furthermore, in Singapore’s new Copyright Act 2021, a suite of statutory provisions when read together indicate that only a human individual may be an “author”. In summary, works autonomously generated by AI would not reflect human personality.

However, this does raise questions for works produced by generative AI systems such as ChatGPT and Midjourney responding to human text prompts—whether these are merely AI-assisted outputs in response to the human user’s free and creative choices. In most scenarios involving generative AI systems such as ChatGPT or DALL·E, the text prompts provided by human users may not qualify as sufficient human intervention. What is clear today is that when the human input lacks a

sufficient causal connection with the final work, then the human author, from whom a work originates, cannot be identified. As a result, what we have is an authorless work, no matter how aesthetic, useful or valuable. Therefore, there may be no copyright in these AI-generated works.

Both Generative AI Learning Input and Output Can Infringe Copyright

For ChatGPT to respond to the questions we input, it needs to have access to millions or even billions of literary works—many of which are protected by copyright—in order to produce fully fleshed out answers and results based on digitally accessible text-based information. Often referred to as the input of data for machine learning or machine training, an AI system is “fed” the relevant works in order for it to function effectively. To date, the companies behind these impressive generative AI systems have not disclosed the datasets they use for machine training. Nonetheless, for an AI system like Stable Diffusion to generate images based on text prompts, billions of text-and-image pairings have to be loaded into the computer memory, which are then encoded as an essential element of training the model. When “fed” with images for machine learning, another algorithm will be scraping the internet for content from various websites, invariably accessing content without permission and in violation of express prohibitions against such conduct contained in the terms of use of these websites. Generally, in the first stage of the data mining process (even if the AI system is not directly fed the relevant input), web robots may infringe the reproduction rights of the

owners in the original literary, dramatic, musical and artistic works if such works are copied. It is therefore not surprising when Getty Images filed a lawsuit against Stability AI in the US in February this year for copying over 12 million photographs from its collection. This follows a class action lawsuit by artists filed in January against Stability AI, Midjourney and DeviantArt for infringing their copyright through the use of training images.

When ChatGPT or Stability Diffusion generates text or images based on the user's questions or commands, the output can also infringe copyright in a source text or image if it is substantially similar to the original. For instance, in generating an essay, ChatGPT may not necessarily paraphrase all the sentences from its training dataset of literary works, and will invariably reproduce significant amount of text verbatim from its sources. In the Getty Images lawsuit, the claim identified some of the output delivered by Stability AI to include a modified or distorted version of a Getty Images watermark, underscoring the clear link between the copyrighted images and the final product. In such circumstances, this would be another instance of copyright infringement. One should further note that copyright does not protect the style of an artist, no matter how distinctive; this includes a painting-style (like Picasso's distinctive cubist style or Warhol's silkscreen treatments of photographs), writing-style or singing-style. In the same way that we can freely paint and sell a scenery of the Singapore Botanic Gardens in a Monet impressionist-style (assuming that Claude Monet's paintings are still protected by copyright), it is not copyright infringement if DALL·E, in response to a prompt "Singapore Botanic Gardens in the style of Monet", generates a particular image that evokes Monet's *Bridge Over A Pond Of Water Lilies*.

Is It Fair Use?

But is it nonetheless fair use? In Singapore, section 191 of the Copyright Act enumerates a non-exclusive list of four factors to be weighed to determine whether an unauthorised use is fair, and hence a permitted use, much akin to the legal position in the US. In the US, fair use has allowed Google Books, acting without permission of rights holders, to make digital copies of tens of millions of books to establish a publicly available internet search function. An important feature is an internet user can use this function to search without charge to determine whether the book contains a specified word or term and also see snippets of text containing the searched-for terms. It was important to the US court that Google Books augmented public knowledge by making available information about the books without providing the public with a substantial substitute for matter protected by the copyright interests in the original works. But ChatGPT, Stable Diffusion and many other comparable AI programs are not search engines. A number of them are highly successful commercial enterprises, with Stability AI valued at USD\$1 billion, and some charging a user fee for their services. In evaluating the extent to which a work is transformative, the court will typically consider the *purpose* of the original vis-à-vis infringing secondary works; the secondary use should be plainly different from the original purpose for which they were created (the first of the four factors). There is also little transformative purpose to be found as the AI would be accessing and reproducing the creative expression in these works in the outputs, i.e., the works would have been appropriated for their creative elements rather than their underlying facts. Generative AI systems are trained essentially with existing creative works

and then they typically remix them to derive more works of the same kind based on our text prompts.

ChatGPT's replies to our text prompts are not based on a process of reasoning or akin to human comprehension; it is based on the probabilities of certain words occurring together, and may generate paragraphs of text from copyrighted literary works in its response. To be clear, some of the output generated by AI may be highly transformative, but it is the use of the creative works in the machine learning process that is arguably not transformative. Last but not least, such unrestricted and widespread would have a substantially adverse impact on the licensing markets of these copyrighted works.

Conclusion

As technology develops at a breathtaking pace and more and more generative AI systems become freely accessible, the traditional mode of producing, disseminating and licensing literary, dramatic, musical and artistic works will also have to evolve. On one hand, this is a welcomed renaissance in which AI has enabled the democratisation of art such that anyone may be an artist. On the other hand, artists will now have to change their way of creating art, and perhaps work hand-in-hand with AI to break new frontiers.

In his interviews with artists between 2017-2020, unlike the current backlash, Ahmed Elgammal discovered that many artists who worked with AI found that it gave them sparks of new ideas, new directions, new ways to create their art. However, he noted that with many of the generative AI systems today:

“Text-promoting helped A.I. get out of the uncanny valley. But it killed the surprise... using language as part of training makes the model very constrained in creating inspiring visual deformations. A.I. now creates its visual output confined by our language, losing its freedom to visually manipulate pixels freely without prevarication from human semantics. In a sense, A.I. is becoming more like us—no longer able to see the world with an eye that complements or challenges us.”

Artists should not fear that they will be replaced by AI. They should be looking at how internationally renowned artist Sougwen Chung uses hand-drawn and computer-generated marks in her drawings, sculptures and installation works, and how Scott Eaton creates and trains AI to translate his drawings and animation into photographic, figurative representations as well as abstracted sculptural forms, and then redefine their own oeuvre by using AI as a tool to further their artistic vision. The future is not one of the decline of the arts, but the rise of creativity. □

About The Author



Professor David Tan is Co-Director of the Centre for Technology, Robotics, Artificial Intelligence & the Law and Head (Intellectual Property) of the EW Barker Centre for Law & Business at NUS Law. He served as Vice Dean (Academic Affairs) at NUS Law from January 2015 to June 2021 where he had oversight of the undergraduate and postgraduate coursework curriculum. Tan holds PhD, LLB (First Class Honours) and Bachelor of Commerce degrees from the University of Melbourne and an LLM from Harvard. At NUS Law, he pioneered courses in Entertainment Law, Fashion Law, Freedom of Speech and Privacy & Data Protection Law; he has also taught as a visitor at Melbourne Law School, Tsinghua, Tokyo (Todai) and University of Hong Kong. His research covers personality rights, copyright, trademarks, freedom of expression and tort law. He has published over 100 articles, comments, and book chapters since joining NUS Law in 2008.

Notes

1. *Global Yellow Pages Ltd v Promedia Directories Pte Ltd* [2017] 2 SLR 185 at [24] (“*Global Yellow Pages*”).
2. *Global Yellow Pages* [2017] 2 SLR 185 at [24].

Bibliography

- AIArtists. 2023. “Sougwen Chung.” Accessed August 9, 2023. <https://aiartists.org/sougwen-chung>.
- Bond, Tony, and Sarah Blair. 2019. “Artificial Intelligence & copyright: Section 9(3) or authorship without an author.” 14 *Journal of Intellectual Property Law & Practice* 423.
- Chan, Gabrielle. 2023. “AI-generated artwork by bank employees raises questions of copyright and artistic licence.” *The Straits Times*, May 26, 2023. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/lifestyle-culture/article/3222753/will-ai-boost-or-break-singapores-art-scene-amid-wild-west-scenario-and-should-artists-be-worried>.
- Elgammal, Ahmed. 2023. “Text-to-Image Generators Have Altered the Digital Art Landscape – But Killed Creativity. Here’s Why an Era of A.I. Art Is Over.” *Artnet*, June 20, 2023. <https://news.artnet.com/opinion/ahmed-elgammal-op-ed-ai-art-is-over-2304028>.
- Ginsburg, Jane C., and Luke Ali Budiardjo. 2018. “Authors and Machines” 34 *Berkeley Technology Law Journal* 344.
- Grimmelmann, James. 2016. “There’s No Such Thing as a Computer-Authored Work—and It’s a Good Thing, Too.” 39 *Columbia Journal of Law & the Arts* 403.
- Kop, Mauritz. 2020. “AI & Intellectual Property: Towards an Articulated Public Domain.” 28 *Texas Intellectual Property Law Journal* 297.
- Lux Life. 2019. “Scott Eaton Artist + AI: Figures & Form in the Age of Intelligent Machines.” June 17, 2019. <https://www.lux-review.com/scott-eaton-artistai-figures-form-in-the-age-of-intelligent-machines>.
- McFadden, Christopher. 2019. “7 of the Most Important AI Artists That Are Defining the Genre.” *Interesting Engineering*, November 10, 2019. <https://interestingengineering.com/7-of-the-most-important-ai-artists-that-are-defining-the-genre>.
- OpenAI. 2023. “Terms of Use.” Last updated March 14, 2023. <https://openai.com/policies/terms-of-use>.

- OpenAI. 2023. "DALL·E Content Policy: Can I sell images I create with DALL·E?" May 15, Last updated August 2023. [https://help.openai.com/en/articles/6425277-can-i-sell-images-i-create-with DALL·E](https://help.openai.com/en/articles/6425277-can-i-sell-images-i-create-with-DALL-E).
- Svedman, Megan. 2020. "Artificial Creativity: A Case Against Copyright for AI-Created Visual Artwork." (2020) 9:4 *IP Theory: Vol 9: Issue 1, Article 4*. Accessed August 9, 2023. <https://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/ipt/vol9/iss1/4>.
- Tan, David. 2023. "The Price of Generative AI Learning: Exceptions and Limitations under the New Singapore Copyright Act." *European Intellectual Property Review* 400.
- Tan, David, and Tan Wee Liang. 2022. "AI, Author, Amanuensis." *Journal of Intellectual Property Studies* 5: 1-32. August 26, 2022. ScholarBank@NUS Repository. <https://scholarbank.nus.edu.sg/handle/10635/231038>.
- United States Copyright Office. 2023. "Copyright Registration Guidance: Works Containing Material Generated by Artificial Intelligence" 37 CFR Part 202. March 16, 2023. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2023-03-16/pdf/2023-05321.pdf>.

From Polycrisis to Collective Solutions: How Arts Funders Can Help Build a Better World

Simon Brault, O.C., O.Q.

We are now living in a period of multiple, concurrent crises, including threats to global human health, the natural environment and political stability. Simon Brault contends that the arts and culture—and, indeed, much of society—still operate under outmoded colonial systems and mindsets. In an appeal to arts funders to effect change and develop collective solutions, he argues the redistribution of resources and the broadening of representation will build new collaborations and further equity, access and sustainability for the future.

Introduction

As I write this text, I am weeks away from the end of my nine-year tenure as Director and CEO of the Canada Council for the Arts (the Council).¹ It has been a privilege to lead the Council through one of its most important periods of growth and transformation in over 60 years.

In the last few months, I have been meeting with arts funders from across Canada and around the world to talk about the major issues facing our work—issues that are redefining our relationship to society. In all my conversations, one thing has become clear: arts funders need to accelerate their transformation to meet the realities of the 21st century and to better our divided world.

Turbulence—Polycrisis

We are living in what philosopher Edgar Morin called a “polycrisis”—a term he coined more than 25 years ago to describe a multitude of simultaneous crises whose combined interaction is far more dangerous than the sum of its parts. The current polycrisis involves ongoing pressures from the global pandemic, climate change, inflation, supply chain disruptions, the resurgence of extreme right-wing ideologies, the polarisation of societies, a mounting sense of isolation and mental health crises among citizens, and armed conflicts around the world which pose a threat to global peace.

In the midst of all these crises, the future of public and tax-based private funding of the arts in Canada—and around the world—is uncertain. Does society still need arts funders? Arts funders were, after all, designed for a very different context than the one in which we are now living. For example, the Council was a creation of the mid-twentieth century for a country that had little-to-no professional arts sector, was significantly less diverse, and dedicated to the colonial vision of its founding nations, France and Great Britain. We are almost a quarter into the 21st century, and the context has changed significantly.

What has not changed is that arts and culture continue to face the challenges of limited resources and limits placed on freedom of expression. In Canada, despite 70 years of cultural policies, laws, regulations and targeted investments to strengthen the creative economy, the cultural sector continues to operate largely at the expense of those without whom it would not exist—artists. Worse still, this state of affairs is often presented as inevitable and normal.

Arts funding should not become the way to make up for a lack of fair remuneration and working conditions. Our investments lose meaning, value and impact if countless artists and cultural workers are kept in a state of precarity that leaves them without adequate social support, vulnerable to exploitation and psychological distress, or forced to leave the sector. There is a growing acknowledgement that at the root of all these precarities—within the arts and in society more broadly—are colonial, capitalist, and extractive ways of thinking, doing, and being.

If arts funders continue to act in response to the context for which they were created rather than the realities of the present and future, they risk their irrelevance if not their demise.

Changing Course— A Holistic Approach to Access and Redistribution

This might be one of the most challenging moments in recent history to be a leader in arts and culture, and yet, transformational leadership is what will guide a much-needed course correction. Transformations that must now be amplified by the global arts funding ecosystem must be enduring and visionary, with a view to creating the most resilient and sustainable arts sectors possible in societies where everybody fully experiences their fundamental cultural rights. So where do we need to change ourselves, and how can we support each other in that change?

One of the most significant projects for us as arts funders is to ensure access to the power and benefits

of artistic creation for everyone around the world—regardless of cultural background, ethnicity, age, ability, sexual orientation, gender identity, language or place of residence. We must increase access and open up the echo chamber that has been the traditional, institutional arts sector created in the West and disseminated around the world. We need to better reach new generations of artists and audiences, as well as communities that have historically been left out of subsidised cultural systems and that lack representation on our stages, in our publications, and in our museums.

To do this essential work, arts funders need to redistribute their resources, as well as their attention and power. Not only is this a matter of social justice, but also the necessary recognition of the universal right to culture. In the context of dim economic forecasts and no additional resources on the horizon, a holistic redistribution—combining vertical and horizontal approaches—will ensure that available resources are put to best use. Vertical redistribution reallocates resources from the most economically, socially, and culturally advantaged to the least advantaged, while horizontal redistribution reallocates resources according to priority objectives.

In addition to redistribution, the concept and practice of decolonisation is beginning to shift the arts and culture in Canada towards greater cultural sovereignty and self-determination for Indigenous peoples, as well as towards a more equitable and accessible future. Decolonisation is an open-ended and evolving concept, but it is also a complex process. Once we begin to decolonise our ways of thinking and being, we must steadfastly stay the course to ensure that we do not revert to the way things were.

The concept and process of decolonisation means something particular for a country like Canada with several Indigenous groups and a history as a former colony of both England and France. Ultimately, decolonisation is relevant to many other countries beyond Canada, as at the heart of this work is a deep-seated desire to redress the harms caused by the logic, systems and institutions of colonialism, including arts funders.

The decolonisation of arts and culture work is a collective endeavour that will need to begin with a redefinition of the hierarchical classification of the arts that gives preference to so-called “classical” culture while it devalues Indigenous and non-Western cultures. We need to revisit notions of professionalism and artistic disciplines, which are deeply rooted in Eurocentric and colonial values. We need to relativise the notion of artistic excellence, a concept that often refers to the hierarchy of good taste, beauty, and values that confirm and perpetuate the dominant culture. And we need to move beyond limited notions of artistic expertise that are often the product of education systems built to reproduce power relations and safeguard the privilege of the dominant colonial discourse on art and culture.

Redistribution and decolonisation will not only increase the social relevance of the arts, but will also enable arts and culture to play a leading role in shedding light on the major issues in our world.

Tailwinds—Opportunities to Influence and to Collectively Explore Solutions

Arts funders have an opportunity to exert a positive, sustainable influence on the viability of the arts and the future of democracy. More than an opportunity, arts funders have a duty to influence and to evolve beyond their traditional roles as funders, to advance arts and culture in a broader sense. There is no better time to act, to explore collective solutions and to participate in decision-making—within and beyond arts sectors and across geographical boundaries—in an effort to address common, global challenges.

As an example of developing collective solutions within the arts, the Council recently convened a gathering of public and private arts funders from across Canada. It was the first gathering of its kind, and provided an opportunity for a wide range of informed and insightful conversations about pressing socio-economic, environmental, regional, generational, and ethical issues surrounding long-term funding of the arts sector in Canada. This gathering built connections, sparked ideas and sowed the seeds for sectoral transformation.

Traditionally, arts and culture have not been included in the conversations taking place at major decision-making tables related to the future of our societies. Yet, the arts have a clear role to play in discussions of all kinds, including around mental health, education,

and poverty, to name just a few areas for potential exploration. The arts are also levers of affirmation, healing, emancipation, and solidarity in the face of the climate emergency, armed conflicts and threats to human rights. Since arts funders, as public agencies, often have a direct line of communication with decision makers that others in arts and culture lack, it is incumbent on us to advocate for a seat at the table. Arts funders can influence policy development by putting forward knowledge and expertise, and by amplifying the most promising demands and proposals that are being brought forward by the cultural milieu.

This type of collaboration can be all the more impactful when we, through international bodies like the International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies (IFACCA), encourage the arts and culture sectors in our respective countries to think of themselves as part of a larger, global community. IFACCA is a microcosm of the world, enabling arts funders to learn from one another and to understand what is happening globally. These gatherings help us reflect on our own contexts, shift our own mindsets, and ultimately break down barriers and traditional hierarchies. Now, more than ever, we need international fora like IFACCA because the challenges facing our world—like increasing polarisation, the climate crises, conflicts and wars—require global conversations and collaboration, above and beyond the borders that divide us.

On the international stage, cultural diplomacy is a crucial path forward in a polarised world torn by major, persistent conflicts. The Council has a long history of supporting international cultural exchanges and partnerships, which has included funding artists to travel the world to create and

share their artistic works. For example, inspired by 60 years of diplomatic relations, the Council recently partnered with Arts Council Korea to support projects that will deepen and diversify creative, collaborative relationships between Korean artists and artists from Canada.

International conversations, partnerships and collaborations are a tremendous opportunity for us to learn from and influence one another, and to identify and develop collective solutions to the many challenges in our world.

Conclusion

Arts funders, and leaders of public institutions, now need to reflect on some difficult questions. We need to ask ourselves: who is missing from our conversations and how can we bring those people and communities along with us on the transformation journey? Who do we need to partner with to make transformation happen—not just in the arts but from other sectors too? And how can arts funders work together more strongly, across geographic and cultural divides, for a community of impact?

This project is within our grasp, and its magnitude and ethics justify the full recognition we are demanding for the arts sector and all those who dedicate their lives to it. □

About The Author



Simon Brault has been active in the cultural sector in Canada for over 30 years. He was Director and CEO of the Canada Council for the Arts from 2014 to 2023, leading the Council through one of its most important periods of growth and transformation in over 60 years. During his tenure, the Council more than doubled its annual contribution to the arts sector with a historic investment from the government, and created a dedicated funding program for Indigenous arts and culture administered by Indigenous staff—one of the first of its kind in Canada. Brault additionally led the Council through the global pandemic, tirelessly advocating for artists and self-employed workers, and ensuring the Council swiftly distributed emergency funds to the arts sector. In 2019, Brault became the first Canadian to be elected Chair of the International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies (IFACCA), a role he occupied until 2023.

Notes

1. The Canada Council for the Arts was founded in 1957, as Canada's national public arts funder, with a mandate to "foster and promote the study and enjoyment of, and the production of works in, the arts". The Council provides funding to artists, arts groups and arts organisations across Canada.

Bibliography

Brault, Simon. 2010. *No Culture, No Future*. Translated by Jonathan Kaplansky. Toronto: Cormorant Books.

Brault, Simon. 2023. "Toward More Equitable and Sustainable Funding." Last modified May 24, 2023. <https://canadacouncil.ca/spotlight/2023/05/toward-more-equitable-and-sustainable-arts-funding>.

Gattinger, Monica. 2017. *The Roots of Culture, the Power of Art: The First Sixty Years of the Canada Council for the Arts*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.

International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies. 2023. "Home." Accessed June 21, 2023. <https://ifacca.org/>.

Moreno Mujica, Magdalena. 2022. "Building resilient and sustainable cultural and creative sectors." In *Re|Shaping Policies for Creativity: Addressing Culture as a Global Public Good*, 43-67. Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380474>.

Morin, Edgar. 2020. "Coronavirus: chronique d'une polycrise." Interview by Frédérique Bedos. De l'intérieur, Le Projet Imagine. Video, 54:23. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lpT26hnttV8>.

Wente, Jesse. 2021. *Unreconciled: Family, Truth, and Indigenous Resistance*. Toronto: Allen Lane.

The Future of Our Arts and Culture: A View from Hong Kong

Winsome Chow

Chief Executive, Hong Kong Arts Development Council

Hong Kong's cultural and arts sector's post-pandemic recovery has been heartening, fuelled by the enthusiasm of local arts groups and audiences. Now, as the city seeks to redefine itself as an East-meets-West centre for international cultural exchange, Winsome Chow, from her vantage point at the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, expresses her hopes for the Hong Kong Government's new Culture Commission.

Recovering from the three-year pandemic, it's clear that Hong Kong has experienced many changes. Despite the challenges, the cultural and arts sector has bounced back with more and better arts performances, exhibitions, and activities. Arts groups, whether supported by public funds or not, have returned to normal operations, many with more vigour and impact. Audiences from local community have responded so enthusiastically that our participation rate (which includes physical or alternative modes of events) has increased to 78%, which is a 17% point increase compared to 2020.

The pandemic had surely been a serious threat, but it also stimulated among practitioners in the cultural and arts sector a sense of solidarity and the spirit to rise above adversity. In the course of my decades-long work in Hong Kong as a performing arts programmer, festival curator and arts administrator, I regularly heard leaders in the sector, linked by their strong sense of rapport, exchange words of mutual encouragement.

Currently, Hong Kong is onstage again. Its concert halls, theatres and museums reopened in late 2022, and in that last quarter, I heard the best concerts in recent years by the territory's three major orchestras, the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra, Hong Kong

Chinese Orchestra and Hong Kong Sinfonietta, at their season opening. Tickets for the Hong Kong Ballet performances and two commercially presented theatrical productions, with a performance run of 50 to 60 performances, were snapped up within hours of their release. Earlier this year, it was back to business for the art fairs, Art Basel and Art Central. All these glittering events took place in a calendar featuring a wide spectrum of works and activities presented by hundreds of small and medium-sized arts groups and collectives.

Clearly, Hong Kong is not the "cultural desert" some had labelled it five decades ago. We are a city and people that have come to love arts and culture. In fact, historically, Hong Kong has always been a place of cultural exchange, though its mix of content has evolved through various eras. At present, Hong Kong is redefining itself as a cultural hub that welcomes, encourages, and supports international cultural exchange, a cultural centre where the East meets the West. This aspiration has been recognised in our country's National 14th Five-Year Plan.

Looking forward, what does it mean for Hong Kong to play a role as an international cultural exchange centre? This question intrigues me as a practitioner who has walked through a few decades of our cultural and arts development, and even more so after the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government set up a Culture Commission this year with the following terms of reference.

The Commission is responsible for:

1. The policy, strategy and initiatives for Hong Kong's arts, culture and creative industries development with a view to realising the vision of turning Hong Kong into an East-meets-West Centre for International Cultural Exchange, including formulating a

Blueprint for Arts and Culture and Creative Industries Development with a view to creating a more complete ecology for the development of the sectors; nurturing and attracting talent; nurturing arts groups, developing audience, promoting cross-sectoral and cross-genre collaboration, as well as promoting arts and cultural exchanges between Hong Kong and the Mainland as well as the rest of the world;

2. The associated funding strategy to further the above objectives; and
3. The strategy to encourage the private sector's participation in promoting the development of arts, culture and creative industries.

The Culture Commission is a committee set up by the Government, an addition to the many existing advisory and administrative committees established to develop and promote the arts. It is not the first such committee in Hong Kong. The last one was set up in 2000 when Professor Chang Hsin-kang was appointed the Chairman of the Culture and Heritage Commission to lead a committee of over 20 members comprising scholars, architects, jewellery designers, sculptors, cultural veterans, and business leaders as well as government representatives. The Commission issued a Policy Recommendation Report in 2003, making over 100 recommendations based on six strategies focused on the themes of “people-oriented”, “pluralism”, “freedom of expression and protection of intellectual property”, “holistic approach”, “partnership” and “community-driven”. The vision for Hong Kong is well-captured in the Commission's report: “If Hong Kong becomes a city where life is celebrated through cultural pursuit, a city where its people are enchanted by the arts, enlightened by different cultures and enriched by

social diversity, we will certainly have a vibrant cultural scene. Our vision to turn Hong Kong into an international cultural metropolis will not be an unrealistic goal”.

20 years have passed, and the six strategies have succeeded in many ways, especially in areas where public funding and resources are involved. For instance, the nine major performing arts groups are funded by the Culture, Sports and Tourism Bureau (CSTB), while all medium and small arts groups are funded by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC). As part of their “holistic approach”, both CSTB and HKADC have Matching Fund Schemes to incentivise arts groups to find partners and supporters in the community and to increase both commercial sponsorship and private donations.

Under the Matching Fund Scheme of HKADC, more than \$80 million dollars have been raised from the private sector for 175 projects since 2016. Performing arts venues managed by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department also have venue partners to enhance their respective characters. The redistribution of the Government's responsibilities and businesses made possible the setting up of the CSTB last year which oversees the creative industries, arts and culture, sports and tourism under one roof.

So why has the Government set up a Culture Commission? From the terms of reference listed earlier, it is clear the Government expects new ideas and propositions from the Culture Commission which will lead to “a Blueprint for Arts and Culture and Creative Industries Development”.

In my mind, the Culture and Heritage Commission set up in 2000 had shed light on the “WHY” and “WHAT” in justifying public support for Hong Kong's arts and culture. The current Culture

Commission now aims to consolidate what is good for Hong Kong while expanding the geographical reach of and professional depth in the arts. It also puts more emphasis on building an ecology, and developing a commercial sensibility within the arts, culture and creative sector. In a sense, 2023's Culture Commission focuses on the "HOW": how will Hong Kong become the hub for international cultural exchange, especially in connection and collaboration with the Mainland? It also addresses the challenge of HOW to build a sustainable ecosystem as well as HOW the arts, culture and creative industries can add impetus to the economy.

The Culture Commission is chaired by the Secretary for Culture, Sports and Tourism, Mr Yeung Yun-hung Kevin with the support of Vice-Chairman Dr Wilfred Wong Ying-wai, Chairman of the Hong Kong Film Development Council and Hong Kong International Film Festival and former Chairman of HKADC. They lead over 25 members comprising legislative councillors, antique dealers, arts collectors, scholars, arts veterans, property developers and businessmen as well as entertainment industry leaders, many of whom have experience on other boards and advisory committees of the Government and public organisations.

For a new commission focusing more on HOW, a review of the implementation of recommendations by the former commission is a good point to start. Many of the over 100 recommendations from the former commission have been implemented in the arts ecology supported by public funding and resources. However, I feel there is still room for the private sector to increase their support for the arts and culture. There is a need for the Commission to come up with bold ideas to capitalise on the resources of the private sector in the development of arts and culture.

One idea that it can consider is to create new platforms for the arts. Arts and culture, like all other businesses in Hong Kong, is constrained by the lack of land and space. The Government needs to take the initiative to cut across its bureaus and departments and come up with a customer-oriented, long-term approach that empowers the private sector to use their facilities and spaces for the purposes of arts and culture. Times have changed and there should be answers to questions like why a restaurant for 200 customers cannot be turned into a late-night performance space for concerts, or why a party venue cannot be turned into a small theatre, and so on. With a clear pathway for the private sector, selected operators with a good record and resources can trial this new platform, and the arts and culture can be integrated into community life more deeply and widely.

Another idea is for Hong Kong to create its own international performing arts platform to complement similar platforms in the world. This would be an industry exchange platform as well as a showcase of professional works to be enjoyed by local people and visitors of Hong Kong. HKADC is already planning the Hong Kong Performing Arts Expo (EXPO) for mid-October 2024. Hong Kong has led artist delegations to many different international performing arts platforms in Canada, Korea, Germany, Netherlands, and Australia. It is now time for international industry leaders, artists, practitioners, groups, and institutions to meet in Hong Kong and show one another their works and proposals in exchange. EXPO will also be a springboard for them to connect with professionals from Mainland China and the Asia Pacific region. Indeed, long before the pandemic, HKADC had already established deeper relationships with similar arts organisations in Singapore, Korea, Japan, and other neighbouring Southeast Asian countries.

EXPO will provide a broader platform with which organisations, arts groups and individuals may connect and reconnect with one another as well as reinforce their relationships in collaboration. I know our Hong Kong artists, arts groups and institutions are also getting ready to show their best.

One dream of many generations of arts practitioners has been to produce a long-running Cantonese musical. This, I believe, should help realise the Culture Commission's many goals. This will involve charting out a long-term plan, including setting up a dedicated company and forming production teams. With a build-up of many performances, and the necessary modifications and improvements, such a production may tour the Greater Bay Area in Southern China, then move onto a tour of the Chinese-speaking communities in the region, and further onwards to other parts of the world. The term "long-run musical" should not be a concept that blocks our minds and blinds our eyes. HOW to tackle the challenges will be the mandate of this generation of arts leaders and workers.

In pursuing such "dream" projects, the question of HOW investment should be shared between public funding and the private sector also needs to be addressed. This should not be an excuse for the Government to make fewer provisions for arts and culture. Rather, it should fuel an attempt to embrace more talents from different professional worlds, encouraging them to innovate together. A strong incentive for investment from the private sector will surely help industry development take flight. It is only with openness, professional practice, and innovation that the arts development of Hong Kong can be taken to another level.

There is one more strategic direction the Culture Commission may consider. While Hong Kong has

inherited a strong legacy of Chinese culture, it has also, for more than a century, absorbed Western culture, especially that of the English-speaking world. It is such a background which makes Hong Kong unique. With broad strides made over the decades in finance, trading and now the professional services industry, Hong Kong has changed dramatically. It is time for Hong Kong to consolidate and play to our strengths in the promotion of Chinese culture and the traditions which are an integral part of our lives. Our distinctive cultural heritage and connectivity with the world enable us to present Chinese culture from our unique Hong Kong perspective and with an international outlook markedly different from the way Chinese arts and culture are conceived and presented in the Mainland. In fact, Hong Kong artistic talents may come up with creative ideas to tell Chinese stories in ways that connect with a global audience.

Whatever recommendations the Culture Commission will finally make, I am confident that they will be shaped with an understanding of the six strategies and ideas that the former Culture and Heritage Commission laid down. They can provide the foundation as well as a checklist and reference with which the leaders of our city may develop plans and actions that will further Hong Kong's interests in the long run. □

About The Author



As the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, Winsome Chow has initiated many vital strategies and schemes over the years, including various grant schemes and the arts space scheme. The Support Scheme that she devised to distribute the government's relief fund helped artists and practitioners get through the pandemic. She also sought sponsorship to engage 68 arts units in a HK\$25 million project, the Arts Go Digital Platform Scheme. She was bestowed the International Citation of Merit by the International Society for the Performing Arts (ISPA) in 2022. Chow keenly promotes cultural exchange and led over 700 arts practitioners to various overseas festivals, expos, and arts markets in Europe, America, and Australia before the pandemic. She has been promoting Hong Kong arts programmes in major cities in the Mainland. She is now leading the organisation of the first Hong Kong Performing Arts Expo scheduled in mid-October 2024 in contribution to the country's National 14th Five Year Plan.

Bibliography

Culture and Heritage Commission. 2003. *Policy Recommendation Report*. Hong Kong: Home Affairs Department.

Culture, Sports and Tourism Bureau. 2023. "Councils, Boards and Committees". Accessed June 22, 2023. <https://www.cstb.gov.hk/en/councils-boards-and-committees/councils-boards-and-committees.html>.

Hong Kong Arts Development Council. 2021. *2020-2021 Annual Report*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Arts Development Council.

Hong Kong Arts Development Council. To be published. *Behavioural Study on Arts Participants*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Arts Development Council.

HKSAR. 2022. *The Chief Executive's 2022 Policy Address*. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China.

Lee, John Ka-chiu. 2022. "The Chief Executive's 2022 Policy Address." Speech, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China, October 19, 2022. Policy Address. <https://www.policyaddress.gov.hk/2022/en/policy.html>.

Charting the Way Forward for Singapore's Media Industry

Justin Ang

Assistant Chief Executive for Media, Innovation, Communications & Marketing
Infocomm Media Development Authority

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.

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)¹ 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.

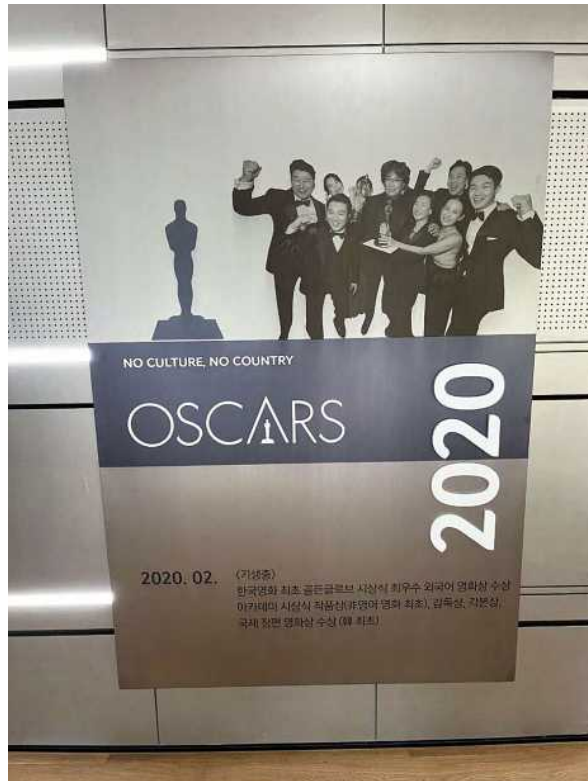


Figure 1. “No culture, no country”, as displayed in CJ ENM’s Singapore office. Image courtesy of Anthony Chen.

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).² 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)³ 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.

Taking It Back to the Basics of Storytelling

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.

Opening Up to the World

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.⁴ 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.

Keeping the Audience in Mind

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.

Building Soft Power Through Well-Told Stories

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. □

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.

Bibliography

Frater, Patrick, and Naman Ramachandran. 2022. “Weiyu Films and Studio76 Expand the RisingStories Screenwriting Competition.” *Variety*, December 7, 2022. <https://variety.com/2022/global/news/atf-weiyu-films-studio76-risingstories-screenwriting-competition-1235452794/>.

Frater, Patrick, and Manori Ravindran. 2023. “Make Way for Miky Lee: How the Super Producer Took South Korean Pop Culture Global.” *Variety*, March 3, 2023. <https://variety.com/2022/film/features/miky-lee-cj-entertainment-endeavor-1235193004/>.

Mediacorp. 2023. “Media Releases: Mediacorp wins 65 accolades at New York Festivals TV & Film Awards 2023.” April 19, 2023. <https://www.mediacorp.sg/media-releases/mediacorp-wins-65-accolades-new-york-festivals-tv-film-awards-2023-184901>.

Building Bridges and Celebrating Diversity in a Turbulent World

R. Rajaram JP

Chairman, Indian Heritage Centre Advisory Board
Registrar, National University of Singapore

Sustaining cultural traditions and heritage has long been a challenge for minority communities in Singapore, especially during the recent pandemic years. In this essay, R. Rajaram discusses the invaluable role various stakeholders and the government play in enabling cultural expressions through policies that respect and celebrate the nation's cultural diversity. He also points to the give-and-take required in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious society and how minority culture contributes to Singaporeans' shared heritage.

In the small, crowded houses of South Main Street in Thanjavur, an ancient temple town and once the capital city of the illustrious Chola empire, there remain fewer than 10 families who can handcraft the melodious stringed instrument, the veena. Named after the Hindu Goddess of Wisdom, Saraswathi, the veena is thought to date back to about 1700 BCE and finds mention in one of the Vedas, the revered Hindu scriptures. It is a much-loved musical instrument still played today in concerts.

For the families trying to keep alive the craft of hand-making these instruments, the challenges are real. First, land where good-quality jackfruit trees are cultivated are rapidly giving way to residential plots. These trees provide the wood for the veena. Secondly, the children of these craftsmen are opting for better paying jobs in the new factories and software companies that dot the city. The laborious task of crafting a single veena can take up to 20 days. And finally, the invasion of western culture and the popularity of western instruments have reduced the demand for traditional instruments.

A rapidly changing and volatile world has obviously taken a toll on the craft and craftsmen. But the reality is that the golden age of the Thanjavur veena is gone forever. Even as traditions play a significant role in societies, providing a sense of identity and continuity, one needs to come to terms with changing times, and evolve and adapt if our touchstones of heritage are to continue to be meaningful in and relevant to our cultural and social life.



Figure 1. A lady playing the veena, a south Indian musical instrument in a religious ceremony.

The Perfect Long Storm

In recent times, it was the long-drawn pandemic that emerged an adversary of the preservation and growth of arts and heritage. Based on the Singapore Cultural Statistics 2021, attendance at non-ticketed arts and culture events and visitorship to museums during the pandemic plummeted to 32% of 2019 levels.

Post-pandemic, we now are confronted with a more complex world fraught with fault-lines, increasing geopolitical tension and domestic socio-economic challenges. As former Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam put it, the world has entered a “perfect long storm”.

Yet, there is no need to be overly pessimistic. This is not the first time we are encountering a challenge of such proportions. In the first half of the 20th century, the world was dealt an equally bad set of cards: two world wars, the Spanish flu and a prolonged economic slump during the Great Depression.

Our Shared Heritage— A Source of Strength

It is precisely in such times that our shared heritage may act as a source of strength to help us meet the challenges brought about by an uncertain and volatile world. Arts and culture are expressions of identity that have a definitive role to play. They can serve as a reminder of the resilience and strength the community has demonstrated in the past and instil hope and determination for the future. They

can bring together people from diverse backgrounds, help them express themselves, and even thoughtfully push boundaries, all within a safe space. The arts and culture reflect the collective experiences, struggles and triumphs of communities.

Singapore is endowed with a rich heritage that includes Malay, Chinese, Indian and other influences. Cultural practices such as our food, music, dance and festivals are important touchstones which should be preserved, cherished and passed down to future generations. Our material culture, such as historic buildings, artefacts and monuments, keeps the memories and stories of Singapore's past alive, while building a sense of community and promoting national identity.

As Singapore continues to evolve and grow, these touchstones will be increasingly important markers of its identity and heritage. This is particularly the case for minority groups such as the Indian community in Singapore which has a long and rich cultural history that spans thousands of years.

The ethnic Indians in Singapore form a diverse community with many different religions, languages and traditions. It is a community which has played a crucial role in shaping the country's landscape. While the average Singaporean would be familiar with Tamil, one of the four official languages in Singapore, the Indian community is not monolithic. It is a rich mosaic of various ethnic groups such as Malayalees, Punjabis, Gujaratis and Bengalis among others, and offers a rich tapestry of experiences that contribute to Singapore's cultural diversity. Inherent in the community's pluralistic nature is its respect for diversity and an appreciation for different perspectives which, in turn, can lead to a more inclusive society. By acknowledging and understanding this diversity, the larger Singaporean community can foster a deeper appreciation for the



Figure 2. The Indian Heritage Centre (IHC). Image courtesy of IHC.

Indian community's contributions to Singapore's multicultural fabric.

That said, it still can be a challenge for minority groups to maintain their cultural identity. In the face of dominant cultural influences, Indians in Singapore have had to work hard at preserving and promoting their practices and traditions.

The Role of Government

On its part, the Singaporean government is keenly aware of the importance of the heritage of minority communities, and has taken several steps to support the expression of the Indian community. As PM Lee observed at the opening of the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre in 2017, "...while cultures... evolve naturally... and cannot be planned... this does not mean the Government has no role." The government encourages "each race to preserve its

unique culture and traditions while fostering mutual appreciation and respect among all of them. Being Singaporean has never been a matter of subtraction, but of addition; not of becoming less, but more; not of limitation and contraction, but of openness and expansion."

One of the most significant efforts of the government to support the Indian community's cultural heritage was the establishment of the Indian Heritage Centre (IHC) in 2015. The IHC is today an iconic museum that displays and promotes the diverse and rich heritage of the Indian community in Singapore, featuring a range artefacts, artworks and interactive displays. It provides visitors who hail from the Indian community as well as tourists and Singaporeans from other ethnic groups with a comprehensive understanding of the culture and history of Indians in Singapore.

Complementing the displays at the IHC are the workshops and open houses that IHC conducts every month which has attracted significant numbers of



Figure 3. A tour of the IHC premises attended by a multi-ethnic audience.
Image courtesy of IHC.

non-Indians to its premises. A deliberate focus has been on children's programmes which aim to develop in our young an early appreciation of other cultures. Today, nearly half of the visitors to the Centre are from other ethnic groups.

A Vibrant Cultural Calendar

Notably, the wider Singaporean community supports the variety of events and festivals that mark the Indian community's cultural practices and traditions. These include Deepavali, Thaipusam and Pongal. Thaipusam and Pongal, though not designated public holidays like Deepavali, have emerged as important signifiers of the cultural identity of the Singapore Indian community.

Though a general ban on religious foot processions has been in place in Singapore since 1964, an

exception has been made for Thaipusam as well as two other Hindu religious events, Panguni Uthiram and Thimithi, the fire-walking festival, which enjoy significant participation by the community. Additionally, in response to feedback from the community, the authorities have relaxed rules such as increasing the designated spots along the procession route where music can be played and allowing percussion instruments to be played by those accompanying the devotees. Even if all these translate to some inconveniences such as road closures, traffic jams and increased noise levels, the wider community is respectful and accepts them as part and parcel of living in a multi-racial community.

Pongal is the Tamil harvest festival accompanied by a colourful street light-up along Serangoon Road partly funded by the government. The IHC and the Little India Shop Owners and Heritage Association (LISHA) organise various events during this period, including bazaars and workshops as well as a mini farm where cows are honoured.



Figure 4. Multi-ethnic Pongal celebration at IHC.
Image courtesy of IHC.

Several other Indian festivals such as Onam, the harvest festival of the Malayalee community, and Holi, the Festival of Colours, celebrated in north and central India to mark the arrival of spring, are also marked by the different communities. These festivals, often held in the community centres run by the People's Association (PA), also attract multi-ethnic attendees and participants.

In the context of multi-racial Singapore, these public celebrations have become opportunities for non-Indian Singaporeans to appreciate and learn about the diversity of Singapore's cultural heritage. Today, it is no longer unusual to see non-Hindu Singaporeans bearing the kavadi during Thaipusam every year.

Looking Into the Future

When Singapore attained independence on 9th August 1965, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew declared that “we will set the example.” That example

was set not by creating a monolithic society or requiring any community to give up its heritage or traditions, but by enjoining citizens to embrace their inherited cultures while respecting other cultures and beliefs.

Later that year, in his first speech to the United Nations General Assembly, then Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam described Singapore as a “little United Nations in the making” where Malay, Chinese, Indian and Western cultures practised their beliefs without hindrance. In the Gallup World Poll in 2019, 54 years later, Singapore was placed first among 124 countries with 95% claiming Singapore “a good place to live” for the minorities. This was higher than the global average of about 70%. This statistic would have pleased our founding generation of leaders.

Today, Singapore remains a good place for immigrants who set out to make this island home. It is particularly so for South Asian immigrants who can tap into vibrant and ready networks, including cultural and community organisations and religious institutions, to find guidance and connections which

provide avenues for engagement and integration. The shared cultural backgrounds mean new South Asian immigrants can actively participate in the festivities and programmes alongside Singaporean Indians, making integration into mainstream society easier.

Singaporeans clearly appreciate the importance of their heritage. In the most recent Heritage Awareness Survey by the National Heritage Board (NHB), over 90% of respondents agreed that our history and heritage are important, and expressed an interest to learn and experience what it means to have our unique heritage.

This interest is undoubtedly an opportunity. Innovative initiatives that promote minority cultures can meet this demand while building a greater understanding and appreciation across different communities. It can facilitate dialogue and help Singaporeans explore and appreciate different perspectives. This can foster a more inclusive and harmonious society, better able to confront the headwinds we are now confronting.

One silver lining that has emerged from the gloom of the pandemic years is the accelerated adoption of digital technologies in the heritage sector. We should capitalise on this and continue to invest in technological infrastructure. Digital technologies make it easier than ever to connect with audiences across communities. The growing appetite for digital heritage content should translate to an expansion of digital offerings as well as experiments with different media to welcome people from all backgrounds and communities.

Conclusion

The pandemic years and the global events now unfolding are a reminder to the heritage sector to be prepared for highly disruptive events, or what author Nassim Taleb has termed “Black Swan” events. We need to recognise that such events are not as rare as we think they are. In a subsequent book, Taleb coined another term, “anti-fragile”, which refers to not just dealing with disruption, but developing the ability to find ways to constantly improve and emerge stronger. How does one develop this?

At a speech given at the Institute of Policy Studies-S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (IPS-RSIS) conference in 2021, Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong referred to the late multilingual local playwright Kuo Pao Kun who had likened culture to trees “separate at the trunk but touching at the tips of their branches where cross pollination occurs, and at the tips of their roots where they draw sustenance from the same soil.”

For Singapore and its various communities, anti-fragility must mean not just going deeper to strengthen one’s own cultural roots, but also reaching higher to cross-pollinate with other cultures, to develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of other cultures in our midst so that we may attain a stronger, shared Singaporean identity. What is most important is for everyone to approach these efforts with humility, empathy and a genuine desire to

learn. Building cultural understanding and fostering inclusivity requires an ongoing commitment to self-reflection, growth and actively challenging one's own biases and assumptions.

Together with continued government and stakeholder support, we have good reason to be optimistic that the heritage sector in Singapore will indeed emerge “anti-fragile”, and that minority cultures in Singapore will have a pivotal role to play in that journey. □

About The Author



R Rajaram JP is currently the Registrar at NUS and has been the Chairman of the Advisory Board of the Indian Heritage Centre since 2022, and a member of the Hindu Advisory Board since 2023. He served as Chairman of the Tamil Language Council from 2013-19 and is currently its Advisor. Rajaram also worked with the Self Help Group, SINDA, in the late 90s, and later as a member of its Executive Committee from 2011-2017. These were stints, he believes, that helped shape his views expressed in this essay.

Bibliography

- Clavin, Patricia. 2022. "Turbulence and the Lessons of History." International Monetary Fund, Finance & Development. June 2022. <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/2022/06/turbulence-and-the-lessons-of-history-patricia-clavin>.
- Krishnan, Gauri Parimoo Krishnan. 2016. "The Indian Heritage Centre: A Discourse on the Representation of Identity, Diversity and Aspiration Regarding the Indian Community's Heritage in Singapore." *Cultural Connections* Vol 1.
- Lee Hsien Loong. 2017. "Speech by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the Official Opening of the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre." Press release by Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre. May 19, 2017. https://singaporeccc.org.sg/media_room/speech-by-prime-minister-lee-hsien-loong-at-the-official-opening-of-the-singapore-chinese-cultural-centre/.
- Low Yen Ling. 2022. "Forging Ahead – The Arts and Culture in a New World: Speech by Ms Low Yen Ling, Minister Of State, MCCY & MTI at Culture Academy Conference." Press release by MCCY. November 17, 2022. <https://www.mccy.gov.sg/about-us/news-and-resources/speeches/2022/nov/forging-ahead-the-arts-and-culture-in-a-new-world>.
- Ministry of Finance, Singapore. 2022. "Singapore Cultural Statistics Report." Singapore Public Sector Outcome Review (SPOR). 2022. <https://www.mof.gov.sg/singapore-public-sector-outcomes-review/home>.
- Ministry of Home Affairs. 2015. "Statement on Thaipusam Procession." Press Release by Ministry of Home Affairs. Feb 13, 2015. <https://www.mha.gov.sg/mediaroom/press-releases/mha-statement-on-thaipusam-procession/>.
- National Heritage Board. 2022. "Heritage Awareness Survey." <https://www.nhb.gov.sg/what-we-do/our-work/sector-development/heritage-awareness-survey-2022>.
- Rajaratnam, S. 1965. "Statement of Mr S Rajaratnam, Foreign Minister of Singapore at the General Assembly of the United Nations on 21 September 1965 on the occasion of Singapore's Admission to the UN." National Archives, Singapore. <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/record-details/fd4ccab0-3270-11e4-859c-0050568939ad>.
- Ramnath, N S. 2012. "The Last Notes of the Thanjavur Veena." *Forbes India*, April 9, 2012.
- Shanmugaratnam, Tharman. 2022. "Confronting a Perfect Long Storm." International Monetary Fund, Finance & Development. June 2022. <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/2022/06/confronting-a-perfect-long-storm-tharman-shanmugaratnam>.
- Taleb, Nassim Nicholas. 2007. *The Black Swan*. New York: Random House.
- Taleb, Nassim Nicholas. 2012. *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder*. New York: Random House.

Tong, Edwin. 2023. "Our SG Heritage Plan 2.0 - A New Chapter of Singapore's Heritage Development: Speech by Mr Edwin Tong, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth & Second Minister for Law, at the Launch of Our SG Heritage Plan 2.0." Press release by Ministry of Culture, Community & Youth (MCCY). May 19, 2023. <https://www.mccy.gov.sg/about-us/news-and-resources/speeches/2023/may/Our-SG-Heritage-Plan-2-A-New-Chapter-of-Singapores-Heritage-Development>.

Wong, Lawrence Wong. 2021. "Speech on Multiracialism and Faultlines by Mr Lawrence Wong, Minister for Finance, at The IPS-RSIS Forum on Race and Racism in Singapore on 25 June 2021." <https://www.mof.gov.sg/news-publications/speeches/speech-on-multiracialism-and-faultlines-by-mr-lawrence-wong-minister-for-finance-at-the-ips-rsis-forum-on-race-and-racism-in-singapore-on-25-june-2021>.

A Minnow Navigates the Torrents

Mervin Beng

Chairman, Resound Collective Limited

Founder/Director, Singapore Chamber Music Festival

Contributor (Classical Music Reviews), *The Straits Times*, Singapore

COVID-19's threat to the performing arts sector was existential but also propelled arts companies to reinvent themselves and build up their digital capabilities to sustain their artistic practices. Mervin Beng shares the story of Resound Collective's struggles and how the group, despite being a small and young arts company, overcame them with tenacity, optimism and a willingness to take risks.

Introduction

As a latecomer and one of the smallest arts companies in Singapore, Resound Collective can be considered a minnow, swimming in waters among larger fish. The COVID-19 pandemic hit all arts companies hard but, for our company, it often felt like we were at the mercy of fierce, unpredictable currents that could hurl us against deadly rocks or sweep us downstream into oblivion.

This article shares Resound Collective's pandemic journey, reflecting on how key decisions were made. It was not a time for measured, deliberate decision-making. Often, there were no options. At other times, a go or no-go decision had to be made within hours. The Resound Collective that exists today is, to a large extent, a reflection of some of the decisions made during those two years.

Background to Resound Collective

In 2016, a band of enthusiastic musicians and music-lovers with many years of experience organising community-music making formed a non-profit musicians' collective. Resound Collective first focused on creating a chamber orchestra (a band of typically 25-40 musicians) named "re:Sound". Three years later, the company embarked on a year-long project to form a string quartet, eventually named Concordia Quartet.

After almost four years of incubation and developmental work, almost overnight in early 2020, the company's activities were shut down by the COVID-19 pandemic. Restrictions on gatherings, concerts and face-to-face work meant that meeting for rehearsals and presenting concerts was impossible.

This was especially dramatic for the Concordia Quartet. Formed in October 2019, their debut concert on 1 February 2020 already saw reduced audience attendance over growing concerns about the new virus circulating in Singapore. Their stint in Wild Rice's *The Importance of Being Earnest* which followed soon after was shortened, and the COVID-19 "circuit breaker", which took effect from 7 April 2020, meant that the quartet musicians could not even meet to rehearse.

Our fiscal year 2020 (April 2020 to March 2021) was to have been a big year. There had been planned collaborations with European chamber musicians in April 2020, a concerto in August with top UK pianist Stephen Hough, and a symphonic jazz concert with Cultural Medallion recipient Jeremy Monteiro early

in 2021. It should have been the year when Resound Collective made its mark as a major player on the classical music scene in Singapore. Instead, with great reluctance, over the next months, these and other planned events were cancelled or postponed.

Planning with Strategic Intent

Early on, it became clear that for a company built around promoting and presenting live classical music, the pandemic was an existential threat. Nonetheless, compared to other music groups, Resound Collective's size, structure and circumstances were unique. It had just four employees (quartet members), a handful of part-time staff, no physical office, and outsourced services extensively. Our comparative advantages included nimbleness, low overheads and the ability to act decisively. On the other hand, our track record and mindshare were very limited. Similarly, our audiences and donor base were still small.

The company had heavily invested in the previous years on building up a chamber orchestra and forming the new string quartet. We worried: if the artistic capabilities we had built up were lost or diminished by dormancy through a prolonged pandemic, what would be left? It soon became clear we had to emerge from the pandemic without losing too much of what we had built up.

Even if our priorities were clear, the strategic decisions we needed to make were not. Experts in medicine and science could not agree on how long pandemic measures would be in place. How would 6, 12 or 20 months of inactivity affect ensemble skills

and artistic drive? Would donors continue to support us if they could not see and hear our musicians for an extended period? Would music-lovers turn to the fast-emerging free digital treats being offered by top musicians and orchestras around the world?

Dogged Determination and Good Fortune

Cancelling or postponing planned events did not take much deliberation. It had to be done. But finding a way to keep the very young Concordia Quartet learning, growing and performing seemed impossible. Two to four weeks off could mean the end of the world. But what would happen when the restrictions lasted longer than six months?

There had been previous pilot projects at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music on remote performances with musicians located across the world. Conceptually, this approach could allow our quartet's musicians to work with one another in a socially-distanced manner. However, we were also aware that these tests utilised very advanced, expensive video recording equipment running on next-generation university research networks.

By a stroke of good fortune, two members of Resound Collective's management team had spent several decades in the technology industry. As specialists in high-performance networking and digital media streaming and motivated by the need to find a workaround to our quartet's restrictions, they were able to put together open-source software ("Jamulus"). This could run over Singapore's high-speed home broadband that allowed just about acceptable audio for the four musicians to test out



Figure 1. E-flyer for the first concert presented live under COVID “circuit breaker” restrictions in June 2020, where each of four performers played from their bedrooms. 2020. Image courtesy of Resound Collective.

working together. This was an audio-only solution, as video would have entailed greater latency, making it impossible for musicians to keep timing with each other.

But the initial experience of each musician playing at home into a microphone while keeping time with fellow musicians was intensely frustrating. The first trial lasted less than 45 minutes before the musicians gave up for the day. The two “techies” in the company persevered, spending hours to test and refine the connections. Over a three-week period, the delays each player heard from the others were reduced, while the musicians became more adept at playing through the latency, though it created fatigue over extended periods.

After six weeks, the musicians and technical team ran a live concert, broadcast with each player performing in their bedrooms. This was a world’s first and was reported on by the *BBC Music* magazine in their September 2020 issue.

The live broadcast in June was followed by an equally audacious project in August, where almost 30 musicians performed in four separate rooms, connected by microphones, headsets and a large audio console, playing Mozart’s *Symphony No. 40* live on YouTube. The mixing console and relatively proximity of the rooms meant much better audio latency, but again the musicians had to play “blind”, only able to use their ears to keep in time with one another.

The quality of the live digital broadcasts was a far cry from the pristine pre-recorded video streams that many orchestras offered during the pandemic, but most listeners understood that the technology used was very different. What the events offered was the spirit of a “live performance”, and a peek into how Resound Collective was trying to keep operating despite the COVID-19 measures. Had we decided against these relatively risky and costly projects, and stuck with more well-tested approaches, re:Sound and Concordia Quartet would have been completely dormant for five to seven months.

Building Capacity for the Next Generation

Pre-pandemic, our regular stream of concerts and an internship program provided opportunities for the company to try out fresh conservatory graduates and newly returned postgraduates. The pandemic had put a complete stop to this. But in 2021, a grant to support self-employed persons (SEPs) in the arts was announced. Thanks to some fresh, lateral thinking by our General Manager, a re:Sound concert featuring these SEPs who had missed the chance to trial with the orchestra was planned.

The challenge thrown at them was huge. The five concerto soloists and half the orchestra had never played with the collective. Could they perform to the same level as our pre-COVID ensemble?

With just five rehearsals, the musicians prepared an all-Italian repertoire that our pre-pandemic collective would have found challenging. But the concert at the Victoria Concert Hall was a huge success, delighting music reviewers, teachers and fellow musicians. The young musicians' hunger to prove themselves, as well as their talent and plenty of adrenaline pulled them through.

A music group's destiny cannot be defined by just one concert, but the self-confidence and belief generated by the musicians involved and their many fellow musicians were infectious. There was a buzz on social media among the music community and, thanks to this SEP concert, a talented new cohort of top players and leaders became part of our collective.

Not All Smooth Sailing

These examples of out-of-box thinking and willingness to take on higher risk in the face of uncertainty clearly paid off. But there were also times when spirits were low and energy was drained.

The unexpected COVID-19 "Heightened Alert" status announced on 15 May 2021 caught almost all arts companies by surprise. For Resound Collective, it meant the cancellation on short notice of concerts in May and July. This round of cancellations, following those in 2020, were particularly disheartening, as what we had read as light on the horizon turned out to be a mirage.

Later in 2021, informal chats with the quartet musicians signalled that pandemic fatigue was setting in. It should not have been a surprise; they had faced two concert cancellations, a cancelled overseas festival and months of rehearsals without the chance to perform. An overseas offsite was quickly arranged to give them some change of scenery and the chance to recharge before a coming concert. "Overseas" during a pandemic was strictly limited to Sentosa, but the gesture did help lift spirits and re-energise the players.

Back to the New Normal?

In 2022, there was a burst of activity in the cultural scene to firm up and present events, including some that had been postponed since 2020. There was great optimism and relief. However, this bounce-back was accompanied by a relatively slow return of audiences

to concerts. Anecdotally, it was not that they had lost the appetite for live events, but that social gatherings, an urgency to celebrate weddings and birthdays, and revenge travel took priority.

After the struggles of the pandemic, and the hectic post-COVID rebound, the road ahead for Resound Collective will hopefully be a little less bumpy, as audiences return to the best of what arts and culture can offer them. The backlog of concerts that were postponed by COVID has been cleared, so events for 2023 and 2024 will be a little less hectic. At last, there is enough calm to revive thoughts of an overseas tour!

The “new normal” will also throw us challenges, as COVID-19 has reminded us many times. Already inflation has driven operating costs up. Air travel is much more costly, and venue hire dates have become more difficult to secure. But, for now, these seem like minor worries compared to the situation from 2020 to 2022.

What Will “Success” Look Like?

Thus far, Resound Collective has been promoting chamber music primarily through chamber orchestra and the Concordia Quartet. For a more enduring impact, a *chamber music loving culture* in the broader public needs to exist. This would mean not just strong audience numbers and a healthy range of performances year-round, but the adoption of regular practice of chamber music as a norm among music lovers.

In 2014, when Igor Yuzefovich, the then newly-appointed concertmaster of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) arrived in Singapore, one of the first things he did was to look for fellow chamber musicians. This was not for a public performance, but a house concert in Singapore. I was fortunate to be present at this immensely enjoyable event. Since then, I have attended others, primarily presented by musicians from our company, as well as one by a mix of amateur and professional musicians.

Orchestral music can only be performed in a hall or auditorium. But chamber music performances can take place outside formal venues for family, friends, enthusiasts and other musicians. With thousands of music students trumping their examinations and attaining diplomas, Singapore is well-placed to see more chamber music performed in budget-friendly, non-traditional spaces.

A Small Step in That Direction

Early next year, Resound Collective presents the Singapore Chamber Music Festival (SMCF), a gathering of musicians of all ages and abilities to celebrate chamber music. While many festivals in Singapore tend to emphasise high profile *international* visiting stars, there is equal, if not greater, focus at SCMF to encourage students of music, young or old(er) to connect with other musicians, to form groups and participate.

At the time of writing, registrations have just opened, but three groups intending to take part have caught our attention—a piano trio of mainly retirees who have dusted off their instruments and aptly named

their group “Diamonds and Rust”, a young string quartet with players (aged 10 years and older) from different music studios, and an adult string quartet from Malaysia, who are working hard to secure financial support for their trip to Singapore.

One run of a chamber music festival may make a small impression on the music landscape. However, over years, its impact can be surprising. SCMF had run on a smaller scale, in 2003, 2005 and 2010, and many young participants in those runs are now leading chamber artists and musicians in Singapore and beyond, playing in the Australian Chamber Orchestra, Singapore Symphony Orchestra, and of course, Resound Collective.

Who knows? The next time you hear chamber music in Singapore, it may not be in a concert hall, but at a home soirée, performed by friends who have bonded for years over music. And hopefully in time, all over the island, we will hear such sweet sounds from private spaces as the community music landscape expands. □

About The Author



After over three decades in the technology industry spanning regional technical consulting to marketing and education in networking, Mervin Beng now spends most of his available time on his lifelong pursuits of music and acoustics. Beng's engagement with community music-making started from his National Service days. A founding member of the Singapore Philharmonic Orchestra, Singapore Youth Orchestra under the National University of Singapore, the NUS Symphony Orchestra, and the Chamber Players, Beng has also served on the boards and committees of the Singapore National Youth Orchestra, T'ang Quartet, Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, and the Singapore Symphony Orchestra. He has contributed classical music reviews to *The Straits Times* since 2002. Beng founded the Singapore Chamber Music Festival in 2003. In 2015, he formed Resound Collective, where he is currently the Chairman.

Bibliography

Chang Tou Liang. 2010. "3rd Singapore Chamber Music Festival: Robert, Clara and Johannes review." *Pianomania*, February 1, 2010. Accessed August 9, 2023. <http://pianofortephilia.blogspot.com/2010/02/3rd-singapore-chamber-music-festival.html>.

Paulson, Michael, and Javier C. Hernández. 2022. "Live Performance Is Back. But Audiences Have Been Slow to Return." *The New York Times*, August 21, 2022.

Wikipedia. 2020. "Timeline of the COVID-19 pandemic in Singapore (2020)." Accessed August 8, 2023. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_the_COVID-19_pandemic_in_Singapore_\(2020\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_the_COVID-19_pandemic_in_Singapore_(2020)).

Wise, Brian. 2020. "All together now! The technical challenges of performing remotely." *BBC Music Magazine*, September 2020.

Winds of Change:

Three Pre-Independence Debates which Shaped Singapore Chinese Literature

Associate Professor Tan Chee Lay

Associate Professor and Deputy Head, Asian Languages and Cultures Academic Group,
National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

In pre-independent Singapore, the development of literature in the Chinese language saw a tension between developing a literary voice rooted in the experience of the local and responding to the influence from “motherland” China. Tan Chee Lay from the Nanyang Technological University highlights the nuances of the three debates which shaped literary trends and schools of thought in local Chinese writing as Singapore’s Chinese literati sought to establish an authentic and unique voice.

Much like Singapore’s volatile struggle for independence, Singaporean Chinese literature went through a long journey towards discovering its identity. From British colonisation, to the Japanese Occupation, to the founding and building of the independent nation-state, Singaporeans’ self-identification has shifted from that of being immigrants to that of being locals, and finally to that of being citizens of a nation. Correspondingly, with political evolution and ideological changes, Singaporean Chinese literature has undergone a tumultuous and stirring journey in its responses to the era. This essay chronicles the pre-independence literary debates among writers and critics that shaped Singaporean Chinese literature, and how they reflected the tailwinds and turbulence of uncertain times.

The Beginning

Singapore’s new Chinese literary works first appeared in the *Sin Kuo Min Journal*, a literary supplement of *Sin Kuo Min Press*, first published in 1919, just after the May Fourth and New Cultural Movements took

over China. The beginnings of Singaporean Chinese literature were closely related to these movements which local Chinese newspaper supplements followed faithfully. Unlike those of other languages, Chinese literary works and significant trends were covered in Chinese newspaper supplements.

During this period, Singapore was primarily an immigrant society, so the sense of diaspora was strong. The themes of the literary works were intensely influenced by places of origin (China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, etc.) and were largely nostalgic for a faraway motherland. However, as more Chinese immigrants settled in Singapore, the debates on literary direction slowly emerged.

The “Emerging Literature Movement” Debate

With increasing Chinese newspapers and publications, the promotion of Nanyang (literally “southern seas”, a term used by the Chinese to refer to the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia) works grew and developed, and evolved into an “Emerging Literature” movement” around 1928. It took the primary direction of “promoting characteristics of Nanyang” and “advocating for emerging literature,” with local topics such as the plight of coolies, problems with education, economic depression, and the rich-poor divide.

Nanyang features were first officially promoted—and encouraged in the creation of literary works—by *Sin Kuo Min Press*’ supplement *Desert Island* in 1927. Its editor Huang Zhenyi and founder Zhang Jinyan issued a slogan to “incorporate Nanyang’s flair and characteristics into literature,” giving rise

to the question of what Nanyang literature was. In support, others like Zeng Shengti wrote “Literature in Nanyang” to highlight the existence of Nanyang literature. Zeng’s article “Wake Up! Singaporean Artists” criticised the “slogan-style literary work” and renounced “decadent literature”, urging writers to start by interviewing Malays to learn about their culture and understand the lives of immigrant Chinese and other races.

The Malayan Chinese Literary Independence Movement was a local movement that aimed to move away from Chinese-oriented expatriate literature towards Nanyang themes. However, “Nanyang” was an extensive and obscure concept. When editors called upon “Nanyang’s writers to use Nanyang as a battleground,” they were, in fact, referring to Malaya. Debates during this period included trying to pin down the terms “emerging literature” as well as “transplanted literature”. Interestingly, the renowned classical poet and calligrapher Yi Hong (the pen name of Pan Shou) was part of this debate, pointing out that “Emerging Literature is Proletarian literature”.

Following this, a new literary movement and trend emerged. The debate revolved around the direction of emerging literature, the relationship between it and Singapore’s society, and between literary and social change. This was essentially the seed that developed into the future discussion on the direction of Chinese literature in Singapore.

The Debate on “Local Writers” and “Localisation”

As more Chinese immigrants settled down in Singapore, a new debate was sparked by Qiu Shizhen’s article, “Talk on Local Writers”. He posited that “we should not blindly attach importance to Chinese literary writers in Shanghai, but also value and recognise the local writers of Malaya”, citing 14 local writers he considered worthy enough to elevate Malayan literature. This assessment of Chinese writers in Shanghai and the consequent nomination of local writers invited great controversy. Even though the writers he put forward were debated upon, Qiu’s first statement regarding “Malayan local literature” was welcomed.

Fang Xiu’s later assessment of Qiu’s article was more balanced: “Qiu was the first author since Chen Lianqing to pay attention to the unique significance of local literature. In effect, both paved the way in establishing Malayan Chinese literature [...] Much of his insight was rarely acknowledged by the typical writers then”.

In response to Qiu’s opinions, other articles appeared in *The Lion’s Voice* in which most parties agreed on the concept of but disagreed on what constituted a “local writer”. Under the broad slogan of “Nanyang colour”, the concept of Malayan “local writers” as being specific and distinct from a geographical perspective was now introduced, taking the process of “localisation” of Singaporean Chinese literature a step further.

Subsequently, in March 1936, a year-long discussion on the “localisation” of literature was initiated, with “location-specific features” as the central theme. In Zeng Aidi’s article, “Malayan Literary Cartoons,” he criticised the bad “corpse removal” phenomenon in local literature which had writers merely borrowing and modifying writings from China. In the article, he expressed his belief that a “good” focus in local literature ought to be the exploration of local issues in Malaya. He emphasised that “Malaya should possess the life of Malayan literature.” His article caused an uproar. Many scholars opposed his view that literary works could be judged as good or bad this easily. The debate that arose was heated, but the outcome pleasantly surprised many in the literary world. Writers now realised that the Chinese in Malaya, along with other people living in Malaya, should work towards the progress of the local Malayan society. It was only with such a mindset that a writer could create works distinct from those in China.

In his 1936 article, Yi Qiao argued that the Singaporean and Malayan literary scenes should abandon the slogan of “Nanyang literature”, and adopt the concept of “Malayan’s Overseas Chinese literature.” Others further advocated theoretical and creative slogans on “neo-realist literature” and “anti-feudal, free and renewed literature of the nation,” including “learning from life’s experiences,” all of which further pushed the boundaries of local literature.

Forming and formulating these theoretical perspectives in the discussion of literary “localisation” suggested that people were no longer satisfied with the broad slogan of “Nanyang’s characteristics”, and demanded clearer geographical boundaries and more precise

characterisation in its definition. This might have been the progenitor of the later-accepted concepts of “Singaporean Chinese Literature” and “Malaysian Chinese Literature.” A name accepted by the community is undoubtedly a prerequisite for developing any literary identity.

The Debate on the “Uniqueness Of Malaysian Chinese Literature” and “Expatriate Literature”

During the post-WWII period, a debate rocked the literary scene. It was more influential and involved more participants than all previous debates. This controversy significantly impacted the understanding of Singaporean Chinese literature and its development.

The post-war period saw two prevalent creative ideologies in the Singaporean Chinese literary community. One strove to depict Chinese themes, painting a deep and representative picture of immigrant and expatriate Chinese; the other endeavoured to depict the realities of local life in Singapore, emphasising the uniqueness of Malayan Chinese literature. The divergence between these two literary ideas had been long-standing. However, the escalation of the conflict between them during this time was not accidental.

Firstly, societal situations had changed. After World War II, there was a growing awareness of democracy and self-determination among all ethnic groups in Malaya, and a rising demand for freedom from

colonial rule. The war gave the Malayan Chinese society a new understanding that the destiny of its community was at stake, and that the Malayan Chinese literary movement should be integrated with the larger national liberation movement.

Secondly, there were changes in the Chinese community's perceptions and feelings toward China. Their views had changed from being "new visitors" with a deep attachment to their homeland to "old visitors" with a developing Malayan identity, akin to a shift in feeling from staying at an "inn" to making a "permanent home." This shift was reflected in literary works, and revealed the rising scepticism towards "expatriate literature," which described life in China's society.

In January 1947, a group of writers met at Singapore's Houjue Public School to discuss the future direction of Malayan Chinese literature, especially focusing on the question: "should Malayan Chinese literature be freed from its link to Chinese literature and be allowed to develop independently, adopting its unique characteristics?" More profoundly, the writers were asking a deeper question: why did they need to create their own literature?

Between March and November that year, newspaper supplements published articles on the "uniqueness of Malayan Chinese literature". Among them, notably, was "The Social Basis of Artistic Creation" by Qiu Feng. The controversy was intensified by the publication of Mahua's article "Malayan Chinese and the Political Struggle" and Zhou Rong's article "Talking about Malayan Chinese Literature" in the Kuala Lumpur-based newspaper *Warrior* in early 1948. Mahua's article suggested that the Chinese participate in the local fight for democracy and resolve to "break their ties with China." Zhou's article took on a sharper and more aggressive tone, referring to some who had migrated southward from

China as "expatriate writers" and "fugitive writers", which, unsurprisingly, provoked resentment among these writers.

It is important to note that at the height of the debate in early 1948, the famous Chinese writers, Guo Moruo and Xia Yan, who were in Hong Kong then, also expressed their views. In "Current Issues on Literature", Guo discussed "the question of 'Malayanisation,' "and argued that there existed two forms of literature: "expatriate literature," which was Chinese literature in Malaya, with an inclination toward mainland China, and "native literature," which had its roots in Malaya and which focused on present-day life. He said, "I am in favour of Malayanisation. That is, I favour Malayan Chinese youths creating native literature. Literature is a reflection on and criticism of life. Thus, Chinese writers in Malaya should take the expression of Malayan life as their principle."

This debate on the "uniqueness of Malayan Chinese literature" and "expatriate literature" had deep historical origins. As mentioned earlier, Malayan and Singaporean Chinese literature were heavily influenced by Chinese literature; this was indisputable. However, on the other hand, a sense of independence and innovation had always existed. Because of this historical and practical background, this debate swept through the entire Singaporean Chinese literary scene, signalling the rise of literary localism.

Conclusion

The scale and impact of these three debates in Singaporean and Malaysian literature are an important part of our literary history. The first

“emerging” debate started because of a “new environment” when early immigrants first arrived on the unfamiliar shores of Nanyang. In contrast, the second “local writers” debate emerged when “new owners” of Malayan literature emerged. The third “uniqueness” debate erupted with a “new search” for identity in the post-war, anti-colonialism and Malayanisation struggle.

With each debate, the focal points became clearer and more centred on identity: “whether and why there is uniqueness in Malayan Chinese literature,” and “why such uniqueness is so crucial to Singapore literature.” The discussions became more in-depth and well-substantiated, as we can see in the many articles published from that period onwards. Significantly, a consensus was eventually reached after these debates: to follow the path of independent development, and to create a distinctive and original form of Chinese literature that is open, tolerant and inclusive.

Of course, it needs to be said that with Singapore and Malaysia’s separation in 1965, the paths taken by Chinese writers of the two countries grew further apart. Both nations diverged in their postcolonial, highly-localised political, social and language development. Singaporean Chinese literature has evolved into a national literature—an urban writing rooted in a modern city-state. Most Chinese literary works in Singapore, such as those in the genre of the well-recognised micro novel and flash fiction, are fast-paced and short, while poetry has become the most written and published genre in post-independent Singapore. At the same time, the number of younger writers writing in English has overwhelmingly surpassed those who write in Chinese, especially after 1987, when all Chinese-medium schools were phased out.

Malaysian Chinese literature, in contrast, has continued to grow, largely due to the large Chinese-

reading population educated by the over 1,300 Chinese-medium schools. Its literature has now become the tour-de-force of Sinophone literature, and the most read and researched Chinese literature outside mainland China and Taiwan. Many of its works embrace an underlying sense of diaspora, and are sometimes set in the tropics or the village. Even as the Singaporean Chinese literary community strives for sustained readership and a new generation of literary icons, the widening gap between the experiences of Singaporean and Malaysian Chinese in terms of identity, language, social, political and living environment, are undeniable. □

About The Author



Associate Professor Tan Chee Lay, PBM, has lived in Singapore, Taiwan and the UK. He received a BA (Chinese and Education, National Taiwan Normal University, under a Public Service Commission overseas scholarship), MA (English Studies, National University of Singapore), MBA (Leicester University) and PhD (Oriental Studies, Cambridge University, under a National Institute of Education (NIE) Postgraduate Scholarship). He was awarded the Young Artist Award by the National Arts Council, the Singapore Youth Award (Culture and the Arts), and the Lee Kong Chian Research Fellowship and George Lyndon Hicks Fellowship at National Library. A former Executive Director (Research & Development) of the Singapore Centre for Chinese Language, he currently helps to oversee the Chinese, Malay and Tamil Divisions in the Asian Languages and Cultures Academic Group, NIE. Besides publishing almost 30 books of academic and creative writing in Chinese and English, he enjoys conducting research on Nanyang literati and artists, and runs a Facebook and YouTube page, *VeryNanyang*.

Bibliography

Bo Yang 柏杨. 1981. *Xinjiapo gongheguo huawen wenxue xuanji* 新加坡共和国华文文学选集 [Anthology of Chinese Literature in the Republic of Singapore]. Taipei: Times Culture Publishing Company.

Fang Xiu 方修. 1986. *Xinma wenxue shilunji* 新马文学史论集 [A Critical History of Malayan Chinese Literature]. Hong Kong: Joint Publishing.

Guo Moruo 郭沫若. 1948. “*Dangqiande wenyi zhuwenti* 当前的文艺诸问题 [Current Issues on Literature].” In *Wenyi shenghuo* 文艺生活 [Literary Life Overseas Edition, No. 1].

Huang Meng Wen 黄孟文, and Xu Nai Xiang 徐迺翔. 2002. *Xinjiapo huawen wenxue shichugao* 新加坡华文文学史初稿 [Singapore Chinese Literature History – First Draft]. Singapore: National University of Singapore Chinese Department, Global Publishing.

Koh Tai Ann, Tan Chee Lay, Hadijah Rahmat, and Arun Mahizhnan. 2018. *Singapore Chronicles: Literature*. Singapore: Straits Times Press and Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore.

Qiu Shizhen 丘士珍. 1934. “*Difang zuojia tan* 地方作家谈 [Talk on Local Writers].” In *Shisheng* 狮声 [The Lion’s Voice], *Nanyang Shangbao* 南洋商报 [Nanyang Siang Pau], March 1, 1934.

Tan, C. L. 陈志锐. 2020. “*Heren yu heshi: xinjiapo huawen wenxuede liangge dazaiwen* 何人与何时：新加坡华文文学的两个大哉问 [On the Who and When of Singapore Chinese Literature].” In *Diversity and Singapore Ethnic Chinese Communities*, edited by Low S. W., 105-116. Singapore: Department of Chinese Studies, National University of Singapore and Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre.

Yang Songnian 杨松年, and Zhou Weijie 周维介. 1988. *Xinjiapo zaoqi huawen baozhang wenyi fukan yanjiu 1927-1930* 新加坡早期华文报章文艺副刊研究 1927-1930 [A Study of Singapore Literary Supplements of Early Newspapers 1927-1930]. Singapore: The Educational Publications Bureau.

Yi Hong 衣虹. 1930. “*Xinxing wenyide yiyi* 新兴文艺的意义 [The Significance of Emerging Literature].” In *Coconut Grove Supplement of Lat Pau*. April 16, 1930.

Appendix: List of original Chinese terms and respective English translations

English translation	Hanyu pinyin	Chinese
Essays/Articles:		
“Current Issues on Literature”	Dangqiande wenyi zhuwenti	当前的文艺诸问题
“Literature in Nanyang”	Nanyang wenyi	南洋文艺
“Malayan Chinese and the Political Struggle”	Malaiya huaqiao yu zhengzhidouzhen	马来亚华侨与政制斗争
“Talk on Local Writers”	Difang zuojia tan	地方作家谈
“Talking about Malayan Chinese Literature”	Tan mahua wenyi	谈马华文艺
“The Social Basis of Artistic Creation”	Yishu chuangaode shehui jichu	艺术创造的社会基础
“Wake Up! Singaporean Artists”	Xingxingba, xingchengde yiren	醒醒吧，星城的艺人
Institution:		
Houjue Public School	Houjue gongxue	后觉公学
Movement:		
Malayan Chinese Literary Independence Movement	Mahua wenyi zili yundong	马华文艺自立运动
Persons:		
Fang Xiu		方修
Guo Moruo		郭沫若
Huang Zhenyi		黄振彝
Mahua		马华
Pan Shou		潘受

Qiu Shizhen		丘士珍
Xia Yan		夏衍
Yi Hong		衣虹
Yi Qiao		一礁
Zeng Aidi		曾艾狄
Zeng Shengti		曾圣提
Zhang Jinyan		张金燕
Zhou Rong		周蓉
Publications:		
Desert Island	Huangdao	《荒岛》
Sin Kuo Min Journal	Xinguominzazhi	《新国民杂志》
Sin Kuo Min Press	Xinguominribao	《新国民日报》
The Lion's Voice	Shisheng	《狮声》
Warrior	Zhanyoubao	《战友报》
Terms:		
“Corpse removal”	Banshi	搬尸
“Nanyang colour”	Nanyang secai	南洋色彩

Preserving Human Culture in an Age of Technological Disruption: Reflections on Knowledge, Education, and the Role of Universities

Professor Joseph Chinyong Liow

Tan Kah Kee Chair Professor of Comparative and International Politics
Dean, College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Around the world, governments and universities have prioritised science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education over the study of the humanities, arts and social sciences (HASS), polarising both academic fields in a bid to meet the needs of the next industrial revolution. In this essay, Joseph Liow compellingly argues that universities need to rethink such binaries to address the cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary nature of knowledge and recognise that the HASS disciplines are essential for the survival of human culture in the digital age.

What do Susan Wojcicki, Jack Ma, Howard Schulz, Phebe Novakovic, and Arundhati Bhattacharya have in common? All five are (or were) running large, multibillion dollar organisations. Susan Wojcicki was CEO of YouTube, Jack Ma founded Alibaba, Howard Schulz ran Starbucks, Phebe Novakovic led General Dynamics, and Arundhati Bhattacharya chaired the State Bank of India. These five accomplished titans of the worlds of technology and commerce share something else in common. All graduated with a degree in the humanities and/or social sciences: Wojcicki in History and Literature, Ma in English, Schulz in Communications, Novakovic in German and Politics, and Bhattacharya in English Literature.

Indeed, there are many more prominent and successful captains of industry who, like them, share similar educational backgrounds in terms of their chosen majors at college. That fact should presumably put to rest any misplaced notion that the skills imparted by an education in the humanities, arts, and social sciences are marginal in today's fast changing world. In fact, given the pace of disruption and change confronting our present world, one would imagine that the need to invest

in understanding their consequences for humanity has grown more urgent.

Yet the larger trends are, unfortunately, moving in the opposite direction. Governments the world over are prioritising STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education and ipso facto de-prioritising the HASS (Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences) disciplines. Many universities have followed suit, slashing HASS research budgets and closing HASS departments, while enrolment numbers have declined.

Many of the reasons for this devaluation of HASS disciplines in universities and the wider economy are not new. Indeed, humanities have arguably been in "crisis mode" since the 18th century, a trend that has been documented in detail by Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon in *Permanent Crisis: The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age*. The fact that this discrimination against HASS degrees often happens as a result of the systematic promotion of other fields only further reinforces the sense of marginalisation. The polarisation of the HASS and STEM fields in the world of academia is arguably more evident today as it unfolds against our present epoch of innovation and disruption. With the rise of artificial intelligence, quantum computing, machine learning, and rapid automation of technical skills, not to mention the pre-eminence of the so-called "entrepreneurial mindset" and the dominance of biosciences, humanist fields find themselves on the backfoot yet again, having to prove their "relevance" in an increasingly digitised and technologically driven world.

Yet this need not be the case, and the narrow narrative of polarisation should not be allowed to overshadow the vast potential for synergy between these two seemingly distinct fields. To be sure, various industries are experiencing disruption

caused by technological innovation on a significant scale. Automation has changed the very nature of manufacturing in fundamental and irreversible ways, while a host of professions from law and medicine to accounting and education will likely rely more heavily on artificial intelligence. Everywhere, indications point to the reallocation of finite resources within the private sector, public sector, and even universities to meet the growing demand for industries deemed to be the drivers of this fourth (or fifth, as it were) industrial revolution. The arts and culture sectors are certainly not insulated from the effects of such transformative change.

Therein lies the irony, for it is precisely in the face of such monumental change that the moorings of human culture, anchored in the disciplines found in the humanities, arts, and social sciences, are urgently needed. Writing on the features and virtues of “modern” humanities, Reitter and Wellmon observe: “In contrast to prior traditions of humanist knowledge... the modern humanities are consistently cast as a particular project to countervail against specific historical forces and problems that threaten the human. The modern humanities address not disordered desires, unruly passions, or the presence of evil but historical changes: Industrialisation, new technologies, natural science, and capitalism.”

The point is that far from irrelevance, the HASS disciplines are crucial today for how they cast new light on old problems—and alternative light on new ones—that bedevil society, including problems associated with the breakneck speed of technological change. Consider, for instance, how the understanding of traditional burial rituals provided by anthropologists played an instrumental role in curbing the spread of the Ebola virus in West Africa. Much in the same vein, the environmental crisis confronting the world today cannot be addressed solely through the introduction of technologies as

important as that is. It is imperative that scientific and engineering advancements be accompanied by contributions from the fields of psychology and sociology because solutions ultimately involve behavioural and societal choices, not to mention the literary arts that create new narratives to encapsulate the struggle of humanity to cope with environmental degradation. It is not technology but the proper understanding of its utility and limits that makes it useful and us, human.

The Role of the University

Universities have always been integral to the progress of civilisations, societies, and nations. From Nalanda University whose influence stretched from Northeast India to Southeast Asia and China, to the Lyceum which laid the foundation for Western culture; from the House of Wisdom in Baghdad, from which cultural and scientific knowledge emanated in the ancient world, to Humboldt University which stood at the forefront of the scientific revolution, universities have shared two things in common. First, they were the progenitors and guardians of civil debate which shaped the societies in which they were embedded. Second, they were the producers and repositories of scientia, or knowledge, which in its classical definition transcends the boundaries of what we know today as disciplines.

These functions of universities as institutes of higher learning remain profoundly relevant for society today, not only as a pathway to a good career but more importantly, to equip students to live meaningful and fulfilling lives as citizens prepared to make constructive contributions to society. So, in keeping with its fundamental nature and purpose, what can universities do to not only reflect the

essentially cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary nature of knowledge, but to ensure that this is transmitted to students?

First, in the face of transformative change and grand challenges that the present age of technology poses, universities must teach students to ask the right questions. How might technology drive cultural change, or is its role and function limited and to be determined by its users? Are we so dependent on technology that we have become slaves to it? What is the relationship between technology and the progress—or regress—of our society? For some, the development of technology is a measure of human progress, driving cultures towards a better (if not perfect) life. For others, technology is not without drawbacks or concerns that must be considered seriously. Jeff Hinton, formerly of Google and one of the foremost minds in the development of artificial intelligence, recently warned in an interview: “I don’t think they should scale this up more until they have understood whether they can control it... It is hard to see how you can prevent the bad actors from using it for bad things.” The fact of the matter is that the relationship between technology and culture and the arts is not predetermined. Rather, we need to cultivate an understanding of technology and the digital world that problematises simplistic assumptions about technological determinism, technological dependence, and technological progress.

Second, universities must endeavour to instil values and mindsets that are interdisciplinary in nature. Technological innovation does not take place in isolation and students should certainly not be taught to think as such. Students of data science or electrical engineering need to be aware about how geopolitics is shaping their industries today. Mechanical engineers can benefit from developing a creative eye for design aesthetics. Medical students would be well advised to develop cultural competencies

to allow them to communicate better as societies become more diverse because of globalisation. By way of these and many other examples, it should be clear that the role of universities must be to provide the full measure of educational experiences which will give students an advantage as they enter their respective sectors after graduation.

Third, to pursue the above, universities must constantly pursue curriculum innovation and integration. Indeed, it is easy to preach the need for interdisciplinarity and cross-disciplinarity in higher education. In fact, this has become something of a tiresome refrain. Walking the talk, on the other hand, is a different proposition altogether. To that end, some self-critical reflection on the part of educators is necessary. Do we believe in our own message of the importance of interdisciplinary education? Are we prepared to take a less dogmatic, less conservative approach to curriculum planning and execution? Can we break out of our siloes and comfort zones ourselves to embrace the brave new world we talk so passionately about?

Apropos my earlier point, there is an urgent need to break the impasse of binary distinctions between the STEM and HASS disciplines, for there is much synergy between these two domains. Let me suggest two examples. First, just as it is with industry, technology will be a vital component of cultural education. For instance, digital technology can allow artists, designers, and creative content producers to position themselves in the marketplace in a way that creates opportunities to gauge themselves and their works, not to mention garner visibility both nationally and internationally. Universities can help artists navigate the technological challenges and changing complexities associated with the digital world in ways that benefit both the public and the artist. It is easy to envisage too, how technology could be a useful ally in building a

robust infrastructure to support the arts and culture sectors in terms of visibility, access, and operating in a digitally networked world populated by an amorphous audience.

ChatGPT is another case in point. The emergence of generative AI threatens to fundamentally change how we think, write, and communicate. This has occasioned not a small measure of anxiety especially among educators, leading some to call for a return to 20th century ways of pen-and-paper assessment. That is probably not the right response. Indeed, the arid reality is that the landscape of knowledge acquisition is changing, and higher education must change with it if we are to fulfil our role and purpose of preparing students to be—and to remain—competitive in the marketplace and constructive citizens of society. To do so, we must equip them to be able to engage AI productively and in ways that can complement and enhance human creativity. Like other technological and digital platforms, ChatGPT must be part of the pedagogical toolbox. As John Villasenor explains: “I am helping my students to prepare for a future in which AI is simply another technology tool as opposed to a novelty. I am also telling them that they are solely and fully responsible for the writing they turn in bearing their name. If it’s factually inaccurate, that’s on them. If it’s badly organized, that’s on them. If it’s stylistically or logically inconsistent, that’s on them. If it’s partially plagiarized, that means that they have committed plagiarism. In short, I’m encouraging my students to become responsible, aware users of the AI technologies that will play a profoundly important role over the course of their careers.”

Conclusion

To clarify, this essay is not advocating a reduction of attention to STEM. Many of the areas of STEM fields are at the forefront of human innovation and invention, and they will play an indispensable role in our efforts to deal with tomorrow’s challenges today. But in shifting our focus unquestionably to STEM at the expense of the HASS fields, as we see many governments and institutes of higher education doing, we risk throwing the proverbial baby out with the bath water, and in so doing, rendering a great disservice to society in the long term. The sooner this is understood, the better humanity’s prospects of surviving and thriving in the digital age. Indeed, we would all do well to heed the words of German philosopher Immanuel Kant who wrote: “the human being is destined by his reason to be in a society with other human beings and to cultivate himself, to civilize himself, and to moralize himself by means of the arts and sciences.” □

About The Author



Professor Joseph Liow is Dean of College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, where he is also Tan Kah Kee Chair in Comparative and International Politics, and Professor and former Dean at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies. He held the inaugural Lee Kuan Yew Chair in Southeast Asia Studies at the Brookings Institution, where he was also a Senior Fellow in the Foreign Policy Program. Liow's research interests encompass Muslim politics and social movements in Southeast Asia, and the geopolitics and geoeconomics of the Asia-Pacific region. Liow is the author, co-author, or editor of 17 books, has testified to the United States Congress and has extensive teaching and consultancy experience. He sits on several editorial boards and governing boards of think tanks, and on the Social Science Research Council of Singapore. Liow is also one of Singapore's representatives on the ASEAN Regional Forum's Experts and Eminent Persons Group and the Trilateral Commission.

Bibliography

Costa, Rosário Couto. 2019. "The place of humanities in today's knowledge society." *Palgrave Communications*, Vol.5, No.38

Louden, Robert B. 2000. *Kant's Impure Ethics: From Rational Beings to Human Beings*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Mayor, Adrienne. 2018. *Gods and Robots: Myths, Machines, and Ancient Dreams of Technology*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Murgia, Madhumita. 2023. "AI Pioneer Geoffrey Hinton Warns about Growing Risks as he Quits Google." *Financial Times*, May 2, 2023.

Reitter, Paul, and Chad Wellmon. 2021. *Permanent Crisis: The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Villasenor, John. 2023. "How ChatGPT Can Improve Education, Not Threaten It." *Scientific American*, February 10, 2023.

