

Chapter 2

anchors and Bridges: The Work of the Singapore National Arts Council in Cultural Diversity



Kenneth Kwok

Abstract The arts have always played a vital role in nation-building in Singapore, a city state that has drawn immigrants from across many countries and cultures over the decades. In a 1991 interview, former Minister of Culture, S Rajaratnam spoke about how ‘Singapore needs a harmonious, stable and evolving cultural environment ... [where] the culture of the various communities can co-exist, interact with one another and eventually integrate with one another, thereby slowly and naturally evolving a distinctive national culture’.

The results of the 2017 Population Survey on the Arts conducted by the National Arts Council also show public support, with:

- a. 89% of Singapore residents agreeing that the arts give us a better understanding of people of different backgrounds and cultures;
- b. 78% agreeing that the arts give us a greater sense of belonging to Singapore;
- c. 78% agreeing that the arts say who we are as a society and country;
- d. 78% agreeing that the arts help draw Singaporeans closer as a community.

Cultural policies in Singapore have approached this in two ways. The first is the continued emphasis on not simply the preservation but also the celebration of traditional art forms. This reinforces the identity of a multicultural Singapore. In 2011, the council launched a Traditional Arts Plan to help provide more opportunities for Singaporeans to ‘explore their roots and achieve a deeper connection with their communities’. This is important because our ‘values and belief systems are often embedded in these art forms and passed down through generations’. This chapter will describe some of the council’s initiatives and the work of traditional arts groups, but also investigate the challenges and opportunities faced, for example, in defining traditional arts as the country’s cultural profile evolves beyond the historical Chinese–Malay–Indian–Others framework.

The second approach is to explore how the arts can be a platform to create more cross-cultural experiences so that people of different ethnicities learn about one

K. Kwok (✉)
National Arts Council, Singapore, Singapore
e-mail: kenneth_kwok@nac.gov.sg

another's customs and beliefs. The chapter will therefore also present how the council encourages intercultural collaborations as well as facilitate inclusive community arts and arts education projects like the Dance Talent Development Programme for students and Arts in Your Neighbourhood to foster social mixing and shared experiences. I will also discuss how the arts, especially Applied Theatre, have strengthened nation-building efforts by engaging Singaporeans in the critical discourse around national issues. Such programmes led by socially conscious arts groups expand the narrative beyond one's ethnic identity towards a larger one as a Singaporean.

The very word 'culture' is itself extremely complex, and much more so when one layers on the idea of 'diversity', and the possibilities that emerge when one further speaks about multiculturalism or interculturalism. It is within this space, however, that the arts can play a very powerful role in reflecting, expressing and therefore, shaping culture, in the case of this chapter, with specific regard to race and ethnicity.

The arts have always been a vital component of nation-building efforts in Singapore, especially as Singapore has drawn immigrants from across many countries and cultures over the years. Our nation's leaders recognised early on the capacity of the arts to bring diverse communities together by providing opportunities for shared experiences, the fostering of national pride and the creation of narratives and symbols that could articulate a common identity, experience and aspiration. This was especially, important for Singapore in our early years of independence, and a Ministry of Culture was set up in 1959 under Minister S Rajaratnam to embark on 'a conscious and deliberate effort to help shape a Malayan culture' (Wong, 2001, quoting Rajaratnam, p. 5) in the form of public exhibitions in community centres, and performances at the Singapore Conference Hall. One of the ministry's flagship programmes was the *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* or *People's Variety Show*. This was an outdoor event with broad-based appeal, featuring Chinese, Indian and Malay performers. The first such showcase was launched in 1959 at the Singapore Botanic Gardens, where then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew expressed the hope that, 'in the course of time, out of the interaction of our rich and varied cultures, we will be able to breed a new strain of culture ... Here, under open skies, Malays, Chinese, Indians will I hope, discover the materials for a national art and national culture' (Wong, 2001, p. 7).

Even in the 1990s, Rajaratnam spoke about how 'Singapore needs a harmonious, stable and evolving cultural environment ... [where] the culture of the various communities can co-exist, interact with one another and eventually integrate with one another, thereby slowly and naturally evolving a distinctive national culture' (Wong, 2001, p. 4).

The capacity of the arts to draw people together was most evident when the National Theatre of Singapore was built in the early 1960s, and the public was encouraged to contribute to its funding. Despite early cynicism, 40% of the total budget eventually required, came from public contributions, with the Brick Sale in 1961 where souvenir bricks were sold for \$1 each, still being talked about today.

Fifty years on, the results of the 2017 Population Survey on the Arts¹ conducted by the National Arts Council show enduring public support for the importance of the arts in city life, with:

- a. 89% of Singapore residents agreeing that the arts give us a better understanding of people of different backgrounds and cultures;
- b. 78% agreeing that the arts give us a greater sense of belonging to Singapore;
- c. 78% agreeing that the arts say who we are as a society and country;
- d. 78% agreeing that the arts help draw Singaporeans closer as a community.

Cultural policies and programmes in Singapore have continued to recognise the critical role played by the arts in our multiracial society. Continued emphasis is placed not only on the preservation, but also the celebration of traditional art forms, specifically those of Chinese, Malay, and Indian and South Asian heritage as the majority cultures in Singapore. Reinforcing Singapore's identity as a multicultural society is important so that all Singaporeans can see that there is a place for us here, that this is our home. Having active, vibrant and admired artists and arts groups within each of our main cultural groups means that we see our traditions and values being respected, our cultural icons and mythologies revered. This translates into a stronger sense of belonging.

National Arts Council's Traditional Arts Plan

"The arts help [us] realise [our] identity," says Cultural Medallion recipient Santha Bhaskar, Artistic Director of Bhaskar's Arts Academy, in a quote featured on the National Arts Council's Arts Education website. "It is important to know the great wealth of values passed on from generation to generation."

In 2010, the council launched a Traditional Arts Plan to help provide more opportunities for Singaporeans to 'explore their roots and achieve a deeper connection with their communities' through the arts, with the over 100 traditional arts groups as well as 1,400 arts activities a year (about 19% of the total arts performances a year) '[serving] as the basis for our national identity and cultural continuity'.² A total of \$23 million (Singapore) was set aside over 5 years to support the various initiatives under the plan. A dedicated Traditional Arts Seed Grant, for example was introduced in 2011 to help traditional arts groups strengthen their organisational capabilities. Today, many of these groups such as Apsaras Arts Ltd. and Siong Leng Musical Association are now part of the council's Major Company³ scheme, alongside their counterparts in the contemporary art forms, playing a crucial leadership role in our

¹National Arts Council's Research website.

²National Arts Council's Singapore Arts Scene: Traditional Arts website.

³The council provides organisational funding to identified major companies for a commitment of 3 years, as opposed to funding on an individual project basis. A major company must produce work of high quality, contribute significantly to the arts scene in Singapore and have strong administrative and organisational structures. The major companies referenced in this chapter include TheatreWorks,

local arts scene. Era Dance Theatre Ltd., for example, organises the annual *Muara* Malay dance festival at the Esplanade⁴ to bring the Malay dance community together. The council's Presentation and Promotion Grant (now Presentation and Participation Grant) was also customised for traditional arts groups so that they could enjoy higher funding support of up to 50% of the costs of staging and producing works, while other arts forms were capped at 30%.⁵

The plan also prioritises advocacy and audience development as some members of the public may have preconceived ideas about the traditional arts. It is therefore important to create space for the traditional arts to be (re-)introduced to the public, and let the quality of the work convince and convert audiences. Over the years, the council has worked with various partners to provide traditional arts groups with high-profile platforms to reach new audiences. In 2016, The Mid-Autumn Festival at Gardens by the Bay,⁶ for example featured 416 performers, and enjoyed a crowd of 61,000. Credit must also be given to our national arts institutions. The Esplanade, for example runs culturally specific arts festivals throughout the year—namely, Huayi, Kalaa Utsavam and Pesta Raya—which are timed with respective ethnic celebrations, and offer commissions and showcase opportunities to traditional arts groups. These artists are often invited to perform at the Esplanade's broader art form-specific festivals as well: Chowk Productions, for example, has performed at both Kalaa Utsavam, the venue's festival of Indian arts, as well its da:ns festival which is not culturally specific.

Like in many countries, however, the population demographic continues to evolve in Singapore. How do we continue to define what constitutes traditional arts in Singapore as we increasingly shift beyond our historical Chinese–Malay–Indian–Others (CMIO) framework?⁷ According to the Department of Statistics (Singapore) website, there is an increasing trend of immigration and interethnic marriages, with roughly 30% of people living in Singapore now neither Singapore citizens nor Permanent Residents. Also, 20% of all marriages now involve people of different races (Choo, 2017). There is also growing recognition of internal diversity within cultural groups, for example that the Indian immigrants to Singapore are drawn from across the sub-continent. A similar situation applies to the immigrants from China. Tensions around newly naturalised Singaporeans, as well as differences in languages and social conventions, also present new challenges. They can, however, also be opportunities. What is the evolving role of the arts in terms of helping to not only mitigate such tensions, but actually draw on these differences to foster stronger, more cohesive communities?

Intercultural Theatre Institute, The Necessary Stage, Checkpoint Theatre, Wild Rice and Drama Box.

⁴The Esplanade is the national performing arts centre in Singapore.

⁵The grant cap has since been revised for all applicants from 30 to 50%.

⁶Gardens by the Bay is one of the landmark tourist attractions in Singapore.

⁷CMIO is a commonly used acronym in Singapore that even spawned a fusion folk dance back in the 1980s promoted by the People's Association—a government statutory board that oversees grassroots organisations.

Building Bridges

“When I knew that you were Chinese, I was shocked because in my school, most of our Chinese dancers won’t feel like dancing Malay Dance—because they say it’s not my culture, it’s not my passion,” says Nur Nathalia Bte Abdullah, a Secondary 3 Malay student in MOE-NAC Dance Talent Development Programme 2015, to a fellow participant, student Nicholas Ho, who is Chinese. “But when I see you joining us in Malay Dance [sessions], I feel like we can dance.”

This is why, even as we deepen support for the individual traditional art forms, we must also continue to create more points of intersection, and broaden opportunities for Singaporeans to access and understand different cultures. The council’s second approach is, thus, to actively explore how the arts can provide more cross-cultural experiences. Knowledge is understanding: we believe that providing people of different ethnicities with the platforms to learn about one another’s customs and beliefs helps to break down barriers. Similar to the *Aneka Ragam Ra’ayat*, free or low-cost community-oriented arts festivals, therefore, continue to be run by the council. These are designed to be accessible, and appeal to a wide range of audiences. Programming traditional artists and groups at events such as the council’s Arts in Your Neighbourhood series in town centres, and the Silver Arts festival for senior citizens around Singapore, means these artists and groups have the opportunity to introduce their works not only to the usual audience supporting their performances, but also a more culturally mixed crowd. Audiences are also exposed to innovative works by artists trained in both the traditional and contemporary arts, such as Maya Dance Theatre, P7:ISMA and SA the Collective, who challenge outdated notions of what artists rooted in cultural traditions are capable of. In addition, such events, being open to all, are attended by new Singapore citizens as well as migrant and transient workers living in Singapore.

Cultivating the young is, of course, key, and so strong school programming is crucial. From humble beginnings in 1993, the council’s Arts Education Programme (NAC-AEP) database now lists over 1000 arts enrichment programmes, which schools can purchase at subsidised rates, with funding from the Tote Board Arts Grant. Since 2001, the council has also run an Artist-in-School Scheme (AISS), where match-making is done between artists and schools which want to cultivate a long-term partnership. The traditional arts feature significantly in both these flagship programmes, with Ding Yi Music Company, NADI Singapura, Sri Warisan Som Said Performing Arts Ltd., the Temple of Fine Arts and the Teng Ensemble being just some of the traditional groups available to schools for NAC-AEP workshops, assembly shows and excursions. The examples of AISS projects include Sarkasi Said and Ika Zahari’s batik programme at Orchid Park Secondary School, and the Chinese Dance programme by Frontier Danceland at Methodist Girls’ School.

Such initiatives expand the arts offering in schools beyond what the schools’ own arts teachers can provide. More recently, the council has also started a series of taster programmes specifically for preschools and kindergartens to introduce traditional art forms in a fun and accessible way to children from the Nursery 2 to Kindergarten 2 levels (4–6-year olds). Specially designed storytelling, music and dance

performances, as well as interactive workshops by ACT 3 International, Bhaskar's Arts Academy, Era Dance Theatre Ltd. and Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre, bring Indian, Malay and Chinese legends like Rama, Hero of Ramayana; Badang, The Strong Man; and Chang Er, Goddess of the Moon, to vivid life.

Another school programme worth highlighting is the Dance Talent Development Programme, a partnership between the council, the Ministry of Education and LASALLE College of the Arts, which was launched in 2013. About 150–170 Secondary 2 and 3 students who are passionate about dance, come together each year from around 50–70 secondary schools for a series of workshops by 6 dance companies covering 6 dance forms, including Indian Dance, Malay Dance and Chinese Dance. It is an opportunity for these 14- and 15-year olds to make like-minded friends from different schools, and bond over a common love for the arts. More importantly, it means students trained in Malay dance in their own school co-curricular activity, for example are now exposed to Chinese Dance and Indian Dance as well, and learning them from the leading Singapore professionals of that form. The council believes it is very important for children of all races to be introduced to—and inspired by—artists of different cultures and traditions, and to cultivate an appreciation of their creative talents.

Of course, the works themselves can also cross cultural boundaries, with the council supporting many productions which bring artists of different ethnic backgrounds and practices together to create strikingly new and original presentations. One example is *Crossing Cultures* by the Singapore Chinese Orchestra, which featured musicians of Indian (tabla performer Jatinder Singh Bedi), Malay (vocalist Taufik Batisah) and Eurasian (jazz pianist Jeremy Monteiro) backgrounds under the baton of conductor Tsung Yeh. The concert also included wayang kulit by Eyo Hock Seng and Kumpulan Sri Campuran, as well as an original composition by British expatriate and Singapore Permanent Resident Eric Watson. TheatreWorks is another company with a long tradition in intercultural works, drawing on forms and practices from across Asia. Also worth highlighting is the Intercultural Theatre Institute, a theatre school based in Singapore, which was founded by T. Sasitharan and the late Kuo Pao Kun, and emphasises intercultural learning in their training approach.

With the increased ease of subtitling, not only is access widened for non-native speakers to watch plays performed in a different language, but more theatre groups are creating works that feature multiracial casts speaking in multiple languages as part of the performance. The Necessary Stage's *Model Citizens*, for example featured three women as lead characters: an Indonesian domestic helper and her Peranakan employer, both of whom only speak English and Malay, and an immigrant from China who only speaks Mandarin. Another recent triumph was Wild Rice's ambitious *Hotel* which told the story of Singapore's history through the decades, and through characters speaking in English, Malay, Hokkien, Cantonese, Mandarin, Tamil, Urdu, Tagalog and Japanese.

Hotel which premiered at the 2015 Singapore International Festival of the Arts commissioned by the council, is also an example of how the arts can invite conversations around national identity, and what it means to be Singaporean, forging deeper understanding through reflection, dialogue and critical discourse. These works speak

powerfully to the wider Singapore public because they are contextualised within, and also address, very Singaporean experiences and concerns. Another example is Checkpoint Theatre's *Normal* which depicted the realities of student life in our local education system. Under its *Both Sides, Now* banner, Drama Box presents interactive community performances and visual art exhibitions that deal with the topic of living with dying, and brings these to open-air public squares. People from different backgrounds converge, and engage one another on issues that matter to them. The company's *Trick or Threat*, a forum theatre piece, dealt specifically with the issue of what it means to be a true 'community' when there is a terrorist scare on the Singapore underground transport system. Do you stay united as a people, or do you allow yourself to fall apart because of racial stereotypes and prejudices? Such programmes by socially conscious arts groups expand the national conversation beyond one's ethnic identity towards a larger one as a Singaporean.

Looking Ahead

The council remains committed to the Traditional Arts Plan, with \$5M now set aside annually from when the first iteration of the plan concluded in 2015. One vital component is the establishment of a traditional arts digital repository housed within the National Library Board, where source materials will be digitised and compiled for ease of sharing with the wider public, and to ensure oral traditions and practices passed down from one generation to another through apprenticeship are not lost. Funding is provided by the council for up to \$20,000 per group for this documentation effort. Another highlight is the setting up of a traditional arts centre with a multipurpose hall, shared studio and artist-in-residency spaces, to be launched in the first-half of 2019. Situated at the former Stamford Arts Centre, and located opposite the Sri Krishnan and Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho temples, the centre is expected to house around eight–ten tenants. These will be either traditional arts groups or artists keen to work with such groups, as the council is mindful of the need to foster partnerships, including those in the wider culturally rich Bras Basah precinct where the centre is located. 'Our vision is for traditional groups that also think about contemporisation... collaborations that may be interdisciplinary or looking at contemporary versus traditional forms', explains Elaine Ng, Senior Director, Performing Arts at the council (Martin, 2017).

The Literary Arts department of the council will also continue to increase its emphasis on supporting translation work in Singapore to bring stories from different cultures and languages to a wider pool of readers. Alongside the existing Publishing and Translation grant and new capability development opportunities for translators who aspire to upgrade their skills, literary translation has also been articulated as one of the priority areas for the council's Creation Grant, as well as its undergraduate and postgraduate scholarship schemes.

Questions remain as Singapore continues on its journey. How explicit should we be when creating opportunities for the arts to address cultural differences? We have

noted above some examples of programmes where the emphasis is on the distinctive qualities of different cultural art forms, and others where we simply want to allow the space for a more organic, shared experience to emerge. Second, if we talk about the arts as helping us to articulate a national identity, then we perhaps need to be clearer about what is uniquely Singaporean art. Is it a specific cultural identity, our own unique mix of cultures, or anything that is rooted in the Singapore experience, made by artists holding a pink Singapore identity card? What about immigrants who have lived in Singapore for many years who have been nurtured and inspired by Singapore? Finally, when we talk about being a truly inclusive society, we need to consider the role the arts can play to bring all of us together, not only in terms of race and cultural identity, but also people of different abilities and disabilities, economic and educational backgrounds and points of view.

References

- Choo, F. (2017, July 19). *One in five marriages here is inter-ethnic*. Retrieved May 7, 2018, from <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/one-in-five-marriages-here-is-inter-ethnic>.
- Department of Statistics Singapore. (2018, May 9). *Population and population structure*. Retrieved May 7, 2018, from <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/find-data/search-by-theme/population/population-and-population-structure/latest-data>.
- Martin, M. (2017, April 25). *Traditional arts to find a new home at redeveloped Stamford Arts Centre by 2018*. Retrieved May 7, 2018, from <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/traditional-arts-to-find-new-home-at-redeveloped-stamford-arts-8789738>.
- National Arts Council. (2017, September 21). *National arts council arts education*. Retrieved May 7, 2018, from <https://aep.nac.gov.sg/nacaep/nacaep.html>.
- National Arts Council. (2018, June 4). *Singapore arts scene: Traditional arts*. Retrieved May 7, 2018, from <https://www.nac.gov.sg/singaporeartsscene/traditionalarts.html>.
- National Arts Council Arts Education. (2015, September 15). *MOE-NAC dance talent development programme 2015* [Video File]. Retrieved May 7, 2018, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4QIRcR1DZUo>.
- Wong, M. (2001). *A city of culture: Planning for the arts*. Singapore: Centre for Liveable Cities.