SINGAPORE AS A RENAISSANCE CITY: POLICY PATHWAYS

(PART II)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA) commissioned the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) to study the concept of a Renaissance City as a metaphor for Singapore’s future development as a culturally vibrant city. This concept paper begins by examining some key developments of the European Renaissance and the lessons they hold for Singapore. While the historic Renaissance cities were not liberal democracies in themselves, it is clear that those who contributed to and participated in the cultural awakening that the Renaissance brought about were curious and liberal spirits living in an intellectually open environment. But they were the elite of the society. In a modern and tiny city-state like Singapore, culture can neither be confined to the elite nor could it flourish in a conformist and controlled environment. If Singapore were to truly transform itself into a future Renaissance City, it needs to shed old assumptions and practices that treated culture as secondary to and separable from the economy. It needs to replace them with a comprehensive and coherent cultural policy in much the same way as it approached economic development. It also has to recognise that culture and economy are interconnected. Given that Singapore itself has chosen an open economic system and an open communication system as the path to the future, and given the current world trends, chances are that state dominance will wane, civil society will rise and information technologies will be liberating. Based on these projections, two positive cultural development scenarios are probable: i) a syncretic model in which the end-state will be a unique Singapore culture, developed from the syncretic selection of what is best from many different cultures; ii) a multicultural model in which the existing indigenous cultures are strengthened and promoted to exist separately but in symbiotic relationship with each other. Yet other scenarios are also plausible but they tend to negate the Singapore spirit. In either of the positive scenarios, the centrality and totality of culture in society is an imperative. Cultural policy in such an environment should have certain unalterable core values, should be enabling in spirit and should look to civil society as a partner in its implementation. The two different scenarios demand specific policy frameworks which must address key factors such as language, education, media, institutional development and state support.
CHAPTER ONE

POLICY FRAMEWORK

Introduction

We would like to begin the second part of the report by clarifying certain questions that arose out of the discussions of the first part, which was submitted to the Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA) in July this year. We will then proceed to map out certain pathways to policymaking in the area of cultural development in Singapore by addressing key issues in three broad sectors that impact on culture. Lastly, we will conclude with some specific policy options for the government’s consideration.

Implications of Scenario Planning

In the first part of this report, several possible cultural development scenarios were discussed and the Syncretic scenario and the (Strong) Multiculturalism scenario were suggested as the most viable in Singapore. However, it should be noted that these two scenarios are not discreet and mutually exclusive. Nor is it suggested that only these two scenarios will exist in the future. In all probability, there will be a considerable mix of various scenarios operating at different levels and segments of the society, constantly interacting with and impacting on each other. People too will be experiencing and assuming a multiplicity of cultural identities and affiliations in dynamic interaction with each other, as individuals and groups. Thus, it would be inappropriate to think of the scenarios as iron-clad templates for policymaking. The scenario planning approach helps the process of anticipating and identifying likely major trends and to throw into sharper relief the different pathways policymakers could take in pursuance of the different trends and goals.

Another point that needs clarification here is that while the two scenarios mentioned above posit two very different outcomes, it is possible for them to co-exist with each other. It is also possible that one scenario could eventually lead to the other in an evolutionary way because people do change their way of life after actual experience of an idealised scenario. One notable example is American society today. The “melting pot” model which many Americans pursued with great conviction and vigour eventually succumbed to other realities. For instance, the African-American community now seems to be focused on “equal but separate cultures” and a potpourri of white-Americans have decided that they too would become, after all, hyphenated Americans: Italian-Americans, German-Americans, Greek-Americans, etc. Thus, it should be remembered that even with scenario planning, cultural policymaking will always be a dynamic process responding to the shifts and turns of the society it is purporting to serve.

In exploring and presenting policy options for the government’s consideration, we have not confined ourselves to the two-model format. In fact, we approach many of the key factors in a comprehensive manner because these comments would apply to both scenarios and are fundamental to the idea of cultural development and cultural vibrancy. It is only towards the end that we have suggested differentiated policy options, where we could clearly identify
separate trajectories of development based on the different models.

**Sectoral Synergies**

Although the primary aim of this report is to suggest policy pathways that the state could pursue, and the primary audience is, therefore, the government, we have deliberately included two other sectors into our purview without which no cultural vision or strategy could be engaged effectively (as mentioned in Part I). We refer to (i) civil society, in particular the arts community, and (ii) the private sector or the market. All three sectors – the state, civil society and the market – exert considerable influence over cultural development in a country and the more synergy we can achieve among them the more effective their contributions. Thus, we have organised our thoughts and comments on cultural development under three headings – the role of the state, the role of the arts community and the role of the market – before we finally spell out specific policy options.

Those who read the two parts of the report together may find some repetition in the organisation of the report. But, it should be borne in mind that when the first part was submitted, there was no certainty that we would proceed to the second. Thus, some preliminary policy ideas were already incorporated into the first part. Furthermore, some arguments found in the first part are revisited here to provide a coherence and completeness for this part of the report.

**Consultation**

In preparing the second part of the report, we consulted a number of people as we did in preparing the first. These respondents include a variety of arts practitioners, administrators and academics, whose names are listed in the Appendix.
CHAPTER TWO

ROLE OF THE STATE

Strong State, Weak Civil Society

Singapore has long been recognised as a society in which the state has played a dominant role in many aspects of public life. Indeed, many government leaders and commentators have attributed the economic success, political stability and social cohesion of Singapore to “strong government.” It is also recognised that civil society in Singapore is rather weak at present, leading to a high dependency on the state for a multitude of public enterprises and initiatives. However, it is becoming increasingly evident that a dominant state and a weak civil society will not be a conducive or even sustainable equation for the well-being of Singapore of the future. In fact, the government has already launched several initiatives to engage civil society and enlarge the space for its active participation. The Town Councils and the Community Development Councils are but two recent examples of such initiatives. However, there are no clear indications as to how far or at what pace this process will proceed.

Ever since the setting up of the Ministry of Culture in 1959 by the People’s Action Party government, when Singapore attained self-governance, there has been a continuous and concerted involvement by the state in most major aspects of cultural life in Singapore. In fact, by making “multiracialism” or “multiculturalism” as it is occasionally referred to as a cornerstone of its governing philosophy from the very start, the government has virtually defined the ambit of the cultural sphere in Singapore and delineated the precise contours of its boundaries. Interpretations and engagements of culture and cultural activities beyond these boundaries have either lacked official recognition and support or ran the risk of government opprobrium and sanction.

There is, however, a strong body of opinion that suggests the state cannot define culture, much less “make” culture. As with the classic concept of economic capitalism, in which the state has no business to be in business, there is a school of thought that contends that the state should stay out of the cultural sphere – other than to maintain law and order as it does in other spheres.

On the other hand, there are those who subscribe to the middle-of-the-road view that the state should be involved only to the extent of providing infrastructure support, funding, and government-to-government arrangements in terms of foreign relations in the cultural sphere. There are yet others who do not frown upon the heavy involvement of the state in cultural matters because they see the hand of the state as steadying as well as supportive. As can be expected, there is a spectrum of views.

It should be noted here that a majority of our respondents (who were mostly arts practitioners and academic analysts) hold the view that the state should play a supportive role and not a dominant one. However, almost all of them agree that the government should provide
substantial financial support for cultural development because it is a public good.

**Tripartite Enterprise**

Having considered the variety of views on government’s involvement in the cultural sphere, we have come to the following view: cultural development should be conceived as a tripartite enterprise in which all three sectors – the state, the arts community and the market – are engaged as joint stakeholders with attendant powers and responsibilities. There are several reasons for arriving at this position. Given the historic role of the state in cultural development in Singapore and given the current trajectory of political development in the foreseeable future, we think it is unrealistic to expect the state to retreat completely or even rapidly from its current position. Nor do we think it is necessary for the complete withdrawal of the state. We also believe that (as discussed in the next chapter) the arts community, is not yet in a position to nurture and sustain the cultural sphere on its own, with minimal government involvement or support. But it is certainly capable of attaining the requisite levels of competence and capacity to manage its own province in cultural development, given time and opportunity. We also believe that the market should be a determinant of certain aspects of cultural development and maintenance, for without such discipline, public resources may not be optimally allocated. But, we must add and stress that certain other aspects should not be left to the mercies of market forces, because culture is not just a commodity.

Such shared responsibility will not merely loosen up unwieldy and unnecessary bureaucratic control but, much more importantly, it will release an enormous reservoir of ground energies that remain dormant within the community and the market. Besides, the very nature of cultural development and cultural vibrancy demand a multiplicity of creative and variegated approaches that no state apparatus could provide. The state indeed cannot “make” culture. This is perhaps the most compelling argument for a diminished role of the state.

Thus, given the current situation where the state is dominant, we propose a gradual but accelerated devolution of responsibility from the state to the community and the market for matters that are best left to those sectors, retaining only those that the government could manage best. In the transition period, the state should commit itself to enabling and empowering the community and the market to assume such responsibility. The state should, however, retain its responsibility for the macro-level policymaking that affects the overall well-being of the society, and for the management of conflicts that might arise from competing interests, through its law and order provisions.

**Culture as Public Good**

In addition, the state should also institutionalise the provision of cultural goods as a public good to be provided from taxation. The notion held by some analysts that civil society and the market by themselves could develop and sustain culture is, in our view, misplaced – in much the same way that we do not believe education could be left entirely to the care of those two sectors. Culture is as much a public good as education is. The state-provided cultural goods include physical infrastructure, educational and training facilities, and direct funding of cultural production. Indeed, the government has long functioned along these lines by, for example, building and maintaining theatre spaces and museums, providing arts education in selected schools, allocating budgets for the Singapore Festival of Arts and giving grants for many performing groups in Singapore.
Finally, it is useful to reiterate that of the many public domains in which the state may choose to intervene and even lead, such as provision of social goods, running of government-linked companies, and cultural development, it is in the last domain in which it is least likely to succeed by its control and dominance. This is because the core of cultural development, which is an intricate mix of creativity, freedom and individualism, cannot be ordained by state authority or efficiency. Thus, state intervention in culture is perhaps best confined to an enabling and empowering role rather than a commanding and controlling role.

**State Censorship, Self-Regulation**

The foregoing discussion leads us next to a specific aspect of state involvement and control in the cultural sphere – censorship. At present, the state is the final – and, sometimes, the first – arbiter of what is right or wrong, and good or bad, in cultural production. In a plural but young society, no one should underestimate the havoc unfettered freedom could wreak upon it. Or argue against all forms of government control. However, there is mounting and compelling evidence against the efficacy of the state as the ultimate censor. The advent of new information technologies is rendering unilateral state controls increasingly impotent. It is the astute recognition of such a trend that has led the Singapore government to adopt a considerably different approach – christened the “light touch” approach – in its response to the Internet. It is the harbinger of a new wave of technologies that will defy conventional forms of control – state-driven or otherwise. But apart from the technological trend, there is a case for the sociological trend as well. If people as a whole cannot face up to the responsibility of making their own choices, and if an arts community as a whole cannot abide by ethical, moral and social norms prevalent in the society, then neither the people nor the arts community nor indeed the whole nation could claim to any cultural maturity, much less cultural vibrancy. It is pertinent to ask if Singapore has not come of age.

Perhaps there is no easy answer. But some elements of a differentiated and graduated response to this issue are beginning to emerge. For example, the government has already recognised that not all artists are the same. Hence, the differentiated censorship regime for different artists and arts groups. Some do not require prior approval while others do. The question now posed is if all bona fide artists and arts groups could be afforded the same latitude. As with criminal law, could censorship regulation hold all artists innocent until proven guilty?

A related issue is the locus of control. It now rests entirely with the government, with some advisory role for representatives of the community. Could the arts community be trusted to regulate themselves, the same way as many other professional groups are? While there is an argument that suggests that the work of, say, the medical practitioner is seldom as incendiary as that of the artist, it begs the same question of the media practitioner, whose work can be just as incendiary and yet the media are not pre-censored by the government.

Lastly on censorship, is there room for a collective approach to judgement and control? It is possible to conceive of a body that brings together representatives of the state, the community and the market to take full and collective responsibility for censorship. This body should have capacity for both the bark and the bite for it to be effective. Such an approach not only provides representation but, equally importantly, demands responsibility from the collectivity. Experience in other countries has shown that, though such a system will not be flawless, it does work. The introduction of such a system in Singapore could be one clear signal of the devolution of power from the state to the other sectors and a strong incentive for
them to gear up for self-regulation. What is also worth noting here is that it is much better for the government to be seen to be taking the initiative to devolve than to be seen as being pushed to that end by technological inevitability.

A related issue is that of rating cultural production. At present the state operates a “go, no-go” system. Books, films, tapes, performances, etc., are either banned completely or allowed with deletions or, in the case of “artistic” performances and films, allowed with an “R” or “NC16” rating that imposes an age limit for entry. In the case of the Internet, quite a different system is being contemplated. There is an attempt to adopt international rating systems that merely suggest thresholds but in themselves do not (and indeed cannot) prevent entry. Given this situation, might it not be better to regularise all forms of censorship with a consistent rating system that is prescriptive but not prohibitive, leaving the choice of consumption to the community? While this is possible, the community at large, which still believes that the state can and should provide the first line of defence against undesirable material, may not take too kindly to this proposal. On the other hand when it discovers, in time, the reality of state impotence in the face of technological prowess, it might not take to that too kindly either. It is a political judgement call as to how and when (not if) the state passes on the responsibility for censorship to the community.

**Egalitarianism, Excellence**

Another major issue confronting the state’s role in cultural development is the constant and inevitable tension between egalitarianism and excellence in cultural production. The state quite rightly adopts an egalitarian approach in its support for the variety of cultural initiatives in Singapore. It needs to balance ethnic and linguistic diversity in addition to providing for different art forms and different age groups and different standards of excellence. As is intrinsic to state apparatus, the outcomes usually favour cultural egalitarianism rather than cultural excellence. But in culture, more than in most other public enterprises, excellence is the life force of its vitality and vibrancy. And yet, cultural excellence cannot always be measured by box office returns. Indeed productions that are visionary or raw or experimental or catering to minority interests will rarely appeal to big numbers and are often dismissed as elitist. Yet they are vital to artistic development and excellence. Given these tensions, how could the state appear to be even-handed and yet provide for “elitist” effort? It clearly needs to do more than giving away Cultural Medallions.

One possible approach is to distance provision for “excellence” from the provision for “grassroots.” By “grassroots” we mean the basic and across-the-board cultural development activities. Currently, the National Arts Council (NAC), the Arts Fund and the Singapore Pools, to name three major funding bodies, all adhere to the same principles of funding, though the quantum and range of activities they support vary. No one is catering exclusively to the “excellent.” The judging criteria, the composition of the selection committee, the process of selection are all very similar to each other. Perhaps the time has come to re-engineer some of the funding bodies, introduce three levels of support and establish appropriate mechanisms for such support. For example, (and for want of better terms) the “grassroots” level funding could be provided by one body (even NAC itself) and the “quality” and “visionary” levels of funding could be provided by another body that is autonomous of government. By “quality” we refer to productions and activities that are widely acknowledged as outstanding works, and by “visionary” we refer to works that may not be readily or popularly recognised as significant but which in the long run have deep impact on our cultural milieu. We strongly believe this differentiated approach to nurturing
artistic excellence is a critically important factor.

**Closed-doors, Open-endedness**

The government is rightly concerned about undesirable influences in Singapore and has exercised a high degree of vigilance against them. But cultural vibrancy cannot be achieved by a constantly pre-emptive regimen because there are inherent risks in many art forms and activities. In the arts, habitual “nipping it in the bud” will probably leave us with a lot of fruitless trees. For example, many arts practitioners feel that the Performance Art and Forum Theatre genres died ignominious deaths here without a fair hearing in the court of artistic opinion. Like many technologies which are double-edged swords and yet confidently incorporated into our daily life, certain calculated risks will have to be taken when trying out new expressions of art and culture. They need to be played out over time before determining whether indeed they fulfil the promise of doom and gloom.

Similarly, when there is failure in the first ever attempt, we should not despair but stay the course. Singapore life is generally acknowledged to be highly intolerant of failure but if we allow the same degree of intolerance into creative fields where failure is endemic, it would in the long run induce only a sterile sameness that succeeds all the time.

**Summary**

In sum, the state has a significant role to play in cultural development, one that should metamorphose from the dominant to the supportive function, and one that should also empower and enable the community and the market in the interim. Vigilance against unsavoury elements will be best achieved when the community develops its own immune system and when people are equipped to evaluate and judge for themselves. That needs education, exposure and practice.
CHAPTER THREE

ROLE OF THE ARTS COMMUNITY

Introduction

We now turn to the second component of the tripartite enterprise – the arts community which is a specific subset of the larger civil society. As indicated earlier, the arts community and related civil society actors, like audiences and arts patrons, are not quite ready or able to realise their full potential as partners in this process. In this chapter we shall examine some of the main impediments within the arts community and the wider civil society that may stand in the way of the effective implementation of a coherent and comprehensive cultural policy.

Professionalism

A major impediment in the way of the arts community being an effective catalyst for cultural vibrancy is a serious lack of professionalism and professional discipline among many arts practitioners and arts companies in Singapore. The terms “professionalism” and “professional discipline” have a specific reference here: an obligation to a sensibility of seriousness, competence, efficiency and commitment in the business of the arts, including knowledge, practice and management. It is worth pointing out at this juncture that being a “professional” artist has no direct correlation either with being a full-time artist or with making one’s living from the arts. Being a “professional” artist bespeaks a certain mindset, an attitude and a drive that are always evident in the artist’s work and his or her interaction with the larger community. It also implies, of course, an unwavering commitment to excellence – excellence in artistic expression.

Arts practice, like any other professional practice, is a calling; and as such it often makes stringent demands of the individual or the company engaged in the practice. Many of these demands, which are par for the course in other professions, like the obligation to respect procedures and deadlines, a commitment to honour contracts (both verbal and written), the necessity for clear communication and a need to exercise transparency and openness in procedures of finance and management, are not taken seriously by enough members of the arts community. It is true that if these professional demands are insensitively imposed or taken to extremes of compliance, then they may become obstacles to artistic creativity and spontaneity. But it is equally true that the frequent and wilful disregard of legitimate professional demands by artists could be harmful to the arts community. For one thing, it would undermine any genuine interaction between the arts community and the wider society of audiences, administrators and businessmen. Once such gaps in perception and understanding are allowed to take root, the arts community will be caught in a downward spiral of distrust and misconception that will adversely affect arts practice in Singapore.

Finally, there is one other dimension to “professionalism” and “professional discipline” germane to the Singapore arts community. This is the obligation, indeed the duty, of every arts community working in nascent or developing arts environments to communicate with and educate the audiences. Particularly in contexts like Singapore where a mature critical
apparatus is unavailable and where the mass media has been inadequate in raising artistic awareness and appreciation, the arts community must take upon itself the responsibility of connecting with and speaking to audiences.

What is normally considered part of the peripherals of a production or exhibition, such as catalogues, programme notes, accompanying critical texts, captions, biographies, documentation of the creative process and even press releases, should be considered integral to the process of art making. The devil is in the details; and unless Singapore artists begin paying attention to all the details pertaining to presentations and exhibitions they will always be deemed less than professional.

**Communication**

By and large the arts community in Singapore tends to underestimate the need to establish a clear and effective line of communication connecting the presentation or display of new work and its reception by a public. Artists who refuse to elaborate on their work usually cite two reasons: first, they are unable or unwilling to speak or write effectively about their own work; second, they believe their work should “speak for itself.” Both reasons do not bear up to scrutiny.

An artist who is unable or unwilling to speak about his/her own work should obviously engage someone else to do so. A writer, critic or journalist could be asked to comment on and discuss the work. The artist should consider such an engagement to be an integral extension of showing or presenting his/her work in public. Moreover, these commentaries and discussions, which could even take the form of a simple interview with the artist, should be made available at the presentation of the work.

As for the art work “speaking for itself,” this is patently untrue. Art works do not speak unless they are spoken to. In a context like Singapore where so much of the audience lack the means of communicating with art – for a variety of reasons including lack of education, exposure or interest – the arts community has a categorical duty to initiate the conversation.

The upshot of the Singapore artist’s need to be self-reliant in initiating and sustaining criticism and communication is that he or she has to be committed to a measure of intellectualism. The Singapore artist in particular, and the arts community in general, has to be systematically aware of the processes, techniques, strategies, methods, motivations, intentions, contexts, materials and manipulations that bear upon and shape the work.

This is not to say that artists here should somehow bifurcate themselves and become critics, which of course is not desirable. But it does mean that the arts community should be aware of and be educated in the means and the need for criticism and critical discourse. In a cultural context in which criticism and critical discourse and the rigorous intellectual exploration of art making, art theory and art history are simply non-existent, it is in the interest of artists and the arts community to contribute, together with the state and the market, in engendering such resources.

**Community**

Some historians say that artists, theatre practitioners at least, have plied their trade in Singapore since the 1840s, just two decades after Raffles’ arrival. It is quite probable that
writers and artists – painters, wood carvers, sculptors and calligraphers – from China, India and Arabia had worked here long before the British set foot on Singapore. There is, without a doubt, a tradition of art practice in Singapore, a tradition we can rightly be proud of. And yet for all this history and tradition, for all who have toiled against all the odds of migration, poverty, disease, war and, perhaps worst of all, the cultural indifference that modernisation brought in its wake, the Singapore arts community is still a community only in name.

There is no sense of a shared, underlying oneness beneath the surface of difference and diversity. There is no co-mingling of spirits, sensibilities, sentiments, values and sense of destiny which might clinch all the disparate elements together so that they may cohere to act collectively.

This is not a plea for consensus. For in matters of art there can never be consensus; art will always be born of conflict, interrogation and intervention; it springs forth from a stubborn, deliberate refusal to be the same old, same old. But difference, dissent and disagreement deny neither the possibility of sharing common goals and objectives nor the subscription to complementary principles of practice and aesthetics.

There is no reason why individual artists and arts companies in Singapore who see themselves in contention and competition, cannot come together in recognition of a higher, common good. Singapore artists and arts companies owe it to themselves and the tradition of art practice that precedes them to identify the oneness that binds them, come together and start acting like a true community.

The arts community and related civil society actors like audiences and arts patrons can redress some of these shortcomings by starting and supporting community-wide initiatives which would marshal resources and nurture solidarity within the arts environment. These could be collectives like co-operatives, associations or federations that bring together artists from a variety of disciplines with the express aim of acting as a negotiator in the dialogue between the arts community and the state or businesses or the wider public. They could also act as facilitators or agencies that provide common services like publicity and promotions, technical support (lighting/sound engineers and designers), ticket distribution and even specialised arts courses.

While there are many arts associations and federations in Singapore today, almost all of them are far too narrow in their constituency and interest, so much so that they tend to fracture and divide the arts community rather than bring it together. They also tend to lack the leadership and vision to act as community unifiers.

The process of unifying the arts community could be greatly accelerated if arts professionals and related civil society actors support the establishment of specialised, inter-disciplinary cultural institutions that are clearly national and international in their scope and functions. One such institution could be a Centre for Singapore Culture (CSC).

The CSC would take the lead in the research, study and analysis of Singapore culture and art. It will link academia, arts practitioners, administrators and the public with one another. It will have several functions; it would be a think-tank; a networking and resource centre; a multimedia library; a publisher of an arts journal; a webmaster with on-line versions of its publications and education programmes.
Summary

The arts community and the civil society in general are probably the most important means at our disposal in initiating the transformations towards cultural vibrancy and vitality. But in order for Singapore artists and the arts community to respond effectively to the state’s initiatives, some fundamentals must be in place. These fundamentals should include a sense of professional pride and competence, an ability to reach out and connect with a larger community and a willingness to draw strength from the shared ideals of that community.

The arts community and the civil society could begin to address and rectify some of these problems by coming together to start up collectives and co-operatives which could streamline the means by which common services and resources are created and utilised.

However, the process of consolidating and unifying the arts community in Singapore would perhaps be most effectively served by the establishment of a national, multi-functional, inter-disciplinary institution like the CSC.
CHAPTER FOUR

ROLE OF THE MARKET

Introduction

In discussions of culture and the arts, the term “market” often conjures up a sinister vision in the minds of many. They tend to think of the market as a mechanism that devalues high art into crass commercialism. Often they are right. When box-office returns and popularity ratings become the dominant measurements of quality and success, there is reason to worry. However, there is a less sinister and more sanguine conception of the market: it can also be a nurturing and nourishing environment for the committed artist, enabling and empowering in its own ways. As suggested in the earlier chapters, the state and the arts community need to take full cognisance of the positive aspects of the private sector involvement in cultural development. But, to be sure, the market is a double-edged sword too. In this chapter, we try to set out some specific positive considerations of the market and suggest ways in which it could be harnessed to help cultural development in Singapore.

Market Potential

Heading a state that is primarily economics-driven, the government is clearly better aware of the power of the market than the arts community. The Economic Development Board (EDB), the Trade Development Board and the Singapore Tourism Board are at the forefront of cultural development as an economic resource. In fact their reach and enthusiasm are so pervasive that the arts community seems to fear that the arts will become all economics. But the community needs to come to grips with the economics of the arts in order to cope with such fears. To be sure, the market is not a sufficient condition for art making. But it is a necessary condition. To the extent that cultural production requires cultural consumption, there is an inevitable economics to it and the better the understanding of this dynamics the stronger the management of it will be.

The most commonly invoked idea of the market is that it introduces an invisible hand that mediates between supply and demand and establishes an equilibrium between them. If something doesn’t sell, it can’t be that good. Often – though not always – that is the right conclusion. Cultural production too is usually subjected to this market discipline in order to survive and succeed. As a general practice, it is probably a good measure to gauge public response to a production and serves as useful feedback to the producers on what appeals to the audience and what does not. Oftentimes, artists assume a certain receptivity to their works that is not borne out by market response. However, defining the market is not a simple process. The market is rarely homogeneous or predictable. Markets need marketing, a process with which artists are both unfamiliar and uncomfortable. The solution is not for artists to become marketers but to engage them. The arts community as a whole needs to view its artistic enterprise with some degree of entrepreneurial spirit. There is nothing demeaning about this view, because what is “made” needs to be “sold” even if not always for profit. Marketing is communication and persuasion, which is why the contemporary term for the
government’s public education campaigns – which have absolutely no financial implications – is “social marketing.” It is also why even academia and the civil service are now referring to their customers and clients instead of students and public. But what is most important is that artists stick to art-making and marketers to marketing, thus leaving the dog to wag the tail.

Catalytic Role

The private sector in Singapore has shown its prowess in many kinds of business, including the highly competitive and volatile information technology field, but has largely shied away from arts and culture. Part of the reason could be the general wariness against commercialism in the arts community and also possibly because the private sector has not paid enough attention to the market potential of cultural production.

Even as we continue to argue for the disengagement of the state to a higher degree than at present, this is an area in which we think the government could play a useful role. Because of the current low level of interaction between the business and arts communities, there is a need for some catalytic agent. To take a leaf from another book, the EDB initiated the Local Industries Upgrading Programme (LIUP) some years ago to match-make multinational corporations and local enterprises, as a learning and upgrading process for the small firms. The process was facilitated and supervised by EDB with the help of dedicated LIUP managers from its own ranks. Over time, the managed LIUP process leads on to a symbiotic relationship between the mentor and the ward, culminating in profitable joint ventures. In a somewhat similar fashion, the government could conceive a catalytic scheme to bring the artist (or the arts group) and the business manager together for a trial marriage. Once the relationship takes roots, the catalyst could be withdrawn.

Arts Business

Art-making at present is largely confined to core activities such as writing, acting, dancing, directing and so on. Few venture beyond the core to the collateral activities such as publishing a stage play or video disking a dance performance or producing a multimedia version of an art exhibition. Or even merchandising the by-products of a creative work, as Hollywood has so successfully done. It is not clear whether this lack of enterprise is due to the catholicism of the artists or their lack of business sense. If the private sector and the arts community could put their heads and hearts together (without selling their soul to each other), the potential for extending the arts into the business arena could be considerably enhanced. Again, caution is needed to contain the business interests from overwhelming the artistic urges and to turn art wholly into business. But there is much experience in other countries from which we could draw valuable lessons.

Autonomy and Independence

Contrary to conventional wisdom among the arts community, we believe the harnessing of the business perspective to the creative endeavour will not shackle but liberate the artist. Instead of being so dependent on state and corporate charity and consequent control, those artists who could successfully engage in business without trading their soul will find that there is greater autonomy and independence. The financial security afforded by business success could actually broaden the horizons for venturing beyond the tried and tested. Professional arts groups are already beginning to experience this autonomy, but because the
business side is still so underdeveloped, the full impact is yet to be fully appreciated.

Having said the foregoing, we must stress, however, that not all art is a business proposition. Some art will always remain beyond the grasp of business and must be jealously preserved so. It is only where business and arts could mix – and there is much that can mix – that the market could have a salutary effect on culture.

**Summary**

As the market is an integral part of the environment in which cultural production and consumption take place, there is a marketing imperative that the arts community should take cognisance of. In addition, if business sense could be infused into the creative enterprise through a symbiotic relationship between the private sector and the arts community, then that would contribute to the overall vitality and vibrancy of the cultural domain. The government could act as a catalyst in creating this synergy. Ultimately, however, business and the arts should mix only if it benefits and not bankrupts the arts.
CHAPTER FIVE

POLICY OPTIONS

The aim of this chapter is to suggest certain policy options and to sketch out their purposes and their advantages. These policy options address key policy areas such as funding, censorship, language, media and education. Given the complexity of these issues, our suggestions should be seen as preliminary investigations into these matters, which warrant further research and thinking. While we feel that at present certain practices and policies may be inadequate to the goal of developing Singapore into a culturally vibrant city, we recognise that some of our suggestions may introduce new problems of their own, and so we qualify these policy options with some discussion of their possible challenges.

The following suggestions are by no means exhaustive. We were privy to an earlier set of recommendations prepared by MITA, which we also endorse without repeating them here. Our own suggestions are in addition to those.

New Mechanisms

Current mechanisms of arts and cultural management – such as the NAC, the current censorship mechanisms, and even the just proposed Institute of the Arts – may not be adequate to manage Singapore’s artistic and cultural development in the near future. We recommend the formation of additional “mechanisms” to deal with a variety of functions.

i) Centre for Singapore Culture
We propose the establishment of a Centre for Singapore Culture (CSC). It should be an independent organisation, with the state providing only seed funding. The CSC is intended to examine Singapore culture and art by moving beyond the confines of the past (i.e. thinking culture predominantly in terms of ethnicity and traditions) without disregarding the past. The CSC will link academia, practitioners, administrators and the public with one another. It has several functions; it would be a think-tank and more: a networking and resource centre for artists, critics and arts administrators as well as the general public; it will have a multi-media library; it will publish a much needed arts journal (aimed at regional and international audiences as well); it will have online versions of its publications, an online version of its information and resource centre; and it will offer online education programmes. Its focus will be emphatically multi-disciplinary: fashion, film, design, advertising, visual arts, performing arts and so on. It could have a small multi-purpose theatre to showcase local films, among other things. It could also have an art gallery which could be run as the main contemporary arts space in Singapore to showcase important contemporary artists and projects. The CSC could include on its board selected international advisers, but the main goal is about empowering local experts, and not simply deferring to international expertise. Seminars and conferences, both local and international, will be run, but not academic courses, etc. The CSC will be a support centre for the archiving and documentation of arts and culture (see Individual Project Ideas, below).
The CSC won’t compete with the Institute of the Arts since the Institute’s focus is on education and the granting of degrees; nor will it replace organisations like The Substation, which is very much like the Statue of Liberty for Singapore art – opening its arms to all, nurturing the untried and untested.

The following could form the main objectives of the CSC:

- To promote interest in and study of Singapore culture.
- To provide a forum for the discussion of issues concerning Singapore culture.
- To engage in research, publication and dissemination of information on issues concerning Singapore culture.
- To facilitate cultural productions and performances.
- To be a resource centre and repository of archival and documentary materials related to Singapore culture.

ii) An independent funding body for “quality” and “visionary” work

As discussed earlier, the existing mechanisms of state funding for the arts do not sufficiently distinguish between different levels of support, and tend to favour cultural egalitarianism rather than artistic excellence. We suggest that the NAC continues with “grassroots” funding. But we recommend establishing a state-supported but independently administered body to give funding to individual artists and projects which are deemed to be of “quality” or “visionary.” Part of the funding could be re-channeled from other funding agencies such as The Arts Fund and the Singapore Pools. This body will have an advisory panel that includes critics and practitioners in the various relevant fields and could include international advisers working with local experts. This funding body should be run independently because matters of evaluating artistic excellence should be left to the arts community and the larger civil society and not to the “be-fair-to-all” state apparatus. Performance indicators for artistic excellence cannot be based solely on numbers of attendance or on the equitable distribution of largesse. The assessment of what deserves support must be centred on critical assessment of how the works or artists contribute to the arts scene.

However, given that the arts community in Singapore is small and still not matured, we recognise the challenges in putting into practice such an independent funding body. Fellow artists may not trust their peers to assess their funding applications fairly because there may be conflicts of interests. The arts community may also resist the idea of a committee having the power to fund on the basis of “quality,” especially if this committee is either seen as uninformed and inexpert or as having a conservative and narrow-minded notion of what is art, let alone “good” art. While we recognise that the success of this independent funding body depends on who comprises the committee, we feel that in the long term, support of excellence in the arts is vital.

iii) Translation Bureau

We recommend the establishment of a state-funded national translation bureau to translate all major works in Chinese, Malay, Tamil and English into each other. The bureau could even expand its scope in the future and become a regional translation centre, translating major works in Southeast Asian languages into each other. This would be in concert with Singapore’s goal to be a knowledge centre for the region. The bureau could also play a role in the mass media, e.g. by providing subtitling in various languages for TV programmes. The bureau will also act as a publisher, adding valuable literature to existing collections.
iv) Council for Arts Censorship
As discussed earlier, the existing mechanisms of the censorship of the arts will become increasing untenable in the future. We feel that there are sufficient laws to govern such sensitive matters as inciting violence or racial hatred and obscenity. We suggest that the present censorship mechanism shift from one that is pre-emptive to one that reviews and penalises transgressions. These transgressions should be defined against the standards set by the arts community in tandem with the larger public. Therefore we propose the formation of an independent censorship review council with a clear mandate; it should consist of people from all walks of life, including educationists, artists, civil servants, members of the general public and so on. At first this council should conduct a review of existing censorship practices with the aim to eventually become the regulating body that makes binding decisions. There should also be a clear and open procedure by which artists or members of the public can appeal this council’s decisions. The procedure of licensing should continue, but it should not be an application process where approval is necessary; rather it should be a simple contract agreeing to abide by basic legal conditions such as no inciting of violence, racial hatred, no obscenity and the like. The function of licensing would be to keep track of events in case there are complaints of transgressions and for a review by the council. In time, we feel that what is desirable is that arts productions are rated, where the ratings are descriptive and prescriptive, not prohibitive.

However, as with the independent funding body, there will be challenges in putting into practice such an independent censorship review council. The council may, in the end, turn out to be more conservative and inconsistent in its censorship decisions when compared with the existing state-controlled mechanism. This is because the council may still operate with the mentality of self-censorship and fear of state reprisals. What is crucial is to get the right kind of persons on this council and to allow it to acquire authority and trust within the community and the government.

v) Advisory Committee on the Promotion of Arts through the Media
We recommend establishing an advisory committee to examine and explore what more the mass media could do in terms of promoting arts and culture. To some extent this is already being achieved by an advisory committee under the Singapore Broadcasting Authority with regard to broadcast media. That function should be extended to all media. This advisory committee should comprise members of the arts community and the mass media. It could be an entirely civil society and private sector initiative; however, since the state has such a strong role in the mass media, its participation in the committee may give the committee recommendations more weight.

vi) Cross-cultural Communication Unit
It is increasingly evident that the re-ethnicisation of Singapore society could deepen, not soften, the fault lines between ethnic communities. Unless remedial action is taken in conjunction with ethnic-centred initiatives, we run real risks of conflict. Our recommendation is that the government signal strong support for cross-cultural communication among Singapore’s different communities. Such a signal could take the form of a cross-cultural communication unit being set up within the NAC or MITA, with the express mission of identifying, encouraging and supporting cross-cultural activities. (Some specific details can be found in a report submitted by the informal Cross Cultural Communication Group in 1995.)
vii) Civics Education for Primary and Secondary Schools
We suggest considering the implementation of a form of Civics Education as a core subject at the primary and secondary levels, which is aimed at promoting a common Singapore culture. This would be a refinement of the existing National Education programme, as it would expand its scope beyond teaching students a shared history, but would explore the area of culture as well.

viii) Singapore Studies Department at the University
We recommend setting up a Singapore Studies Department at the University; it will be similar in scope and purpose to such Departments as European Studies, Japanese Studies, Malay Studies and so on.

ix) Living Treasures
We recommend setting up a programme where individuals or groups be deemed “Living Treasures.” Based on their extensive experience and contribution to their respective fields, those selected will be given funding so that their experience and expertise can be disseminated and preserved. “Living Treasures” could be anything from a senior theatre director, musician, painter, or a Chinese Opera troupe. A person or group so designated would be obliged to continue producing new and original art works, and to be engaged in the teaching and transfer of techniques, systems, training methods, etc., which are integral to the creation of such works. Funding for the programme could be administered by the independent funding body (see above).

Individual Project Ideas

In addition to suggesting the formation of new mechanisms, we also recommend individual projects, such as:

i) A Singapore Triennial International Contemporary Visual Arts Show
The Triennial would have the ambition to be as important to the international arts community as the Asia Pacific Triennial in Brisbane. It should be at least comparable in scale to the Singapore Festival of Arts and Singapore International Film Festival.

ii) A State-supported Project to Digitise Major Art Works, Performances and Productions
As electronic information increasingly becomes the lingua franca of the future, we recommend the translation of Singapore art works, of all disciplines, into digital form. This will facilitate the dissemination of such materials over information networks (such as the Internet). But of course without existing documentation and archiving, there can be no subsequent digitisation. So we recommend state support for the documentation and archiving of art works, performances and productions. The CSC (see New Mechanisms, above) could be the agency to review and recommend financial support for documentation and archiving. As for the funding itself, the independent funding body (see New Mechanisms, above) could administer it.

iii) More Spending for Public Art Works
Various state and private sector initiatives, in tandem or on their own, should contribute more to funding public art works. The state should consider giving various incentives (e.g. tax breaks) to encourage more spending by the private sector. The examples of the Moore, Dali and Botero sculptures sited at local bank plazas are few and far between.
iv) World-class Lecture Series in Areas of Arts and Culture
Commensurate with the world-class lectures that Singapore hosts in areas like economics and the sciences, there should be a world-class lecture series on arts and culture. The lecturers should have a short residency in Singapore to conduct seminars, workshops and so on. Singapore should host world-class conferences on arts and culture as well.

v) Annual Singapore River Festival
There should be more major events added to the calendar of Singapore arts and cultural events (e.g. the Arts Fest, Film Fest, the proposed Triennial). We propose a Singapore River Festival, one whose focus is on multi-cultural exchange and popular culture, and less on the “high arts” as such.

vi) International Publishers to Set Up their Houses Here
Singapore literature suffers from inadequate marketing overseas. From one of our discussions with a respondent, we learned that the local publishing houses are ill-equipped to promote Singapore writers to international audiences. As a result, local writers may turn to publishing with international houses outside Singapore. The consequences are: first, there will be a shift of editorial decision-making from local editors to international editors, and second, local writers may increasingly tailor their works primarily to overseas audiences instead of local ones. We suggest that these international publishing houses be encouraged to set up branches in Singapore. The aim is to tap into their expertise and their marketing networks, but also to sensitise them to the interests of Singapore writers and audiences.

vii) Arts LIUP
As observed in Chapter Four, there is a real need to infuse business perspectives into cultural development and to encourage the business sector to maximise the market potential of the arts. The EDB-inspired LIUP (Local Industry Upgrading Programme) for the manufacturing and services sectors was mentioned as a model; we recommend the creation of a similar scheme specifically aimed at bringing businesses and the arts together for mutual benefit.

Policy Options Specific to a Syncretic Singapore
To realise a Syncretic Singapore, we believe the following policy options may be instrumental in addition to the ones mentioned above.

i) Language
We believe that English will continue to be the dominant language of government, business, science and industry, and the mass media. We recommend that there be no compulsion for mother tongue learning at primary and secondary levels but that there be compulsory second language for all students, and that a third language is encouraged. Second and third language learning should be about fluency and not passing difficult examinations. At the tertiary level there should be an emphasis on high standards in language learning. There should be a gradual shift from printing official forms in four languages to printing them just in English, as English literacy will become virtually 100% in less than a generation. We suggest that the state sponsor an extensive research project into how language is used as an expression of ethnic and cultural identity in the various communities. We believe that English will continue to be the dominant language of government, business, science and industry, and the mass media. We recommend that
there be no compulsion for mother tongue learning at primary and secondary levels but that there be compulsory second language for all students, and that a third language is encouraged. Second and third language learning should be about fluency and not passing difficult examinations. At the tertiary level there should be an emphasis on high standards in language learning. There should be a gradual shift from printing official forms in four languages to printing them just in English, as English literacy will become virtually 100% in less than a generation. We suggest that the state sponsor an extensive research project into how language is used as an expression of ethnic and cultural identity in the various communities.

ii) Ethnic-based Institutions such as Mendaki, CDAC, SINDA, etc.  
We recommend that there be no state funding for ethnic-based institutions and organisations, although private initiatives to develop such organisations should not be discouraged.

iii) Ethnic Integration  
As far as possible ethnic categorisations and separation should be removed from public life. One good example is the abolition of ethnic identifications in our identity card. Increasingly, we should shift our thinking from hyphenated identities to the common Singaporean identity.

Policy Options Specific to a Multicultural Singapore

To realise a (Strong) Multicultural Singapore, we believe the following policy options may be instrumental in addition to the ones mentioned earlier.

i) Language  
We believe that English will continue to be the dominant language of government, business, science and industry, and the mass media. However, for a Multicultural Singapore we believe it is essential to promote language use in Chinese, Malay and Tamil. We therefore recommend strong encouragement of mother tongue learning at primary and secondary levels and even a third language should be encouraged. Mother-tongue/second and third language learning should be about fluency and not passing difficult examinations. At the tertiary level there should be an emphasis on high standards in language learning. As with the policy recommendations for a Syncretic Singapore, we suggest that the state sponsor an extensive research project into how language is used as an expression of ethnic and cultural identity in the various communities.

ii) Ethnic-based Institutions such as Mendaki, CDAC, SINDA, etc.  
There should be state funding for ethnic-based institutions and organisations.

iii) Ethnic Quotas in Housing  
We recommend that there should be no ethnic quotas in housing, so as to allow for the formation of ethnic enclaves.

[We should note that due to constraints of time and space, we have not provided elaborate details on some recommendations. We would be happy to provide them in personal discussions.]
APPENDIX

RESPONDENTS AND DISCUSSIONANTS

1. Prof CHUA Beng Huat  
   Scholar in Sociology and Culture

2. Mr Raman DAUD  
   Journalist and Commentator

3. Ms GOH Su Lin  
   Arts Manager

4. Mr Philip JEYARETNAM  
   Lawyer & Writer

5. Mr K VADIVALAGAN  
   Theatre Director and Actor

6. Mr KUO Pao Kun  
   Playwright

7. Mr KWOK Kian Chow  
   Museum Director

8. Prof KWOK Kian Woon  
   Scholar in Sociology and Culture

9. Ms Juliana LIM  
   Corporate Supporter of the Arts

10. Mr N GUNALAN  
    Arts Educator

11. Mrs Tisa NG  
    Arts Manager

12. Mr ONG Keng Sen  
    Theatre Director

13. Ms PANG Cheng Lian  
    Social Commentator

14. Mr Venka PURUSHOTAMAN  
    Arts Manager

15. Ms S THENMOZHI  
    Theatre Director
16. Ms Constance SINGAM  
    Social Commentator

17. Mr Alvin TAN  
    Theatre Director

18. Mr TAN Swie Hian  
    Artist

19. Dr WEE Wan-Ling  
    Scholar in English Literature and Culture