

CULTURAL POLICY IN SINGAPORE: NEGOTIATING ECONOMIC AND SOCIO-CULTURAL AGENDAS¹

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INTRODUCTION

At the opening of a local conference titled “Art versus Art: Conflict and Convergence” in 1993, Ho Kwon Ping, Chairman of the Practice Performing Arts Centre, a private arts school, made the following observation about the increased attention paid to the arts in Singapore in the late 1980s and 1990s:

We are moving so very rapidly in a national effort to change this underdeveloped state in the Arts. It was only in 1988 when the Ong Teng Cheong Advisory Council on Art and Culture completed its extended study. The change that has taken place in the last five years has been phenomenal: We now have a Cabinet Minister for the Arts, a National Arts Council, half a dozen professional performing companies, a National Gallery under renovation, arts major degree programmes in both universities and as much as \$500 million set aside to build a world class arts centre scheduled to open before the year 2000² (*Art vs Art*, 1995:7).

Indeed, the Singapore government aims to make the city-state a “global city of the arts” by the year 2000 and has spared little effort to achieve this. What has brought on this vigour in cultural policy and action which was lacking before? As Liu Kang, one of Singapore’s pioneer artists noted, the lack of support for the arts in the post-World War Two and early post-independence years was stark: the government spent tens of millions on secondary and primary schools, but nothing on an arts academy (the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, then the only arts academy in Singapore). It spent huge sums building structures like the National Stadium but did little to channel the funds to developing the arts. Even in the mid-1980s, as Koh (1989:736) pointed out, the government still held the view that

Material and social welfare, earning a living, and economic survival have always been Singapore’s mostly immigrant community’s primary concerns, and the arts have never been seen as a “basic need”.

As Liu articulated, it was because the government was very good “when it came to things related to business (the airport, the harbour), but negligent when it comes to the arts” (*Art*

² The arts centre in question is named the Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay. It would include a 2,000 seat concert hall and a 1,800 seat Lyric Theatre. The projected opening date has since been revised to 2001.

vs *Art*, 1995:13). Yet, he, like the state, accepted without question a dichotomy between "business" and "the arts".

In this paper, my first intention is to examine the role of cultural policy³ in a newly industrialised economy which is at the same time a state with a short history⁴, and only nascent beginnings in nation-building and efforts to construct a distinctive cultural identity. As Dunn (1997:7) advocates in the context of Australia, I take "cultural policy" beyond the narrow conception of "policy development, government process and consultancies" to include a "focus upon power, upon the forces of oppression and strategies of resistance", "stressing the role of everyday places, of landscapes, in the formation of culture and identity". In examining the case of Singapore, I hope to develop an understanding of the intersection between the economic and socio-cultural agendas behind cultural development policies. I will illustrate how the hegemony of economic development strategies is supported by the ideology and language of pragmatism and globalisation and argue that, as a newly industrialised country which places highest premium on economic development, the state's economic agenda in developing cultural activities is pre-eminent. Further, I will suggest that, despite the rhetoric about the importance of the arts in developing a "gracious society", the major motivation behind cultural policy is economic; indeed, often, the economic works through the socio-cultural. Certainly, despite fears about the potential threat to the development of "Singaporean" artistic and cultural forms posed by cultural development policies which appear to privilege foreign talents over local ones, such presumed challenges to the construction of a "Singaporean idiom" are dismissed by the state whereas in other arenas, it has been vigorous in efforts to construct a "nation" and build national identity.

My second aim in this paper is to examine the reception of and attempts to negotiate (and at times, contest) these policies by "cultural practitioners"⁵ themselves. In so doing, I will illustrate how there is a severe disjuncture between the state's policies

³ In this paper, I adopt an expansive notion of culture to include both what is traditionally considered "high culture" and "popular culture".

⁴ Singapore gained independence from Britain in 1963 as part of Malaya but left the Federation in 1965 to become an independent republic.

⁵ By this, I refer to those engaging in the arts, such as dancers, playwrights, actors and directors. I do not include those who are essentially business people engaged in culture industries but do not participate in the creative process as such.

and the intents of practitioners, which may be appropriately cast as a conflict between social and cultural development priorities as envisaged by the practitioners as opposed to economic development priorities as embodied in the state's cultural economic policies.

My analyses in this paper are motivated as much by a perceived lacuna in the academic literature as a commitment to policy analysis. Much of the literature on cultural policies, particularly cultural economic policies and the regeneration of cities, has focused on Western countries, mainly in the U.S. and Europe, and more recently, the U.K. and Australia (Frith, 1991; Watson, 1991; Bassett, 1993; Bianchini, 1993a; Scott, 1997; Williams, 1997). Most of the work examines the historical development of cultural policy, often highlighting early tendencies to neglect the economic potential of the arts and subsequent discovery and appropriation as a response to global capital restructuring. Some recent works have begun to explore the interconnections between capitalist production processes and the cultural content of outputs, and how this is reflected in the growth and development of particular places (Scott, 1997; Waterman, 1998). At a more micro-level of analysis, others have examined specific aspects of cultural industries, such as the contribution of the cultural industries sector to employment and trade (Pratt, 1997a; 1997b), and economic organisation of particular cultural industries (for example, Sadler, 1997, on the music industry). Such analyses have been kept distinct from examinations of cultural policies from the perspective of socio-cultural and political agendas. Where such research has been done, particularly in non-Western, developing country contexts, the tendency has been to focus on questions of cultural imperialism: addressing questions about whether there is in fact cultural imperialism at work, and attempts by states through policy and various actions to halt or at least ameliorate such impacts (see, for example, Wallis and Malm, 1984; and Shuker, 1994). Little work has been done which focuses on the intersection between cultural economic policies and those cultural policies which bear socio-cultural and political agendas. In the context of Singapore, no systematic attention has been given to analysis of cultural policies (see, however, Koh, 1989). Particularly given Singapore's penchant towards developmentalism (see below) and its relatively nascent stage in the construction of nationhood, this issue bears scrutiny.

In what follows, I will first devote a section to painting a broad background of Singapore as a developmental city-state, one steeped in the ideology of pragmatism, which has led to the development of a remarkably strong economy in a few short decades. This will be followed by a brief historical account of the cultural policies of the 1960s and 1970s to provide the context for the later discussion. The rest of the paper will then focus specifically on cultural policy in the 1980s and 1990s, beginning with the state's rationale for its policies, the conditions which prompted the development of an explicit cultural economic policy and the specific strategies it adopted to implement its policies. This will be followed by a discussion of how practitioners view these policies and their attempts to negotiate and manoeuvre for space for cultural development in their own terms, in order to serve their own socio-cultural agendas rather than the state's economic-driven ones. I will conclude by evaluating the hegemony of the economic and arguing for the need for policies which develop local cultural resources such that the arts is part and parcel of people's everyday lives in as much as the everyday and ordinary contribute to cultural development. In other words, I argue for a cultural policy which pulls together economic as well as socio-cultural agendas such that the latter do not simply serve the former.

SINGAPORE: A DEVELOPMENTAL CITY-STATE

In this section, I will lay out the context within which Singapore's cultural economic policy of the 1980s and 1990s must be understood. Specifically, I will focus on, first, its ideological position: as a developmental city-state and one that subscribes to the tenets of pragmatism, and second, a brief description of its economic development since independence.

According to Castells (1992:56), a state is developmental when:

...it establishes as its principle of legitimacy its ability to promote and sustain development, understanding by development the combination of steady high rates of economic growth and structural change in the productive system, both domestically and in its relationship to the international economy.

While economic development is a priority in all types of countries, a developmental state is distinguished through the absolute prioritising of economic growth and its use as a prime indicator of government performance. In the case of Singapore, evidence that

economic development is given the highest priority takes various forms, for example, the privileging of land for economic use; the status of state economic agencies and administrators and the coordination of planning at the highest levels of government; and the continuous finetuning and multiplication of incentives and economic programmes, based partly on the detailed monitoring of industry needs and development intentions.

This prioritising of economic development above other concerns is rooted in the pragmatism of the state, which in turn stems from the 'politics of survival' in the 1960s when the urgency of raising the social conditions of the masses was seen to justify a shift away from the socialist strategies earlier advocated (Chua, 1985). The crux of the pragmatic ideology is that policy can be justified where there exists, from the state's perspective, an acceptable rational response (Hill and Lian, 1995:190). For a developmental city-state, an acceptable rational response is an action which contributes to economic development.

The combined effect of the developmentalist and pragmatic ideologies is that Singapore's economic development has been quite phenomenal in its post-independence years. Singapore has moved from developing country to newly industrialising economy to its present status of 'advanced industrialising nation' in 30 short years. This economic development can be summarised in four main phases according to differences in performance and management (see Perry, Kong and Yeoh, 1997). In brief, the immediate post-independence years forming the first phase saw the most rapid growth and were characterised by the primacy of textiles and garments and the production of electronics and electrical goods which generated about half the manufacturing employment growth, and entrepot trade.

While economic growth continued in the second phase of development (1974-1984), overall growth slowed down, reflecting the less favourable circumstances in the world economy partly associated with the two international oil shocks. Domestic-market and low value, labour intensive industries such as food and beverages, textiles and wood products declined in relative importance while industries which expanded rapidly included petroleum refining, chemical products, fabricated metal products, electrical and electronic products and components as well as machinery and precision equipment (Tan, 1995:57). Singapore also consolidated its role as an international financial centre in the 1970s. In the late 1970s, sustained economic expansion, which by now was resulting in an increasing dependence

on foreign workers led the government to embark on a 'second industrial revolution' to force the pace of technological upgrading. R&D capacity and technical skills were given special attention, evident for example, in expanded government R&D funding, including support to a new Software Technology Centre and the opening of a Science Park.

However, the desired economic transformation did not take place. In the third phase of development (1985-1986), real GDP declined as international economic conditions contributed to the only recession so far encountered by independent Singapore. The government appointed a ministerial committee to identify the causes of the downturn and to identify 'new directions' for growth. The Committee proposed various diversification strategies, with recommendations for a number of substantive economic areas, such as manufacturing, tourism, construction, commerce, trade and services. One of the important orientations of pertinence to the discussion in this paper is the recommendation to encourage overseas headquarters to relocate to Singapore and to build a 'total business centre' in which Singapore would become an important strategic node of global companies for the Asia-Pacific region (EDB, 1988:12).

The most recent phase of economic development, led by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong who replaced Lee Kuan Yew in 1990, is shaped by a central document, the Strategic Economic Plan (MTI, 1991), which is partly a restatement of established goals. It speaks of positioning Singapore as a global city, by making it a 'total business hub' for the Asia-Pacific and offering a business location on par with other leading global cities. The attraction of high tech, knowledge-intensive industries is to be intensified, along with investment to enhance labour skills and innovation capacity. Another important dimension of 1990s strategy is a regionalisation drive, which has involved Singapore-based companies moving their operations to regional locations, a strategy aimed at enhancing their competitiveness and expanding Singapore's economic space beyond its limited geographical boundaries.

CULTURAL POLICY IN SINGAPORE: THE VIEW FROM 'ABOVE'

The primacy of socio-political agendas: 1960s and 1970s

In this brief sub-section, my intention is to illustrate the substance of cultural policy in the 1960s and 1970s as a backdrop to the main discussion focusing on the rise of cultural economic policy in the 1980s and 1990s. Singapore's cultural policy in the

1960s and 1970s was focused primarily on how artistic and cultural activities could be used for nation-building purposes and how the negative influences associated with “yellow culture” of the “decadent West” were to be avoided. A statement by the Minister for Culture, Mr Jek Yuen Thong, in 1974 made this point distinctly:

Literature, music and the fine arts have a significant role to play from within the framework of nation building. A truly Singaporean art must reflect values that will serve Singapore in the long run. Faced with threats from the aggressive culture of the West, our own arts must reflect countervailing values that will be helpful to Singapore (Press release, 28 June 1974).

This view was variously repeated by other members of government, for example, when government MP Tay Boon Too argued that “the various orchestras, dance troupes and choirs in the National Theatre should be regarded as a cultural army representative of Singapore” (Parliamentary Debates, 22 March 1971, col. 998) and when the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Culture, Inche Sha’ari Tadin, asserted that “the arts can play a vital role in nation-building through the inculcation of correct values”, especially since, “more than ever”, Singapore was faced with “the threats from the aggressive culture of the West” (Press release, 30 Nov 1974). By the mid to late 1970s, this took active form with the government encouraging the composition of songs by Singaporeans to help “develop a sense of national identity and instill a sense of patriotism in our young people” (Parliamentary Debates, 16 March 1977, col. 1078). Engagement in the arts, it was hoped, would also “redeem us from the ill-effects of a materialistic, money-oriented existence” (Inche Sha’ari Tadin, Press release, 30 Nov 1974), especially important given the emphasis on economic development in the newly independent state. Artistic pursuits, defined by the state, were to be purveyed to the person-in-the-street, with the introduction of, for example, a series of monthly “Art for everyone” exhibitions that toured the community centres, organised by the Ministry of Culture.

At the same time that “healthy” artistic and cultural pursuits were deemed to have a role in nation-building, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the government also held the view that cultural products, particularly popular cultural products from the West constituted “unhealthy” “yellow” culture which “destroy[ed] [young people’s] sense of value, and corrode[d] their willingness to pay attention to serious thought” (Lee, 1967, no p.). As Inche Sha’ari Tadin argued,

It is important to have a rich, established cultural tradition particularly at this time of Singapore's development. This is because there is the danger of our Republic being inundated by undesirable influences from the outside world. Already many young people are mindlessly aping foreign mannerism. They think that the process of modernisation simply means drug-taking, a-go-go dancing and pornography. Once our youths have adequate cultural anchorage, they will be less prone to these modern excesses (Press release, 26 April 1973).

The values and lifestyles that were associated with the “decadent West” included the keeping of long hair, hippism and drugs, and it was believed that these were purveyed through cultural products such as rock music, foreign films and television programmes. Night spots such as night clubs with live bands and discos were closed down and bans and censorship were introduced and tightened in a bid to control the insidious dangers.

In short, the socio-political agendas of cultural policies were pre-eminent in the 1960s and 1970s. Conversely, the conception of a cultural economy was somewhat circumscribed. The only significant cultural economic policy was a tourism strategy which sought to promote Singapore as a destination where tourists could enjoy, *inter alia*, the arts and cultures of Asia in one destination, using the banner of “Instant Asia” as a promotional tool. This was the tack that the then Singapore Tourism Promotion Board took from about 1969 to the late 1970s. However, apart from the active pursuit of a tourist cultural policy, recognition of and efforts to tap the economic potential of the arts and culture in other ways were, at best, feeble, including, for example, turning arts and crafts products into souvenirs for the tourist industry (Press release, 19 July 1973).

The rise of cultural economic policy: 1980s and 1990s

At the start of the 1980s, the official view of the relationship between culture and economy was still one in which culture was thought of as the superstructural icing on the Marxist cake. The state was clear that the economy had to be taken care of first, while artistic pursuits could follow later. S. Dhanabalan (1983:16), then Minister for Culture, expressed this unequivocally when he said,

We often talk of improving the quality of life in Singapore as distinct from improving the standard of living. We have concentrated, and rightly so, on improving the standard of living of Singaporeans. ... Without better standards of living – more jobs, more housing, more education, better health – one cannot hope to improve the quality of life.

The quality of life, in his estimation, referred to more “peripheral” issues such as artistic and cultural pursuits. The view was taken further with the position that economic prosperity was a necessary pre-condition for artistic creativity (Sabapathy, 1995:16), a view that was not borne out in reality.⁶

By 1985, however, when Singapore was in the midst of an economic recession, the Economic Committee tasked to chart future directions for growth proposed diversification strategies, and some attention began to be paid to the arts as a potential growth area. It was deemed part of the “service sector”, albeit a relatively minor part. Specifically, “cultural and entertainment services were given brief attention as one of 17 service categories that could be further developed.”⁷ Several recommendations were made as to the role of the cultural and entertainment services, defined to include the performing arts (popular music, symphony, drama), film production (for theatres and television), museums and art galleries, and entertainment centres and theme parks. These recommendations were made in recognition of the fact that such services were economic activities in their own right; that they enhanced Singapore as a tourism destination; improved the quality of life and helped people to be more productive; and contributed to a vibrant cultural and entertainment scene which would make Singapore more interesting for foreign professionals and skilled workers, and could help attract them to work and develop their careers here (Report of the Sub-Committee on the Service Sector, 1985:211).

The specific recommendations made by the sub-committee on the service sector were to develop arts festivals along the lines of the successful Hong Kong Arts Festival and the Festival of Asian Arts; to harness the potential of television in promoting variety shows, music and singing competitions, and popular drama; to develop a more extensive range of museum and art galleries with richer and more interesting selections which would be more attractive to foreigners; and to develop high quality theme parks with local historical and cultural flavour. The report also recognised the problems involved. First, Singapore’s educational system did not emphasise the development of artistic and creative talent,

⁶ In the 1950s and 1960s when Singapore was economically not very well developed, some exciting work was produced in the visual arts by artists such as Cheong Soo Pieng, Liu Kang, Chen Chong Swee, Chen Wen Hsi and Georgette Chen. They “examined conventions in the light of the realities in this part of the world, consolidated fresh imagery and subject, created distinct visual languages and produced innovative work that crystallised formative, historical phases of art in Singapore” (Sabapathy, 1995:16-17).

focused as it was on technical and professional skills. For that, it was recommended that some tertiary institutions should develop departments of fine arts and performing arts, and that more financial support be given to private institutions such as the Nanyang Academy of Arts. Second, the Inland Revenue Department did not permit non-residential entertainers, artistes and musicians to enjoy any exemption for income earned in Singapore. The report recommended that the withholding of such exemption should be reconsidered. Third, land for entertainment purposes in Singapore is expensive. In Hong Kong, for example, land for cultural centres is usually provided free by the government with value unassessed. In 1984, the Hong Kong government also spent over HK\$90 million to maintain arts events and performing companies. It was recommended that some of the more successful cultural and entertainment programmes in Hong Kong could be considered for Singapore. Fourth, television was then owned by the government in Singapore and therefore not sufficiently competitive in the market place. The report recommended that some privatisation should be introduced. Finally, film production had been difficult to develop in Singapore because of the scarcity of scenic or interesting places, the high cost of labour and a small domestic market although no specific recommendations were made to rectify this.

These recommendations represented the first explicit, albeit somewhat ad hoc, acknowledgement of the economic potential of artistic and cultural activities, and although there were few clear signs that the recommendations were systematically taken up in the three to five years following the report, many have since then been given serious attention and carefully developed. In the meantime, however, other recommendations and reports emerged at the same time as new discourses which overtook in the public arena, and which drew away attention that might have been publicly, explicitly and exclusively given to the development of a cultural economic policy. The Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts (popularly labeled the Ong Teng Cheong Report because the then 2nd Deputy Prime Minister chaired the Council) was a key document, produced in 1989, which was to form the blueprint for cultural policy in Singapore. It gave due acknowledgement to the importance of the arts for “personal enrichment”, that is, “broaden[ing] our minds and deepen[ing] our sensitivities”; to “improve the general quality of life”, “strengthen our social bond” and “contribute to our tourist and entertainment sectors” (*Report of the Advisory Council*,

⁷ The others were classified under six divisions: transport and communications, business services, financial services, commerce, personal and social services, and others.

1989:3). It outlined as key strategies the need to “encourage more people to develop an interest in culture and the arts, to take part in art activities as amateurs or as professionals, to build up a pool of good artistes, arts administrators, arts entrepreneurs and other related professionals, to develop more modern purpose-built performing, working and exhibition facilities for the arts, libraries and specialized museums/galleries, to step up the level and tempo of cultural activities and have more works of art in public places, and to encourage and promote more original Singapore works” (*Report of the Advisory Council*, 1989:3). The substantive outcome of the report was that the National Arts Council (NAC) and the National Heritage Board (NHB) were established to spearhead the development of different aspects of the arts in Singapore. According to its mission statement, the NAC’s function is to “support and promote the practice of the arts by nurturing local artistic and creative talent; to actively promote Singaporean arts and artists both here and abroad ... to provide and manage a number of different performance and exhibition-related facilities for the arts, and constantly strive to attract to Singapore a wide range of international artistic talent and events (<http://www.nac.gov.sg>). In turn, the NHB seeks to “explore and present the culture and heritage of Singapore through the collection, preservation, interpretation and display of objects and records so as to promote a better understanding of our roots and instill a sense of national identity in Singaporeans” (<http://www.nhb.gov.sg>). The decision to establish the Esplanade was also the direct outcome of the Council’s recommendation.

In sum, the Ong Teng Cheong report was an important watershed in the development of the arts and culture in Singapore. However, in its focus on specific strategies and recommendations, the Report did not champion either an economic or socio-political agenda, acknowledging both roundly in the vision statement. To that extent, the Report did the work of focusing attention on the development of culture and the arts in Singapore but, as a document, did not appear to privilege such development for either economic or socio-political ends.

By the 1990s, two other discourses and related policies had also emerged: that of globalisation and regionalisation in the area of economic development, and that of developing a world class city and a “gracious society” in the area of socio-cultural and urban development.

In an earlier section, I have already discussed the strategy of globalisation and regionalisation as a means of maintaining and extending Singapore's economy. In the 1990s, there was an explosion of attention to this strategy, as reflected in government-led efforts to establish businesses in China and India, for example, and further exhortations for Singaporeans to venture overseas. Public discourse was acutely focused on this phenomenon, if evident in nothing else, then in the 461 pages of text generated from a search of newspaper articles from one local daily between 1992 and mid 1996 with the keyword "globalisation".

In terms of developing the city and society, the state engaged in a high-profile public discourse about developing a "world class city". In 1991, the government launched *Living The Next Lap*, a document to guide the city's development, covering all the key areas of life, from housing and education to defence. In 1992, the ruling People's Action Party used it as its election manifesto. A key component of this vision is the Revised Concept Plan, a planning blueprint put together mainly by the Urban Redevelopment Authority, intended to help Singapore "make a quantum leap" in the quality of its environment (*Living the Next Lap*, 1991:3) so that there would be a developed city for (a) business, (b) living and (c) leisure, and one (d) with world class transportation, and (e) endowed with nature. While planning for Singaporeans, the blueprint also took cognisance of the need to retain a quality foreign workforce, and the need to give increasing consideration to the preferences of professional and skilled workers, be it in housing, leisure or other facilities.

Particularly from the mid-1990s, the state has also developed a public rhetoric that emphasises the development of a "gracious society", an apparent shift from the earlier emphasis on economic development *per se*. For example, in a speech addressing youth leaders in 1996, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong outlined his vision for Singapore's socio-cultural development whereby the country is characterised by a civic-conscious and gracious people, and an intellectual, cultivated, compassionate and caring society. It is one in which universities will be throbbing with ideas, and where there is a thriving arts scene. While there is no serious suggestion that economic growth should be halted, the idea that the 'non-tangible aspects of life' need greater priority gained wider currency, as expressed in the Prime Minister's view that there is more to being a successful country than having lots of money. Rather, a successful country is one in which its people are able to appreciate

the finer things in life and are concerned for one another and public property (*The Straits Times*, 22 April 1996). One measure of a more gracious and cultivated people while keeping up with the pressures that he suggested was the ability to enjoy good music. He used that as a metaphor for the finer things in life which reflected his larger statement that the arts were important to Singapore because they made for a more thinking, gracious and sophisticated society.

Given the lack of public attention paid to the 1985 recommendations for the development of a cultural economy, the paucity of concrete developments in the years immediately following, the even acknowledgement of the socio-cultural, political and economic role of the arts in the Ong Teng Cheong report, and the emergence of other discourses in the public arena, particularly on the importance of developing a “gracious, cultivated” society, it is tempting to conclude that the state is now focusing on developing the arts in Singapore for its own sake. Despite the rhetoric, I will argue, based on my analysis of other state pronouncements as well as concrete actions, that some extremely hard-headed economics underlies the recent promotion of artistic and cultural activities. Indeed, the economic works through the socio-cultural, illustrating its hegemony.

Evidence that the state became cognisant of the economic potential of culture and the arts at the highest level may be found in the pronouncements that were emanating from no less than the Minister for Information and the Arts, George Yeo⁸, as well as from other government Members of Parliament (MPs) and leaders of government bodies. Yeo was most active among Ministers in publicly suggesting that “to be competitive in the next phase of our national development, we need to promote the arts” (Yeo, 1991:56) and that while Singapore had been “an international market for rubber, for spices, for oil, for Asian Currency Units, for gold futures, and for many other things”, it also hoped to be “an international market for the arts” (Yeo, 1993:66). This was because

We should see the arts not as luxury or mere consumption but as investment in people and the environment. We need a strong development of the arts to help make Singapore one of the major hub cities of the world. ... We also need the arts to help us produce goods and services which are competitive in the world market. We need an artistic culture ... we also need taste. With taste, we will be able to produce goods and services of far greater value (Yeo, 1991:54).

⁸ George Yeo was Minister for Information and the Arts until mid-1999.

Some of these views were echoed by government MP Heng Chiang Meng, who used economic arguments to ask for better financial support of cultural activities. He suggested that

...such funding can be viewed as supporting an infant industry. Looking at the arts industry in London and New York, I see no reason why Singapore cannot be a major arts centre if we put our minds to it ... all the necessary ingredients for the promotion of arts as an exportable industry are here ...(*Parliamentary Debates*, 21/3/91, col. 944-46).

He cited for support the view that a wide range of industrial products needed not only to be functional and durable, but that increasingly, there was demand that they were also well-designed and aesthetically pleasing. Hence an artistic base was crucial to industrial progress.

Then Executive Director of the NAC, Foo Meng Liang, also expressed the view that there are economic reasons for arts promotion, citing figures to show how the arts in UK provided half-a-million jobs and accounted for 27% of the earnings from tourism in 1987 and how the arts created about 110,000 jobs in the New York-New Jersey area, and generated an annual turnover of US\$9.8 billion (*Art vs Art*, 1995:29). The Chairman of the NAC, Liu Thai Ker, also articulated the view that there was nothing wrong in the arts being “aligned with economic impetuses”. He argued that while the arts was traditionally associated with the need to be subsidised, the government now recognised that the economic gains were potentially far greater than the expenditure, which made government spending on the arts justifiable. His view was that investment in the arts was the act of a “responsible government” (Personal interview, 12 May 1997).

Given this recognition, the government began to pursue more rigorously policies and strategies to harness the economic potential of the arts particularly in the 1990s. All three types of cultural economic policies that Frith (1991) identified are evident. First, the state, through its agencies such as the Economic Development Board (EDB) and Trade Development Board (TDB), has been aggressive in promoting an industrial cultural policy, defined as the local production of cultural goods to be consumed nationally or exported. Examples of cultural goods are electronic goods (the radio, discman etc.), the mass media (film, television programmes etc.), artistic productions (theatre, dance etc.) and fashion. As part of the promotional strategy, in 1990, the EDB set up a Creative Services

Strategic Business Unit, later renamed the Creative Business Programme, to “develop Singapore into a centre of excellence for the various creative industries” (EDB, 1992:2). In 1991, it developed a Creative Services Development Plan as the blueprint for the development of the four major sectors, defined as film and music, media, design, and arts and entertainment (EDB Press Release, 10 December 1991).

The development plan was translated into specific goals and actions. In terms of the film-making industry, the EDB's aim was to develop Singapore into a movie production centre and a film hub for international film-makers. This economic investment was envisaged to involve transfer of technology, job and training opportunities, and potential business for the hotel and tourist industries. The EDB therefore sought to bring companies from Europe, the US, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Australia to establish world-class facilities such as film laboratories, movie studios, production and post-production services (EDB, 1992:3). A whole range of other incentives were introduced, for example: (a) pioneer status and a five to ten year tax holiday to companies which produce movies in Singapore on a long-term basis; (b) waiver of withholding tax on income for foreign stars and creative talents such as producers, directors, costume and set designers, lighting and sound engineers in the movie industry; (c) investment allowance incentive for pioneer status companies, in which a write-off against taxable income of up to 50 % of costs incurred in purchasing new equipment is granted, in order to encourage investments in high-tech equipment (d) sponsorship grants to training consultants who train develop and transfer expertise and knowledge to Singaporeans; and (e) waiver of script censorship for producers who want to make movies in Singapore develop and transfer expertise and knowledge to Singaporeans (EDB, 1992:4-5). In April 1998, the Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA) gave a further boost to the industry by setting up a Singapore Film Commission, with S\$2.5 million worth of grants from the EDB, the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) and MITA to disburse as scholarships and seed money for film projects so as to encourage Singaporeans to produce good Singapore-made films (Tong, 28 April 1998:3).

Similar attention was paid to other industries such as the video and music industries. The government's two-pronged approach to enhance the capabilities of the video industry with state-of-the-art equipment and talents involved (a) enhancing capabilities to ensure a growing pool of trained personnel by introducing training grants;

and (b) promoting niche players who are capable of penetrating the world market with their special programmes and service such as telemovies and documentaries, for example, Asian Business Report, a locally-produced TV programme which is shown internationally (EDB, 1992:7). Within the music industry, tax incentives have also attracted companies such as East Gate Technology and P+O Compact Disc to establish themselves in Singapore and bring with them their high precision CD Mastering and Replication equipment and highly-trained engineers and technicians to produce CDs in Singapore. These state-of-the-art facilities have provided “synergies” (Thrift and Olds, 1996), such that Singapore has become able to “provide value-added creative services for recording companies and artistes to produce their work even more economically and within the shortest time possible” (EDB, 1992:9).

In the area of art, the TDB and EDB have also helped to promote a major international art and antiques fair in Singapore, Tresors d’Arts. Since 1993, Tresors has become a major annual event. The fair brings major art galleries and antique dealers from Asia and Europe to Singapore and attracts collectors, buyers, sellers, dealers and art professionals from all over the world. To facilitate this, the government has decreed that profits of dealers derived from transactions on behalf of non-resident clients with approved auction houses qualify for a special concessionary tax rate of 10% instead of the normal corporate tax rate of 27%. The Goods and Services Tax is also lifted from non-resident buyers, which is encouraging for those who come to auction houses and art galleries here, for example. To attract foreign arts-related personnel so that they may contribute to the knowledge transfer and the production of arts products, the state has also introduced more liberal rules for granting permanent residence to artists, art authenticators, valuers, restorers, collectors, reviewers, art historians and other personnel required to support the art and antique industries (Yeo, 1993:66).

The production of cultural goods to be exported is also encouraged. Under the National Arts Council’s new International Relations Unit (established in 1998), cultural acts by groups/individuals are selected to perform elsewhere so as to enhance their reputation, to sell the image that Singapore is not only a city of business but a city of arts as well, and to earn revenue. Thus, an early effort in this direction involved NAC’s selection of 17 art groups/individuals as its pioneer group which was marketed at the

Australian Arts Market in Adelaide in early 1998. The effort was repeated in December 1998 in Montreal.

While aggressively pursuing an industrial cultural policy, the state has also adopted a tourist cultural policy and an urban cosmetics policy which reinforce each other. This is reflected most unequivocally in a statement by government MP Yu-Foo Yee Shoon (*Parliamentary Debates*, 23 March 1990, col. 764) that Singapore was well-placed to “absorb the best of Eastern and Western arts and culture for the smooth development of tourism and economic development” so that **both** tourists and international investors could enjoy “a certain degree of cultural life”. The value of culture and the arts to tourism is acknowledged by Tong Min Way, Director of Corporate Affairs at MITA, who announced in 1995 that the state intended to develop “cultural tourism” as a “distinct industry” (Brady, 1995). At the same time, Minister George Yeo (1993:65) has made explicit the fact that the multitudinous actions to generate artistic activity in Singapore also belie an urban cosmetic policy:

We want to make Singapore a centre for the arts partly for its own sake and partly because we need the arts to help make us a centre for brain services. We want talent from all over the world to meet here, to work here and to live here. They must enjoy being here – the people, the food, the music, the cosmopolitan air. We cannot work the magic without the arts. This is why we will be spending quite a lot of money – about a billion dollars – over the next five to 10 years building new cultural facilities and expanding existing ones.”

Tamney (1996:154) has expressed this pointedly as the government's belief that “educated, affluent people will be more content if there are various artistic and literary works for their amusement and enlightenment”.

In specific terms, a clear tourism strategy has been developed, part of which emphasises culture and the arts. More broad-based attempts to create a city throbbing with arts and cultural activities so that it may be attractive to investors and “foreign talent” have taken the form of developing infrastructure to make Singapore a “regional hub” or a “global city for the arts” (*The Straits Times*, 1 June 1997; 27 August 1997; 1 April 1998).

The STB has aggressively developed a strategy for tourism development in a blueprint called *Tourism 21*, which adopts a cluster development approach in the development of the industry. It identifies 13 different areas of “themed attractions”, including “culture and heritage”, and “arts and entertainment”. In terms of culture and heritage, the STB has sought to revitalise various “thematic districts”, including Chinatown, Singapore River, Little India and Kampong Glam, emphasising the culture and history of these areas (see Kong and Yeoh, 1994; Chang, 1996), developing interpretive centres and walking guides which cover historical and cultural walking trails through the districts. It has also organised, co-organised or sponsored a series of cultural events such as the Singapore River Hong Bao '98 (with fireworks, variety shows and night stalls to welcome the Chinese New Year), and Chingay Parade (touted as “one of the most exciting and grandest cultural events in South-East Asia, featuring the best multi-cultural performing groups and marching bands from Singapore and all over the world” (<http://www.stb.com.sg>)). To attract tourists to Singapore, the STB has held overseas promotions of these events through regional tour operators and travel agents (Seah, 1997).

While the STB has worked with the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), particularly in enhancing the culture and heritage of thematic districts, in terms of arts and entertainment, it has worked closely with the NAC and EDB to bring in popular performances. More and more major pop and rock acts are bringing their touring machines, from Michael Jackson, Paul Simon and Natalie Cole to Jacky Cheung and Anita Mui, which has brought in their train regional audiences, particularly rich Filipino and Indonesian youngsters (*Art vs Art*, 1995:147). London West End and Broadway musicals have also been brought in, such as *Cats* and *Les Miserables*, not only to “keep Singaporeans entertained” but to “draw art lovers from other parts of the region” (Brady, 1995). This is done in full recognition that “for every dollar spent on a theater ticket, six or seven more are spent on related services” such as meals, lodging and souvenirs (Brady, 1995). For this reason, the EDB has “opened doors” for companies such as Cameron Mackintosh Pte Ltd, thus encouraging it to set up a Southeast Asian base in Singapore, as has Andrew Lloyd Webber's Really Useful Group (Brady, 1995:40). The outcome of the synergies generated is that big companies have bought blocks of seats for performances, catering to touring groups - “just as they do in Sydney, New York and London” (Brady, 1995:40). Indeed, George Yeo (1993:65) has used *Cats* and *Les Miserables* as measure of success, indicating that if they are able to attract not only

Singaporeans but also bring in audiences from the region, then “Singapore will be on its way to being a theatre hub in Southeast Asia”.

The various attempts to make Singapore a regional hub for the arts have been further enhanced by a huge injection of funds by the state to the tune of S\$1 billion to develop new and upgrade old cultural facilities. In particular, a new Singapore Arts Centre (SAC, named the Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay) is being constructed by 2001, with a complex of four theatres, a concert hall and studios. Its Executive Director (Robert Lau) sees it to comprise sufficient facilities to cater to the needs of the “240 million people in the region” rather than the 3 million in Singapore (Personal interview, 20 May 1997). When completed, the Esplanade will have a 1,600 seat concert hall, three smaller theatres, and a 2,000 seat Lyric Theatre. It will cater to both classical and popular events. Another major initiative on which the significant budget has been spent is in the development of three museums, the Singapore History Museum, the Singapore Art Museum and the Asian Civilisations Museum, under the aegis of a National Heritage Board established in 1993. Together, these museums will present the trends and developments that have characterised and shaped life and history in Singapore (Singapore History Museum), the contemporary art of Southeast Asia (Singapore Art Museum), and the ancestral cultures of Singaporeans, namely, through the Southeast Asian, South Asian, East Asian and West Asian collections (Asian Civilisations Museum).

The “mutedness” of social-cultural and political agendas?

Compared to the aggressiveness with which cultural economic policies have been pursued, the state has been relatively muted in pushing socio-political agendas via cultural policy in the 1980s and 1990s. Public rhetoric by state leaders continued periodically about the importance of culture and arts development as part of nation-building (Ker, 1994:113) and the importance of artists in helping to record, preserve, and propagate Singapore’s cultural heritage so that “subsequent generations of people [may] understand their roots better, and know what binds them as a people and as a nation” (Wong, 1987:38-39).

Probably the most significant programmes developed during this period which reflected the state’s socio-cultural and political agendas were those aimed at developing a sense of national identity and those designed to bring the arts to the community. The

former is best exemplified in the "Sing Singapore" programme introduced in 1988 and held in some form or other every two years since then.⁹ This involved the penning and popularisation of songs in a "Sing Singapore" package, intended to achieve an ideologically hegemonic effect. Through various means of dissemination (including the constant airing on national television and radio; the organisation of community singing sessions in community centres; and teaching schoolchildren these songs during school assembly time at the directive of the Ministry of Education), an attempt was made to persuade and reinforce in Singaporeans the idea that Singapore has come a long way since its founding (in 1819) and independence (in 1965); and that Singaporeans must play their part in continuing this dramatic development (see Kong, 1995). In all of these, the ultimate concern is to develop in Singaporeans a love for their country, a sense of patriotism, and a willingness to support the ruling elite who have led the country through the short years since independence to tremendous development. As Yeo Ning Hong, then Minister for Communications and Information, wrote in his message for the "Sing Singapore" songbook,

Singing the songs will bring Singaporeans together, to share our feelings one with another. It will bring back shared memories of good times and hard times, of times which remind us of who we are, where we came from, what we did, and where we are going. It will bring together Singaporeans of different races and backgrounds, to share and to express the spirit of the community, the feeling of togetherness, the feeling of oneness. This, in essence, is what the "Sing Singapore" programme is about (*Sing Singapore*, 1988: no p.).

The second component of cultural policy and strategy during this period which underscored socio-cultural agendas was the concern to infuse in the population at large an interest in the arts, reflecting the Prime Minister's vision of making Singapore a "gracious society". This has been attempted through three types of programmes at the NAC: arts exposure, experience and excursion. Through "arts exposure", the NAC brings performances to schools in the hope that students will benefit from the exposure to particular art forms. Through "arts experience", students are invited to participate in activities such as workshops, playwriting and sculpting. Through "arts excursions", students are brought to performances in theatre and music, for example, and given the opportunity to talk to directors and performers so that they may have a better

⁹ The Sing Singapore Programme, a bi-annual event was started in 1988 by MITA and was subsequently taken over by NAC in 1994, when it became renamed Sing Singapore: Festival of Songs '94. In 1996, it was named Song Fest'96 and in 1998, it was back to Sing Singapore: Festival of Songs '98.

appreciation of what engagement in the arts entails. In addition, the NAC has also sought to bring the arts to the community through performances in public places such as public libraries and community centres. It has been working with the People's Association¹⁰ in the co-location of arts groups in some of the community centres, and to construct Black Boxes there. It has also held a successful "Concert in the Park" series, the frequency of which was recently increased from once to twice a month (*The Straits Times*, 10 October 1997). It has sought to make performances more affordable, including fringe programmes in arts festivals to reach out to the general public (Foo, 1995:30).

While these various efforts clearly have socio-cultural and/or political agendas, it may also be argued that the "socio-cultural" services the "economic" as well. In this regard, reference may be made to the state-vaunted view that Singapore's economic development can be achieved only if Singaporeans are willing to support their political leaders and want to play their part in the country's growth. Therefore, efforts to inculcate such commitment to their country and leaders, may at least in part, be aimed at ensuring that conditions for economic development are maintained. Cultural policy, as part of the arsenal to shore up psychological and social defence¹¹, thus serves indirectly to enhance Singapore's economic development. Such is the hegemony of a developmentalist vision. The logic, however, does not end there, for, in a circular way, economic development that is maintained or enhanced becomes a form of political legitimacy for the ruling elites.

¹⁰ The People's Association was formed in 1960 and its mission is to promote racial harmony and social cohesion through mass participation in educational, social, cultural, sports and recreational, and other community activities.

¹¹ Social and psychological defence form part of Singapore's total defence strategy. The former refers to the promotion of cohesion amongst Singapore's diverse groups so that external subversion through the exploitation of primordial sentiments would be minimised while ideals are fully shared by all Singaporeans. Psychological defence is defined as "the means of winning the hearts and minds of the people and preparing them to confront any national crisis" (Seah, 1989:956).

CULTURAL POLICY IN SINGAPORE: THE VIEW FROM 'WITHIN'

The primacy of the state's economic agenda is principally at odds with the views and intents of arts practitioners.¹² In this section, I will focus on one area of divergence (in relation to the primacy of economic intentions) and one of convergence (in relation to the need for community involvement) between the state and practitioners in their view of state cultural policy.

Practitioners are critical of the state's interpretation of Singapore as a regional centre for the arts. This is because they read into the state's strategy purely economic intents:

I think it's quite clear that what the government means by developing the arts is for a very economic kind of reason. Big touring groups that come in, big musicals, pop concerts. Michael Jackson is the arts to them. And that's the truth, this newfound interest in the arts and the SAC, a lot of it is economic ... I know a lot of people will be dazzled. You just see all this analysis of how much money the Michael Jackson concert alone generated in the economy. And you get these cash registers ringing in everybody's mind (Simon¹³, playwright, director and actor).

However, providing the "hardware" (infrastructure and facilities) without concomitant attention to the "software" (creative development) (Tim, artistic director, arts company) is deemed regressive for the development of local/indigenous arts, and Tim argues that the only outcome will be that

... with all the sophisticated and well-developed infrastructure, Singapore will be a good magnet for tourists, travellers, convention goers and other people who are involved in international conferences to stop over and savour international culture in Singapore but there will be little place for local communities to develop their own art forms. ... Exhibitions like the Guggenheim will be quite happy to come to Singapore. Cats and Les Miserables will be quite happy to show in Singapore, given all the incentives and help. And I think given the kind of commercial development we have in film, we'll have some of the most up-to-date Hollywood movies or movies from all over the world being shown in Singapore. So we will be a kind of place where top-rate acts from all over the world will be available at all times. ... It's also the same for the visual arts, in terms of art fairs like Tresors and big auctions like Sotheby's and Christie's. There will be this global flavour that takes place, but there will not be anything indigenous worth talking about. This is a serious problem.

¹² The discussion in this section is drawn mainly from personal interviews conducted in May 1997 with a range of 'practitioners' such as playwrights, directors, actors/actresses and dancers.

¹³ All practitioners have been given pseudonyms unless their views already appear in published form.

He goes on to argue that it will make Singapore “a kind of emporium for the arts ... another retail space in Singapore”.

Why do practitioners hold this negative view of state initiatives which ostensibly will serve the arts well? As David (playwright) articulates, it is because with such heavy financial investment in the Esplanade, there is a need to “go for surefire successes” which will cover the cost of renting the spaces and eventually recovering the investment. He, and other practitioners like Simon and Tim, all recognise that few local groups can afford to use the spaces. Certainly, as Edwin (playwright) articulates, “profit-making theatre” will be favoured above “exploratory, indigenous forms”, with the result that

people who are still exploring new forms feel the pressure to have to abandon more of those projects and go for more audience determined plays so that they can economically justify [their work], so that they can feel that there is an audience to their theatre.

Apart from the inability to compete on financial grounds, artistically, local groups are still experimenting and finding a distinctively Singapore idiom, and are of the opinion that they will not yet be able to draw the crowds in the same way that foreign acts will. As architect and critic Tay Kheng Soon put it,

What is the SAC? It's primarily a number of big concert halls to host, under very salubrious conditions, the top performing groups from the developed world as they cycle through Asia. What will that do in terms of taste for Singapore experimental art? Zero! Because the Singaporean who has seen these tremendous shows will look down upon local productions (*Commentary*, 1993:66).

For that reason, Simon is of the opinion that the Esplanade is “a huge mistake” because it signals the decision to “push back the schedule for developing the small performing spaces in favour of bringing forward the large facilities.”

Tim also pursues a similar argument about the development of exhibition spaces. He argues that the establishment of the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) in 1995 has meant that few other venues will be developed for exhibitions, on the assumption that there was now a national gallery which promoted and displayed, inter alia, local art. Yet, he argues, SAM does not rent its galleries to artists for exhibitions nor can non-SAM staff seek to curate exhibitions since all exhibitions at SAM are curated internally. Any exhibition

proposal had to be scrutinised by the curators at a curatorial meeting with regards to the relevance to the museum's mission and the Singaporean audience before it is recommended to SAM's Art Acquisition and Exhibition Committee for approval. The protracted and stringent process leaves little room for local artists to grow through small-scale exhibitions. As things stand, artists were feeling the crunch for exhibition space as retail giants such as Takashimaya closed down/converted their gallery spaces for other commercial use with the downturn of the economy in the mid-1990s.

Practitioners also held an unequivocal view about the need for local artistic development. As Tim highlighted, no regional or global hub for the arts

whether it was London or Paris in the past, whether it's New York today or Tokyo, can ever hope to achieve that kind of status without having at least as strong a basis of indigenous works as it does for international platforms.

Across the different art forms, practitioners called for the opportunity to develop "something unique to us" (Henry, film organiser and music critic), "real local arts ... from the locals and related to local things ... something that people are familiar with and can understand" (Irene, dancer). Playwright and director Kuo Pao Kun asked pointedly:

Can we have a Singapore Arts Centre by just bringing all the arts of the world to Singapore without our own education, without our own creativity (*Art vs Art*, 1995:145)?

In effect, they subscribe to a view of the arts as "rooted in an understanding of local cultural resources" (Bianchini, 1993b:212). As Mahizhnan (*Art vs Art*: 1995:34) points out, articulating the views of many practitioners, economic returns should not be the fundamental reason for supporting the arts. They should be the by-product.

Minister George Yeo is, however, unpersuaded by these arguments, and has spoken unequivocally about the state's continued intention to provide opportunities for foreign acts to perform in Singapore and indeed, to facilitate it:

Nothing is more inimical to the development of the arts than a false nationalism which tries to protect a market under the guise of safeguarding some misconceived national essence. We offer Singapore as a venue and as a stage for artists and those who enjoy the Arts from all over the world (Yeo, 1992:114).

From this perspective, he is committed to keep the doors open to “foreign talent”, as in “every other aspect of our national life”, for “[i]f the arts in Singapore are only by Singaporeans for Singaporeans, we will get nowhere for we are too small ... Singapore is Singapore only because our national spirit is a cosmopolitan one (Yeo, 1994:36). Furthermore, the state has countered that it has not neglected the development of local arts, pointing out that it channels significant funding to local groups and offers old buildings to house them in the NAC’s Arts Housing Scheme at subsidised rates¹⁴ (Brady, 1995). Yet, scrutiny of the budget makes a poignant point: while \$1.65 million is channeled (in 1996) to the provision of housing for 41 local arts groups, two art institutions and 26 individual artists, \$667 million is expended on the construction of the Esplanade (*National Arts Council Annual Report*, 1996).

Given the clear signals from the state, practitioners and critics have sought to negotiate their preferred socio-cultural agendas within the constraints of the state’s economic agenda in a number of ways. First, and probably the most effective strategy, is the deliberate but difficult process of developing “alternative arts spaces” in Singapore. Chief among these is the Substation, an arts centre established in 1990, which its artistic director, T. Sasitharan, defines as serving to

- Nurture and develop promising, young Singapore artists;
- Encourage Singapore artists to be innovative and bold in thought and work;
- Facilitate arts appreciation among as wide an audience as possible;
- Promote interaction among artists and art lovers of different national, cultural and linguistic backgrounds;
- Raise the level of critical and intellectual discourse on arts and foster research, study and rigour in artistic practice; and
- Be a centre for an emerging Southeast Asian aesthetic, incorporating the rich visual, musical, performance and literary traditions of the region.

The Substation houses a 120-seat theatrette, and an art gallery, a dance studio, two multipurpose rooms, a garden courtyard for performances and other arts events, an art shop and a box office, and has become a central place to young local artists, providing a

¹⁴ An arts administrator with a professional drama group, however, highlights the problems of limited space, yearly leases (and hence uncertainty), and the need to share facilities with far too many other groups to be effective (Mary, Personal interview, 8 May 1997).

space for rehearsals, installations, workshops and performances, offering a “home to cultivate and foster imaginations, *particularly those that find other spaces inhospitable*” (Artistic statement, T. Sasitharan, <http://www.substation.org.sg>; emphasis added). The opportunities it affords new artist(e)s and new styles has rendered it “an alternative space for the arts” by default, in Sasitharan’s view:

In Singapore, so much of the established spaces and companies happen to be working with what is considered very mainstream or middle-of-the-road work, so any company which tends to do anything a little off-centre is considered alternative. And that is the position of the Substation. ... When we do an experimental theatre presentation, or when we do something about experimental music or contemporary music, contemporary visual arts, which no one else happens to be doing, that is what we become identified with.

The Substation provided one of the first Black Boxes in Singapore in contrast to the prosceniums of large theatres such as the NAC-run Victoria Theatre. This “empowered new actors and new groups and incorporated them even though they had no voice training and no technology” and therefore “allowed more people access into theatre” (Edwin). Simon articulates the view that the Substation and other alternative spaces have been important for the development of Singapore arts because they are “sanctuaries of experimentation where one can learn from failure” because the pressure to fill audience spaces is not as great and “a culture of development” is evident. This is particularly important, in his view, because the Singaporean

... has this intense fear of failing, of being deemed a flop. That is sort of very troublesome and counter-productive when it comes to the arts, in particular, theatre, when you realise that the moment you dare not fail, any sort of development is impossible because you are constantly going in this circumscribed circle rather than expanding the circle.

Cited alongside the Substation as an “alternative space” which nurtured local artists is the now defunct Artists’ Village¹⁵, a spontaneous development that sprung up around artist Tang Dawu in a village environment, “miles away from proper roads, off a beaten path, and providing a very nice area for artists to work in” (James, artist). Tim saw it to be an important milestone in the development of Singapore art, for “single-handedly, Dawu introduced contemporary visual arts, and really, most of the significant artists who are practising to this day in the contemporary field were in one sense or

¹⁵ It was closed down because the state took back the rental units for development purposes.

another associated with Dawu.” In Henry’s words, the Artists’ Village “accepted and embraced art and gave space for its development”.

A second strategy of negotiation that practitioners have adopted is to work within the parameters set up by the state. This has primarily taken the form of a call for space within the Esplanade, if not a more open call for the Esplanade to support local groups. Simon expresses this most pointedly when he argues that the Esplanade should be a “dedicated space for performing arts in Singapore by Singaporean artistes”. He nevertheless acknowledged there was also a need to bring in foreign performances so that there could be “synergy, opportunities for linkages and for learning”, and so suggested that, if the Esplanade could not be a space for Singaporean artistes alone, it could at least have a resident local group. Otherwise, he argued, “it cannot be the Singapore Arts Centre”.

Finally, critics and practitioners seek their own ideological spaces by (re)interpreting the state’s cultural policy, focusing particularly on the Esplanade as the site of (re)interpretation. The most strident perhaps amongst those leading the ideological charge is Janadas Devan, writer and critic, who takes the view that the state is interested to develop the Esplanade only as a symbol of its “power and glory”. He argues that if the needs of the practitioners are for small drama centres, small performance stages in community centres in various parts of the island and arts housing facilities, for example, the fact that the state was spending so much money on the one location suggests that the Esplanade was really to serve a purpose other than local cultural development (*Art vs Art*, 1995:63). He interprets it as an attempt to embody power and glory, citing other examples around the world -- such as the Taj Mahal and Versailles -- of the construction of monuments for the same ends, be it for king, emperor or state (*Art vs Art*, 1995:54). He argues that “it is precisely because art has always been about power that we are going to build for ourselves an Arts Centre. It is not an accident that the state’s involvement in the arts has taken the form of a commitment to build a monument to art” (*Art vs Art*, 1993:63). Without the wherewithal to reverse or forestall the direction of cultural policy, Janadas resorts to ideological attack on the state, claiming that as a monument, the Esplanade will be damning for the development of the arts precisely because it is a monument, because

By definition, monuments commemorate the dead. There is a kind of reciprocal structure: when you go before a monument you not only

commemorate the dead, you are struck dumb. This is the general effect of government intervention in the arts (*Art vs Art*, 1995:63).

Artistic space in Singapore is thus literally and metaphorically debated and negotiated between the state with its cultural economic policy and practitioners with their socially and culturally driven agendas.

Where there is convergence between the state and practitioners is in the area of community involvement in the arts and in the goal of cultivating an interest in the arts among Singaporeans. The NAC's efforts outlined earlier in the form of arts education and performances in community spaces are reinforced by practitioners as well. Hence, the Substation, as well as other groups such as The Necessary Stage (a professional drama company), have taken their works to housing estates, community centres, train stations and parks, as well as to schools. The community interaction between performers and people who would normally not be involved in the arts is, to Sasitharan, a way of "opening up new spaces, new horizons" (Personal interview, 15 May 1997), which can only boost socio-cultural development.

CONCLUSIONS

The development of cultural economic policies as a response to global economic restructuring is not a new phenomenon. In the case of Singapore, the initial impetus and recognition of the value of cultural industries came about because of a recession in the mid-1980s. However, cultural industries did not constitute a major part of the restructuring strategy. Instead, the immediate post recession recovery was driven primarily by strong manufacturing growth, in large part because of the economic recovery of the United States, reviving the demand for electronic products and components (Rodan, 1993:232-33). Indeed, for several years after the Economic Committee recommendations, little concrete effort seemed to be put into developing cultural industries. Subsequently, with the emergence of new state discourses and rhetoric about the premium to be placed on developing a gracious society that, *inter alia*, brimmed with artistic vibrance, little public attention was given to the notion of a cultural economy.

Yet, what I have illustrated is that, after a brief hiatus, the recommendations of the Economic Committee, and the larger implications of the value of the arts and culture for the

economy, have been noted seriously by the state. From the highest level (no less than the Minister for the Arts) to arts council staff, the view holds that culture is no longer the by-product of an economic surplus. The revival of this view in the 1990s when it never fully took off in the 1980s must be contextualised. Although Singapore was no longer dealing with a recession and was maintaining high economic growth, the state was fully cognisant of the need for diversification and the growing trend of globalisation, in which capital and people crossed borders frequently. The state was also fully cognisant that its own population and that of the region was becoming more affluent (until the 1997 economic crisis), and would be looking for new (including artistic) forms of leisure activity. Singapore's situation therefore does not mirror that of many Western cities such as Bristol, Birmingham, Glasgow, Sheffield, Manchester and Liverpool (see Bassett, 1993; Cohen *et al.*, this issue) where cultural industries are a crucial part of urban regeneration strategies in a time of economic decline. Rather, while the impetus stemmed from a time of economic recession, the actual strategisation and implementation are rooted in a time of economic expansion and globalisation, when competition to attract "global citizens" -- personnel with the requisite high technology skills -- are dependent, at least in part, on a lively urban setting, with all the trappings of a modern city in its physical and socio-cultural infrastructure. Indeed, as Landry and Bianchini (1995:4) point out, future competition between cities is likely to be based on "the ability to develop attractive images and symbols and project these effectively".

The state's readiness to seize the opportunity to develop cultural industries is also further evidence of its ideology of pragmatism and developmentalism. While in the 1960s and 1970s, there was significant caution in importing "western culture", there is greater laxity in the 1990s. A generous interpretation of this turn in demeanour is the greater confidence of a nation in its own identity. At the same time, it is also possible that the call of economic gains compensate some perceived dangers. This is the hegemony of the economic in Singapore.

However, hegemony is never total. As I have illustrated, cultural practitioners are less concerned with economic generation than with cultural regeneration, more persuaded as they are by "community self-development and self-expression" (Bassett, 1993: 1785). In seeking to develop a Singapore idiom and an indigenous voice in their cultural products, they endeavour to draw from local cultural resources as well as to contribute to community

life, so much so that artistic and cultural activities may become part of the warp and woof of daily life, generating a pulse and rhythm in the city. The cultural spaces that they seek are those in which “[a]rt, artists and art-lovers mingle, muse and meditate”, and where there is room “for eloquent failures as for resounding successes” (Artistic statement, T. Sasitharan, <http://www.substation.org.sg>). Economic imperatives, on the other hand, emphasise “growth and property development and find expression in prestige projects and place marketing” (Bassett, 1993:1785). The trouble is economic drive does not necessarily contribute to cultural regeneration. There is a danger that urban cultural entrepreneurialism will create a city in which economic spectacle replaces cultural substance and “aesthetics replaces ethics” (Harvey, 1989:102). As Bianchini (1993b:212) argued, to be truly effective, cultural policies should not be measured purely by income or employment generated but should contribute towards improvement in the quality of life, social cohesion and community development. Cultural policy should contribute to the development of cities as “cultural entities - as places where people meet, talk, share ideas and desires, and where identities and lifestyles are formed”. In that way, the arts can become a part of people's daily lives, socially and economically. Only then can the arts be a part of the wider community rather than an appendage to it (Wynne, 1992:x). This, Wynne (1992:x) argues, will make the arts a true investment, providing both economic returns and quality of life.

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