

## The Singapore Story through a History of Arts and Cultural Policies

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When Singapore attained self-government in 1959, a Ministry of Culture was established with Mr S Rajaratnam as its first Minister. Central to the ministry's founding was the belief that the shaping of a Malayan culture should be a conscious, deliberate and organised effort. The importance of culture to the state was very much evident then. Yet, the much-told Singapore Story has often privileged narratives on the economy, security or foreign policy, and arts and cultural policies have hardly enjoyed any prominent place in this story.

Despite the ideological relevance of the arts and culture to Singapore's nation-building project, they have been studied in an ad hoc manner by local scholars. The numerous pieces of excellent scholarship, though well-focused, have been issue and period specific. The absence of a documented historical account prompted the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) to commission a volume of essays to trace the trajectory of arts and cultural policies in Singapore from the 1950s to the present day.

The book is nearing completion, with 19 chapters covering key policies and programmes such as the setting up of the National Arts Council, the inauguration of the Singapore Arts Festival, and the development of the Renaissance City concept. To invite feedback and discussion on some of the draft chapters, IPS organised a conference on "A History of Arts and Cultural Policies in Singapore" on 27 October 2014. Close to 130 arts practitioners, academics and policy-makers attended the full-day conference.

The significance of cultural policies was elaborated on by IPS Director Janadas Devan during the conference's opening remarks. Referring to the writings of the venerated cultural historian Raymond Williams, Mr Devan suggested that the history of cultural policies in Singapore could serve as "a window to the evolution of our self-conception — as a people, as a society, as a country". Understanding the history of these policies, moreover, raises the questions of where we came from, what happened, and what might have been.

Dr Terence Chong, editor of the book and Senior Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, spoke about the volume's aims and significance. According to Dr Chong, the book would examine the state's role and vision for the arts and culture in Singapore, and how policies and institutions have shaped the artistic and cultural landscape through the

“bureaucratic imagination of the arts”. He added that it was vital for policies to be contextualised as responses to particular needs in specific time periods.

The conference consisted of three sessions, which were arranged chronologically to reflect the different historical phases of arts and cultural policies in Singapore. The first session, which examined the policies implemented in the 1950s to the 1980s, saw educator Lim Cheng Tju examine the “anti-yellow culture movement” that spanned the 1950s to the 1970s.

In the second session covering policies from the 1980s to 2000, Ms Audrey Wong, Programme Leader of the MA Arts and Cultural Management Programme at LASALLE College of the Arts, reviewed the Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts that was released in 1989. The Singapore Writers Festival (SWF) was the research topic of Associate Professor Angelia Poon, Deputy Head (Programmes & Teaching) of the English Language & Literature Department at the National Institute of Education, and she used the SWF as a lens to consider the state of literary culture in Singapore. Also in the session was Mr Lee Weng Choy, President of the Singapore Section of the International Association of Art Critics. As the Artistic Co-Director of the Substation from 2000 to 2009, he recounted how artists and the Substation engaged and negotiated with the authorities to realise their artistic visions.

The last session took into account the arts and cultural policies from the 2000s onwards and involved presentations from four authors. In his presentation on the Censorship Review Committee, IPS Senior Research Fellow Tan Tarn How underscored the importance of context when examining the approaches to censorship while Associate Professor T C Chang of the Department of Geography at the National University of Singapore assessed the significance of the Arts Housing Scheme (1985–2010), which provided spaces to artists. Another topic presented pertained to arts education. Mr Shaun Oon, Senior Assistant Director, Enterprise Division at the Ministry of Trade and Industry, elaborated on the policy considerations behind the establishment of the various arts schools in Singapore. Finally, IPS Research Fellow Hoe Su Fern examined the perceived paradigm shift in focus for arts and cultural policy-making in Singapore through an analysis of the Arts and Cultural Strategic Review that was initiated in 2010.

In his closing remarks, IPS Special Research Adviser Arun Mahizhnan said that the book would provide a factually-accurate chronological review of the arts and cultural policies in Singapore, as well as an analytical framework to understand and contextualise these arts and cultural policies according to the contemporary nation-building interests.

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