

**Presentation by Mr Fong Hoe Fang, Publisher, Ethos Books
at IPS-SAM Spotlight on Cultural Policy Series Five:
Roundtable on Whither Arts Funding: Priorities, Values and Control
on Friday, 2 March 2018, 9am, Glass Hall, Singapore Art Museum**

At Sea with Literary Arts Funding in Singapore

My presentation is a story. Rest assured, it is not a fake story.

In the late 1990s, when Ethos Books first started publishing, we put out three collections of poetry by three unknown writers. The collections were funded by my company, Pagesetters Services, which was then into advertising and communication design. We had no idea of funding schemes from the government then, but we went ahead with the project on our own because we found the poetry manuscripts beautifully written, and because I actually like poetry and felt that there was a bit of a desert in this area.

The three writers were Aaron Lee, Alvin Pang and David Leo. The books were very well received and occupy pride of place in my library even today. More important, the three writers continued to write, and are quite, quite distinguished in the writing community.

Perhaps a year or so later, a senior executive from the National Arts Council (NAC) approached me for a chat. He wanted to know why I decided to publish poetry, whether it was profitable, where we would get money from *et cetera*. I told him that we had actually lost quite a bit of money so far on the project and we knew that right from the start. But we thought it worthwhile because of the socio-cultural capital which the books would create. He thought I was mad. He did not say so explicitly then, but sometimes when people think you are mad, you will know it.

Anyway, in that conversation, we talked about art forms and funding, about whether it was necessary to quantify the value of the literary arts, whether profitability was a good or even sufficient measure of the quality and success of the writing.

These are questions which will surface time and again, and I hope some of us will ask and suggest answers today. The long and short of it was that I supported literature because for me, it is an art form which can reason, criticise and inspire the mind and heart far better than any work of conceptual or visual art.

We had discussions about the value of the literary arts and what it could possibly contribute to society. I spoke about my apprehension over arguments that only things of economic value was deserving of public investment. I cannot remember if I said this then to him, but I will say it here now: Sometimes the value of a commodity is not seen by what it gives, but by what it can no longer give when it is not there.

History is replete with such examples. The first emperor of China, Qin Shi Huang burned all the books of Confucian philosophy and literature from the regions he conquered. The Library of Alexandria was burned by the marauding hordes of Julius Caesar in 48 BC, destroying countless original works by Plato, Aristotle and other great thinkers. Nine million books in the ancient Nalanda University was destroyed by an army led by the Turkish leader Bakhtiyar Khilji in 1193. The House of Wisdom was burned by the Mongols in their 1258 invasion of Iraq. The religion, art and other traditions of the great Mayan civilization almost died out entirely when their artworks were burned at Mani by the Bishop Diego de Landa. All because of one man on one day.

I think we can all imagine the social and cultural loss which the burning of these books and artworks brought. The thoughts, insights and wisdom of writers through the ages – gone. I do not need to say anymore about the value of writing and books.

Back to my story.

This executive also introduced me to the grants which were available from NAC then, and encouraged me to apply for them. I was happy that NAC was supportive of literary writing like poetry despite the niche audience. I was happy that NAC was convinced that the literary arts form a significant public good, and that when the literary arts are unsupported, the community loses some well-being.

So things became hunky-dory as we applied for and received grant after grant. About this time, other publishers were also making their entrance into the market with poetry collections, and probably received grants too. And here I must stop to say that the strong poetry scene in Singapore today is in no small way, a result of NAC's grants and support in those early years.

Then something strange happened at the turn of the century. I had received and agreed to publish a manuscript from a brilliant young writer named Alfian Sa'at who happen to be seated here on my right today. When I applied for a grant for that manuscript, it was rejected. I was aghast! Had I lost my mojo? How could this manuscript not possibly qualify for a grant? But being an obedient and naïve Singaporean, I took it in my stride without question, and went ahead to publish using my company funds. But for weeks, I lost confidence in my evaluation abilities.

On October 22, 2001, Ong Sor Fen, the *Life* Correspondent for *The Straits Times* wrote, and I quote, “*Two Singapore books have made it to the Kiriyama Pacific Rim Book Prize's list of notable fiction and non-fiction books. They are Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew's memoir 'From Third World to First: The Singapore Story 1965-2000' and Alfian Sa'at's poetry collection, 'A Brief History of Amnesia'.*”

This was an international prize. *A Brief History of Amnesia* went on to be short-listed for the Singapore Literature Prize in 2004.

I realised then that, apart from literary excellence, there could be some other unseen factors in the evaluation of grants. I could not help thinking about Hitler, and how art could be deliberately turned into an instrument for political or other purposes.

Many of us here will probably know that there were two major art purges that occurred in Germany from 1933 to 1949. The first occurred when Hitler wanted to change the cultural landscape to return the country to traditional “German” and “Nordic” values, to excise or circumscribe Jewish, “foreign,” and “degenerate” influences, and to shape a racial community (*Volksgemeinschaft*) which aligned with Nazi ideals.

The second purge occurred when the Military Government in Germany, US (OMGUS) started administering the country and were highly concerned with controlling what people saw and how they saw it.

And here I quote from a paper by Cora Goldstein, a Professor of Political Science at California State University, Long Beach:

“The Nazis eliminated what they called ‘Degenerate art’, erasing the pictorial traces of turmoil and heterogeneity that they associated with modern art. The Western Allies eradicated ‘Nazi art’ and excluded all military subjects or themes that could have military and/or chauvinist symbolism from pictorial representation.”

Both the Third Reich and OMGUS utilized the visual arts as instruments for the construction of new German cultural heritages.

The fact that such dissimilar regimes used visual strategies both for political education and for the construction of new national identities and collective memories, highlights the importance of images in modern mass politics. It also underlines the importance of the political control of the visual sphere in situations that call for the creation of new paradigms of normalcy and self-understanding.”

My conclusion about the hand of a political force in arts funding and literary excellence would be confirmed time and again by a series of other incidents after 2001. And these included an incident when the event for the reading and discussion of a book which had been short-listed for the Singapore Literature Prize in 2014 came under direct political pressure to be cancelled. Apparently, the problem here was not in the content, but in the person of the writer. Instead of playing the ball, the government was now playing the man. However, I am sure there are civil servants who retain their professionalism and integrity in work commitment over their personal job security. This is one of the reasons why I continue to keep faith with our civil servants. In fact, I had always found the people and partners in NAC to be great chaps with much passion for the literary industry. They are timely, accommodating and flexible in the administration of their projects, seeking always to make it easy for the publishers. But they follow guidelines which are sometimes not of their own making and if there are problems with the rules and guidelines, we have to deal with those who made them, and those who seek to rule them.

All these meant that along the way, I had to, what some would say, “self-censor”. But I found another route. We continued to apply for grants for the books we want to publish, but for those which we think might be a problem, we will still publish, but not look for government grants. Grant applications waste quite a bit of time if we finally do not get it. Instead, we focus on the readers and those who are not reading. That is where the real “enemy” is. The book trade would not be in the straits it is today, if every title produced results in sales of five to eight thousand copies. If literary readers expand significantly, there would be less reliance on grants, something I think all publishers should work towards. If we reach a situation of less dependence on grants, it would mean that we have taken a good step forward.

This leads me on to my final point – should funding be disbursed at arm’s length from government? Yes and yes again. How can we do so when NAC is an arm of government and is guided by government? Don’t the civil servants have to obey their political masters? Yes. Indeed so. But civil servants are also expected to advise these political masters after hearing from the ground. Especially when decisions involve key principles. The story I told earlier of the civil servant who stood up, and the stories of Philip Yeo who is neither civil nor servant should inspire us in some ways.

Further from home, the story of Hugh Thompson, the US helicopter pilot who stopped the Mai Lai Massacre back in 1968 by standing up against a higher-ranking officer should inspire and tell us that when we need to do the right thing, we should not be found wanting.

I want to end with another story. Many years ago, when I was running an advertising outfit, I had an argument with my creative director. We had been asked to contribute to a cause, and I wanted to donate a piece of very expensive software which was sitting on our shelves because it was surplus stock, and it made sense to get rid of it instead of allowing it to languish. My creative director argued strenuously against it, even though it was out of his jurisdiction, insisting that when we contribute a gift, it had to take account of the needs of the cause. The economic value is irrelevant.

I gave way to him, a little ashamed of the concern to meet my own needs instead of the needs of the cause I was contributing to. I hope this will always be the case with all our grant-making bodies in Singapore now, and forever more.