

Presentation Speech

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IPS-SAM Spotlight on Cultural Policy Series Eight: Roundtable on Cultural Diplomacy

Introduction

1. Good afternoon. It's great to see so many familiar faces among the audience, some of whom I know from before I joined the NAC through my own work as a drama educator and arts writer. Many of you, I also know from working together while I've been in the NAC over the last 8 years, including on some internationalisation projects.
2. When Tarn How invited me to the roundtable, he expressed that it was important, as a first speaker, for me to set out what "Culture Diplomacy" means. He felt that, coming from the NAC, a government agency, I would be able to provide a basis for our discussion. Which is fair enough, I guess, because when we talk about Cultural Diplomacy, we think of it at a national, or rather, international level, as something between governments, between countries. And that's a big part of it – but I also hope that, as I share, you will find a lot that resonates with you as arts professionals, and as people living, working, playing in Singapore, because of the "cultural" part of the conversation.
3. So let me get straight to it. But being aware of the responsibility Tarn How has placed on me, and to do justice to the work done by my colleagues in MFA and MCCY, and the arts community as a whole, I hope you won't mind me reading off what I have prepared.
4. [Slide] For my presentation today, I will be looking at four main areas, namely, what is cultural diplomacy and why is it important; what is the NAC's approach to cultural diplomacy; how do we support our cultural diplomacy efforts; and finally, what will be our vision of success. I'll try to illustrate what is happening with examples, but I'd like to caveat that, of course, I won't be able to name everyone,

so many of our cultural institutions like The Esplanade; arts companies like The Rice Company; as well as our artists and arts groups like the Singapore Chinese Orchestra off to Berlin next month, you are all doing incredible work to put Singapore on the global map. Here, we have just one example, Apsaras Arts collaborating with Milapfest UK, to present the annual Dance India Asia Pacific programme in Singapore. I will also be taking the presentation primarily from NAC's point of view, mindful that I have friends from MFA and MCCY here as well who can contribute during the open discussion.

What is Cultural Diplomacy & Why is it Important?

4. [slide] So what is cultural diplomacy and why is it important for Singapore? NAC Chairman and Ambassador-at-large Prof Chan Heng Chee, defined Singapore's brand of cultural diplomacy as *"an institutionalised effort, working with our embassies, of promoting our cultural and creative assets, and including the arts community as a partner in the role of projecting Singapore internationally"*. For me, the key words are "institutionalised", "working with embassies", and "the arts community", and also "cultural and creative assets" - this idea of positioning arts and culture as a vital component of our relationship-building with other countries. And indeed, all of us coming together to work in a structured and systematic way so that there is greater impact.
5. [slide] Diplomacy has always been important for Singapore at a national level. We are a small country and having good relationships with our neighbours, with global powerhouses, is how we have survived and thrived. In this vein, cultural diplomacy is one more part of Singapore's larger diplomacy agenda, where we forge connections around shared interests and mutual investment, whether economic, military, or indeed, cultural. Culture allows us to strengthen people-to-people relationships, and enables the government and businesses to build an affinity for Singapore. For example, in September 2018, NAC and the China National Arts Fund signed an MOU to signal a commitment to work together. This was not done in isolation, but as part of six other MOUs signed between China and Singapore agencies.

6. [slide] The efforts of cultural diplomacy also play an important role in positioning Singapore as a nation known not just for its world-class infrastructure and Mathematics textbooks, not just for being clean, safe and efficient; but as a country that has a soul, as well as a rich and multi-cultural heritage. A country of people who are creative, confident and dynamic. That is the Singapore I know, and that is the Singapore I want others to see.
7. [slide] I've mentioned the practical and strategic importance of cultural diplomacy, and how the arts express who we are as a nation, and how it can change international perceptions of Singapore. But, for me, it is also about the pride that I feel when I see Singapore artists making their mark internationally. And they deserve the opportunity to do so. There are so many great talents in Singapore, I'm sure you will agree. I hope that our cultural diplomacy efforts resonate not only with people overseas, but locally too. Whether it is Kuo Jian Hong and The Theatre Practice in Shanghai, or Kuik Swee Boon and T.H.E Dance Company in Europe. When I was in Edinburgh last year, I spoke to Ramesh Meyyappan who is based in Scotland. He told me he no longer needs to stand at the street corner giving out brochures like many at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. His name alone enables him to sell tickets, fill venues. When I met my arts council counterpart in Scotland, and I mentioned Ramesh's name, he immediately knew who I was talking about, I was so proud.
8. [slide] And so, Cultural Diplomacy can have its agendas. But, ultimately, it's about people, it's about relationships. And that's why I like this quote from Corrie Tan's 2015 article in The Straits Times: cultural diplomacy "offers a human way for countries to see eye to eye". Such efforts are "an affirmation of ties between countries, a cultural give-and-take that can develop a more intimate and layered understanding that economic talks and free trade pacts sometimes cannot."
9. [slide] NAC is committed to this national Cultural Diplomacy effort. NAC's strategic thrusts talk about Inspiring our people, Connecting our communities, but also Positioning Singapore globally, with the three interlinked with one another.

10. [slide] As we work to support Singapore's national and diplomatic interests, NAC also looks for market development platforms where Singapore artists cultivate new audiences overseas, as well as capability development opportunities for Singapore artists to learn from - and collaborate with - their counterparts from other countries. All these three objectives overlap and intersect.

What is Our Approach to Cultural Diplomacy & How Do We Support Our Cultural Diplomacy Efforts?

11. [slide] Let me now talk about NAC's approach to cultural diplomacy. And let me give a shout-out here to Sri Warisan, Dance Ensemble Singapore, Artiste Seni Budaya and Jigri Yaar Bhangra who recently represented Singapore in Thailand alongside artists from other Asian countries to celebrate the coronation of the king.
12. [slide] Firstly, we broker institutional-level partnerships to open doors for Singapore artists. Secondly, we work with MFA and MCCY to support their cultural diplomacy initiatives, and to create opportunities to showcase our artists. Thirdly, we look at showcasing Singapore artists at pinnacle platforms. Fourthly, we make sure we are plugged into international networks and organisations, and, finally, we are especially mindful of the importance of connecting with our friends across the region.
13. [slide] In our efforts to facilitate institutional partnerships, NAC has signed MOUs with our counterparts and arts institutions from various countries. If I take the NAC-British Council MOU, for example, initiatives that have emerged include artist-delegation visits to the Unlimited, Spark and Imagine festivals to connect with UK artists in the disability and arts for young audiences sectors, as well as musician Syafiqah from Open Score Project speaking at the Edinburgh International Culture Summit.
14. [slide] I am also proud to say that our efforts have led to opportunities for our artists to represent Singapore as experts in their fields, positioning our Singapore arts professionals as thought leaders. For example, we nominated independent producers Jeremiah Choy and my fellow panellist Tay Tong, to Creative New

Zealand to be speakers for their Aspire Asia Symposium. We sometimes think, Singapore is so small, we are such a young country, we don't have the rich cultures that others have. I remember trying to bring in artists and arts professionals from the US, Australia and they actually turned round and told me, oh, we are surprised, we actually want to learn from you! So let's not sell ourselves short. And this is an example, so thanks, Tay Tong. And so yes, it's not always us learning from others. Others can learn from us too, and so the relationship becomes even deeper.

15. [slide] The second strategy NAC employs for cultural diplomacy, is that of supporting MFA, MCCY and other government agencies in their cultural diplomacy initiatives. This creates more opportunities for Singapore artists to present overseas as well.

15. On a country level, for example, Singapore and Australia have signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, which pledges close cooperation on multiple fronts such as defence, education and trade. MCCY has a cultural MOU agreement with their counterparts in Australia as well. This relationship has enabled many of our artists, such as Checkpoint Theatre, Wild Rice and SA the Collective, to name just three examples, to present works in Adelaide, Brisbane and Melbourne as part of major festivals.

16. [slide] Collaborations have also emerged. One example is TOPIA between Pvi collective from Perth Australia, and Singapore's Teater Ekamatra and Drama Box. They were first connected by NAC at the Australian Performing Arts Market (APAM) in February 2018.

17. I'm also happy to say that our relationship with Australia helped to open doors for an MOU to be signed between the Singapore Symphony Orchestra and the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra in 2018.

18. [slide] Another important diplomatic effort which NAC supports is naturally ASEAN. MCCY represents Singapore at the ASEAN Committee of Culture and Information,

and Singapore artists are regularly featured on ASEAN platforms overseas. Sometimes we organise them too: in 2018, we worked with Global Cultural Alliance to organise *The Best of ASEAN Performing Arts: One Voice* which brought together young contemporary musicians from across 10 Southeast Asian countries to Singapore to not only perform, but also co-create works together, with Singapore represented by Tim de Cotta.

19. [slide] NAC also works with NHB to conduct an annual briefing about Singapore arts and culture for all MFA staff before they leave for their first international postings. We also conduct an individual briefing for outgoing Ambassadors and key Mission personnel to encourage them to incorporate cultural elements in their events, and to coordinate efforts on the ground when Singapore artists are presenting overseas. Even just having Singapore artworks hanging on the walls in the embassies, giving out Singapore literature as gifts, is a great way to showcase our culture.
20. [slide] Sometimes, we work with overseas Missions to put together a Singapore showcase in that city. Earlier this year, NAC worked closely with Paris Mission to facilitate an Urban Art Singapore event in Paris, presenting a showcase of works by urban and contemporary artists from Singapore, such as RSCLS, performer Rizman Putra and dancer, Christina Chan. This initiative enabled us to showcase a very different side of Singapore from what is normally seen in tourism brochures.
21. [slide] Other government agencies can also help further cultural diplomacy. A good example is the Singapore showcase at Georgetown Festival in 2018, where the Singapore Tourism Board's Malaysia Office came together with NAC and MFA's KL Mission to present music performances by Charlie Lim, .gif and Tabitha Nausser, and also a collaboration between Singaporean street artist, SKLO and Malaysian street artist, AkidOne.
22. [slide] NAC also wants to make sure that the works of our artists are presented at pinnacle international platforms. I showed a picture of Zai Kuning earlier, and in May, Ang Song Ming represented Singapore this year at the 58th Venice Biennale

with his multidisciplinary presentation *Music for Everyone*, curated by Michelle Ho. The Venice Biennale is often considered the Olympics of the contemporary visual art world. What was particularly interesting was Song Ming's choice of using the recorder, an instrument which most Singaporeans are familiar with, as a centrepiece for this work that would be presented to a global audience. I think it's a good example of how the local and the international can intersect, and how art can change perceptions and create new ways of understanding what it means to be Singaporean. I would like to show you a short video of this year's Venice Biennale that NAC has commissioned. I feel the comments made by the visitors to the exhibit that we capture in the video truly encapsulate what I have been saying about the importance of Cultural Diplomacy.

23. [slide] It's also vital for Singapore artists and arts professionals to be plugged into international networks and organisations. We don't want to miss out on conversations that are happening around the world. One such body is the International Society of Performing Arts (ISPA), and NAC recently supported three artists on an ISPA Fellowship – Nelson Chia, Danny Tan, and Shaza Ishak. Through the fellowship, the artists have been able to gain access to ISPA's networks and many of the world's most significant presenting organisations, artist management agencies, and festivals. We are very proud that Nelson was also recently selected to be a member of ISPA's 2020 Congress Planning Committee. The NAC is a member of the International Federation of Arts Council and Cultural Agencies, so we ourselves, as a council, are not a frog in a well.
24. [slide] Cultural Diplomacy is especially important in terms of connecting with our neighbours across the region. The ASEAN platforms I talked about earlier is one example. But, over the last year or so, NAC has also hosted visits from our arts council counterparts in Hong Kong and Malaysia, and, in fact, we have just been invited to speak at a conference by the Thailand Creative and Design Centre. We always take these opportunities to, of course, talk about the excellent work done by Singapore artists.

25. [slide] As shared in the earlier part of my presentation, there are three elements to NAC's internationalisation efforts.
26. In the area of Capability Development, NAC supports professional development through the Capability Development Grant, and this includes international seminars, conferences, residencies, etc. That's the ground-up component. In addition, in specific areas where there are gaps and opportunities, NAC actively collaborates with international partners to open up more opportunities for artists. For example, NAC recently announced a visual arts residency programme with Cemeti Institute for Art and Society in Jogjakarta, and another residency programme with Lu Xun Academy of Literature in Beijing. Sometimes at the government level, we can unlock opportunities that otherwise may not be available for artists operating at an individual level.
27. In the area of market development, many artists here would be familiar with NAC's Market and Audience Development Grant that supports efforts to build audiences both at home and abroad, and this includes international tours and exhibitions that artists and arts groups have identified for themselves, and for which they apply for funding. Besides this grant which is again the ground-up component, however, NAC also has various strategies for audience development overseas such as participation in major international events with a market platform, like leading delegation of artists to Tanzmesse in Germany for dance, and the London Book Fair.
28. And lastly, for the third component of Cultural Diplomacy, this is where the Cultural Diplomacy Fund comes in. In 2014, government set aside \$20 million and, over the years, this fund, administered by MCCY, has supported various cultural diplomacy platforms around the world, showcasing a wide range of Singapore artists. Some examples of projects funded include the ASEAN initiatives and showcase opportunities in Australia like AsiaTOPA. If you have a project that you think fits the bill, a project that meets Cultural Diplomacy objectives, that creates new opportunities not only for you as an individual artist, but also paves the way for other Singapore artists as well, do let us know. We can explore whether CDF might be the right avenue – or maybe it can be an NAC-funded project.

Vision of Success

29. Before I conclude my presentation, I would like to share what our vision of success for Cultural Diplomacy looks like. And here's Syafiqah and Open Score Project whom I mentioned earlier. To put it simply, three things: (a) Singapore will be celebrated internationally as a leader, not only in the traditional areas of business, science and technology, but also in arts and culture – another Ong Keng Sen, another Wong Kah Chun, please (b) Singaporeans are proud to see our artists making waves internationally – another Joanna Dong, another Balli Kaur Jaswal, please and (c) our counterparts overseas will see us as valued partners and collaborators, see Singapore artists as relevant, innovative, thoughtful, and plugged into larger global arts conversations.

Thank you.