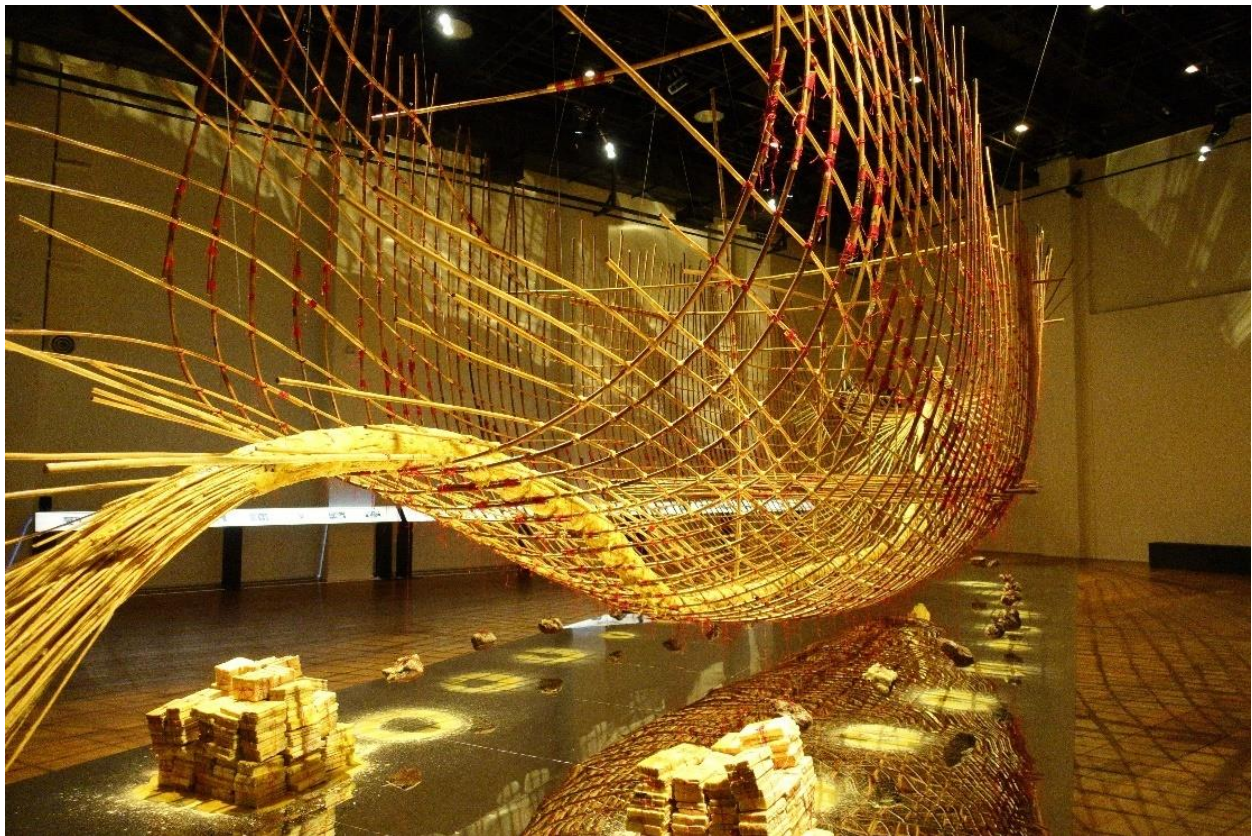


# Full Report on the IPS-SAM Roundtable on Cultural Diplomacy

(part of the IPS-SAM Spotlight on Cultural Policy Series)



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Cover photo:

*Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge*, by artist Zai Kuning, was featured in the Singapore pavilion in the Venice Biennale in 2017. This picture shows the work at an exhibition held a year later at TheatreWorks in Singapore. Photo by Sim Jui Liang.

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## Executive Summary

Cultural diplomacy can be broadly defined as the exchange of ideas, information and art and culture among nations, their organisations and their people that furthers mutual understanding.

In Singapore, cultural diplomacy is carried out at one level by government or quasi-government bodies, including ministries and agencies such as the National Arts Council (NAC), the Esplanade, museums, and Singapore Tourism Board (STB). One major example is the Cultural Diplomacy Fund — comprising \$20 million from the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY), and \$5 million from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) — that was launched in 2014 to promote Singapore’s arts internationally over five years.

At the grassroots level, artists, arts groups and other organisations also engage in cultural diplomacy (often with government funding) with activities such as organising or attending festivals and residencies, or via artistic collaboration.

This is a report of a roundtable discussion organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) on 5 July 2019, titled “Making Friends and Influencing People: The Art of Cultural Diplomacy”. The roundtable was organised in collaboration with the Singapore Art Museum (SAM).

The discussion saw the participation of 40 policymakers, artists and arts practitioners, academics and other experts. The participants discussed a range of issues, including the successes, challenges and even failures of cultural diplomacy projects, the benefits and possible drawbacks for artists and the nation, and the role of artists in cultural diplomacy.

The six presenters were as follows:

1. Mr Kenneth Kwok, Assistant Chief Executive of the NAC;
2. Ms Yvonne Tham, Chief Executive Officer of the Esplanade;
3. Ms Jean Tan, Executive Director of the Singapore International Foundation (SIF);
4. Mr Tay Tong, arts consultant and the former Managing Director/Producer of TheatreWorks;
5. Mr Koh Jee Leong, poet, activist and Founder and Organiser of Singapore Unbound;
6. Mr Daniel Kok, independent artist and Artistic Director of Dance Nucleus.

The presentations were followed by a discussion session that was moderated by Mr Colin Goh, Chief Executive Officer of The RICE Group of Companies, and open to all participants.

### **Defining the yardsticks of success for cultural diplomacy**

Mr Kenneth Kwok considered cultural diplomacy as part of Singapore's larger diplomatic agenda, in which culture is the means to strengthening people-to-people relationships and for government and businesses to build an affinity for Singapore. The NAC's approach to cultural diplomacy includes brokering institutional-level partnerships to create opportunities for Singapore artists to build relationships, working with MFA and MCCY to support their diplomacy initiatives, and showcasing Singapore artists in "pinnacle platforms". Such efforts have paved the way for local artists to represent Singapore as experts and leaders in their artistic practice. He also put forth the NAC's vision of success for cultural diplomacy, where Singapore is celebrated as a leader in the arts and culture field; Singaporeans are proud of local artists who have made a name for themselves internationally; and that the world sees our artists as "relevant, innovative, thoughtful, and plugged into larger global arts conversations."

### **Artists as friends**

Ms Yvonne Tham explained that the Esplanade's indirect contribution to cultural diplomacy could be seen in the arts centre's programming, which has examined Singapore's cultural connections to the Nusantara, East Asia and South Asia. This has also enabled the Esplanade to build long-lasting friendships with artists from these regions, through efforts to truly understand their artistic visions and being with them on their artistic trajectories. Hence, building relationships with artists also means presenting artists more than once. Such an approach also allows audiences to grow and build relationships with artists, witnessing their development and appreciating their body of work. She added that the Esplanade's strategy of co-commissioning projects with other arts centres has borne fruit, with the involvement of Singapore artists in these productions that also have the potential to travel out of Singapore.

### **Putting people at the forefront of diplomacy**

Ms Jean Tan said the focus of the SIF was on people diplomacy, of which cultural diplomacy was a subset. She noted that Singapore's people-to-people diplomacy efforts have grown organically beyond state-centric activity to involve private actors, partners and networks. As a people-to-people diplomacy agency, the SIF aims to strengthen ties and trust between the peoples of Singapore and the world. For example, from 2000 to 2016, the SIF partnered art creators as cultural ambassadors, and supported over 700 artists in presenting Singapore culture in more than 50 countries. She believed that countries that involved their citizens in

proactively engaging the publics of another state to build mutual trust and respect would have an edge over others that did not.

### **Trust and space for cultural diplomats**

Mr Tay Tong pointed out that governments were not the only practitioners of cultural diplomacy; to him, cultural diplomacy encompasses ground-up initiatives and people-to-people exchanges. Likening cultural showcases like the Singapore Season in the 2000s to “UFOs descending on a city for a few weeks”, he argued that such showcases offered glimpses of what Singapore could potentially offer and it was the individuals and groups who were consistently working in that city who could fulfil these potentials. Mr Tay called for greater support mechanisms, in particular, trust and space, to be given to individuals so as to enable them to become “cultural diplomats”.

### **Debunking the assumptions of culture**

Mr Koh Jee Leong highlighted in his presentation “three tenacious and malicious values” that stymie the development of the arts in Singapore and the pursuit of cultural diplomacy in other countries. The first is the belief that culture is instrumental to obtaining some greater good. The second is the belief that culture is a zero-sum game, which is manifested partly in the use of quantifiable key performance indicators (KPI) as measures of success. The third is the belief that culture is a form of presentation or spectacle. He cautioned that adherence to these values would not only doom cultural diplomacy efforts to failure, but also discredit Singapore.

### **Independent artist as cultural agent**

Mr Daniel Kok, speaking from his experience in having presented dance performances overseas, cast the spotlight on the potential of the independent artist as a cultural agent. As globally connected individuals, these artists are nimble in thinking and movement, and are better positioned to “set up conversations, connections, collaborations with different millieus.” The informal yet empowering networks and relationships forged among local, regional and international artists also led him to question if the social capital of an independent artist is just as valuable as the financial and symbolic capital of the state. This means that cultural diplomacy does not always have to be led by the state.

### **Discussion**

The main points raised during the discussion that followed the above presentations were:

1. Policymakers and arts administrators bringing cultural showcases to other cities need to have a good understanding of the particular city’s context, in terms of the audience and the venues in which the showcases would be

presented. Such efforts are sometimes hampered by the dearth of local contacts, which could be addressed by the building of long-term relationships with artists and arts groups.

2. Funding for cultural exchanges between artists from different countries is sometimes tied to quantitative KPIs such as the number of books published or translated or audience attendance. Some artists and arts groups in Singapore felt that the more pressing issue was that of having conversations with their regional counterparts, especially when their knowledge and understanding of the latter was limited.
3. Some artists working on co-productions have had their works vetted by the authorities who were concerned that the topics explored in these works could affect bilateral relations. Hence, there could be a tension between cultural diplomacy and cultural exchange. In addition, there was a possibility that artists could be co-opted to project a softer side of Singapore.
4. Should funding for cultural diplomacy initiatives, or even arts and cultural projects in general, be provided at arm's length? Artists reflect what is happening in society and should be given the trust and space to tell these stories.
5. Speakers and participants agreed that it is important to present Singapore in its diversity.

## Introduction

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), together with SAM, organised a roundtable discussion on 5 July 2019 to look at the issues surrounding cultural diplomacy. The discussion is timely given that it has been five years since the launch of the Cultural Diplomacy Fund in 2014.

The roundtable discussion was held at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and examined the following issues:

- What are the pros and cons of cultural diplomacy for the nation and artists and arts groups?
- What are some of the challenges faced by artists, arts institutions and policymakers in carrying out cultural diplomacy projects?
- What is the role of the artist in cultural diplomacy?
- What is the status of the Cultural Diplomacy Fund and how many artists and arts groups have benefited from this initiative?

Forty participants, including policymakers, artists and academics, attended the roundtable discussion. The roundtable was chaired by Mr Colin Goh, Chief Executive Officer of The RICE Group of Companies.

Mr Tan Tarn How, IPS Adjunct Senior Research Fellow, started the session with introductory remarks. Six speakers delivered their presentations on cultural diplomacy in the following order:

1. Mr Kenneth Kwok, Assistant Chief Executive of the NAC;
2. Ms Yvonne Tham, Chief Executive Officer of the Esplanade;
3. Ms Jean Tan, Executive Director of the SIF;
4. Mr Tay Tong, arts consultant and the former Managing Director/Producer of TheatreWorks;
5. Mr Koh Jee Leong, poet, activist and Founder and Organiser of Singapore Unbound;
6. Mr Daniel Kok, independent artist and Artistic Director of Dance Nucleus.

The presentations were followed by an hour-long discussion session that was open to all participants and moderated by Mr Goh.



## Speaker 1: Kenneth Kwok

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 have been in the NAC over the last eight years, including on some internationalisation projects.

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.

So let me get straight to it. Being aware of the responsibility Tarn How has placed on me, and to do justice to the work done by my colleagues in the MFA and MCCY, and the arts community as a whole, I hope you won't mind me reading off what I have prepared.

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 will try to illustrate what is happening with examples, but I would like to make the caveat that, of course, I will not 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 which will go 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 the NAC's point of view, mindful that I have friends from the MFA and MCCY here as well who can contribute during the open discussion.

### **What is cultural diplomacy and why is it important?**

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.

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. This is how we have survived and thrived. In this vein, cultural diplomacy is one 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, the NAC and the China National Arts Fund signed a Memorandum of Understanding (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.

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 multicultural 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.

I have 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.

And so, cultural diplomacy can have its agendas. But, ultimately, it is about people, it is about relationships. And that is 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.”<sup>1</sup> Such efforts are “an affirmation of ties between countries, a

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<sup>1</sup> Tan, C. (2015, May 7). The arts as new global ambassador. *The Straits Times*.

cultural give-and-take that can develop a more intimate and layered understanding that economic talks and free trade pacts sometimes cannot.”

The NAC is committed to this national cultural diplomacy effort. The NAC’s strategic thrusts talk about *inspiring* our people, *connecting* our communities, but also *positioning* Singapore globally, with the three interlinked with one another.

As we work to support Singapore’s national and diplomatic interests, the 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 and how do we support our cultural diplomacy efforts?**

Let me now talk about the 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.

First, we broker institutional-level partnerships to open doors for Singapore artists. Second, we work with the MFA and MCCY to support their cultural diplomacy initiatives, and to create opportunities to showcase our artists. Third, we look at showcasing Singapore artists at pinnacle platforms. Fourth, 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.

In our efforts to facilitate institutional partnerships, the 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 audience sectors, as well as musician Syafiqah from Open Score Project speaking at the Edinburgh International Culture Summit.

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 do not have the rich cultures that others have. I remember trying to bring in artists and arts professionals from the US and Australia, and they actually turned around 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 is not always us learning from others. Others can learn from us too, and so the relationship becomes even deeper.

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

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.

“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 multicultural heritage. A country of people who are creative, confident and dynamic.”

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 the NAC at the Australian Performing Arts Market (APAM) in February 2018.

I am 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.

Another important diplomatic effort which the NAC supports is naturally ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). 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 create works together, with Singapore represented by Tim de Cotta.

The NAC also works with the National Heritage Board (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 diplomatic 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.

Sometimes, we work with overseas missions to put together a Singapore showcase in that city. Earlier this year, the NAC worked closely with the 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.

Other government agencies can also help further cultural diplomacy. A good example is the Singapore showcase at George Town Festival in 2018, where the STB's Malaysia office came together with the NAC and the MFA's KL mission to present music performances by Charlie Lim, .gif and Tabitha Nausier, and a collaboration between Singaporean street artist, SKLO and Malaysian street artist, AkidOne.



Yung Raja and Tabitha Nausier performing at ConneXions: Passion Made Possible, a Singapore showcase at George Town Festival 2018. Photo courtesy of Singapore Tourism Board.

The 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 is a good example of how the local and the international can intersect, and how art can change perceptions and create 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 the 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.

It is also vital for Singapore artists and arts professionals to be plugged into international networks and organisations. We do not want to miss out on conversations that are happening around the world. One such body is the International Society of Performing Arts (ISPA), and the 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 Councils and Culture Agencies, so we ourselves, as a council, are not a frog in a well.

Cultural diplomacy is especially important in terms of connecting with our neighbours across the region. The ASEAN platforms I talked about earlier are such examples. But, over the last year or so, the 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.

As shared in the earlier part of my presentation, there are three elements to the NAC's internationalisation efforts.

In the area of capability development, the NAC supports professional development through the Capability Development Grant, and this includes international seminars, conferences, residencies, etc. That is the ground-up component. In addition, in specific areas where there are gaps and opportunities, the NAC actively collaborates with international partners to open up more opportunities for artists. For example, the 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.

In the area of market development, many artists here would be familiar with the 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, the NAC also has various strategies for audience development overseas such as participation in major international events with a market platform, like leading a delegation of artists to Tanzmesse in Germany for dance, and the London Book Fair.

And lastly, for the third component of cultural diplomacy, this is where the Cultural Diplomacy Fund comes in. In 2014, the 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 paves the way for other Singapore artists as well, do let us know. We can explore whether the Cultural Diplomacy Fund might be the right avenue — or maybe it can be an NAC-funded project.

### **Vision of success**

Before I conclude my presentation, I would like to share what our vision of success for cultural diplomacy looks like. And here is 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; (b) Singaporeans are proud to see our artists making waves internationally — another Joanna Dong, another Balli Kaur Jaswal; 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.

## Speaker 2: Yvonne Tham

The Esplanade is a performing arts centre, although we also work with visual artists. We present about 3,500 activities a year and they reach out to over 2 million in attendance a year. We are in the midst of building a mid-sized theatre, in addition to our existing concert hall, a 2,000-seat theatre, the small studios, and public spaces like the concourse and the outdoor stage.

I have always been somewhat allergic to the idea of cultural diplomacy. I can understand the impulse for it and I think from a diplomatic perspective, it seems to make sense to showcase as much of Singapore culture as possible in projecting our identity. But I have always found showcases largely ineffective, from an artistic perspective. It is probably good from a diplomatic perspective of saying, “Look, this is my country, come see this.” National showcases supported under the official banner of “cultural diplomacy” have underperformed in the depth and quality of artistic relationships being forged, and sometimes even the quality of the work being showcased or made.

So how Esplanade complements this more “institutional/national showcase” approach of governments is to focus on “people-to-people” relationships and exchanges. For example, besides national showcases, cultural MOUs are important to governments. The formality of an agreement is less important to performing arts centres.

My presentation will cover three main points — chiefly around how we programme — on how we complement the work of making friends on the diplomatic front.

First, how do we programme as an arts centre?

We programme to understand who we are as a society; the context in which we operate; and our cultural links. When Esplanade first opened in 2002, it launched Kalaa Utsavam Festival of Indian Arts, and after that, various cultural festivals followed. We saw the need to place the arts in how communities celebrate important times of the calendar. So, if you are celebrating Chinese New Year, why should the arts not be part of how you celebrate?

But as much as these festivals are about local communities, they are also our way to think about the artists in the region – because of Singapore’s history and links with the region. For example, we focus on our relationships with the artists within the Nusantara region (for Pesta Raya Festival of Malay Arts), the artists within South Asia (for Kalaa Utsavam Festival of Indian Arts), and the artists from Mandarin-speaking territories in some ways (for Huayi Festival of Chinese Arts).

These cultural festivals have allowed us to show the traditional but also the contemporary aspects of those societies, and then relate these back to who and



where we are, vis-à-vis those cultures. They have allowed us to also present the diasporic voices. So these cultural festivals are platforms for us to form relationships with these artists and for us and our audiences to investigate the artistic traditions and the contemporary voices of the region. And I think we made a lot of friends over the last 17 years through the 10-over annual festivals we present.

Behind the programming, what is the basis of the relationship with artists? We make friends by trying to understand what the artistic vision of the artist is, because that is at the core and heart of everything. What is it as an artist you are trying to do, where is this journey and how can we, in presenting this work, continue to be part of that journey? As such, we also try not to present artists just once. Instead, we may present the same artist or arts company two or three years later, and this becomes a way of understanding how they have developed. In this way, we build a relationship with the artist, and audiences also build a relationship with the artist.

Another aspect that we seldom speak about is the artist's experience when they visit Singapore, but this is equally important. So, for instance, we always host visiting artists over a meal and we try to introduce them to Singapore artists. The people who look after the artists, such as the logistics team, the artist liaison officer, the technical production team (not just the programmers), they are very much a part of that artist's experience of coming to Singapore, performing at Esplanade. Making that experience here as good as possible is part of the effort in making friends.

That is my first point: through Esplanade's programming activities, which include not only how we create our festival programmes but also how we work and interact with the artists we present, we have been creating links internationally between us and artists, and between artists and audiences.

My second point is about Asia, and the increasing focus on relationships within Asia in the artistic sphere. I think there is a strong sense that Asia is a most dynamic, exciting place. The dynamism in Asia largely runs in parallel with its economic development. For example, somebody just told me that in China, every eight-and-a-half days, one new arts centre is being built! Although these projects may not be always initiated from an artistic perspective (it could be a commercial development, an educational project, an urban revitalisation project, etc.), they nonetheless reflect the potential for development of the arts and culture. There have also been arts centres being developed in recent years in Taiwan and Hong Kong, such as Free Space and the Xiqu Centre that have opened in Hong Kong. There are consequently also a lot of opportunities created, including opportunities for arts managers and producers, not just for artists.

Asian producers are discovering what it means to be working within the region. I think while many arts centres still look to Europe and America, there is now a greater sense of "let's look at each other" (to make new work or collaborate). So,

one network is called the Asia Discovering Asia Meeting (ADAM). There is also the Asian Dramaturgs Network. The dance makers and producers in Asia have got together and said, “Let’s start an Asian dance network.” There’s a growing sense that we need to support each other and we need to speak a lot more with each other. That is my second point, which is about the opportunities for making friends within Asia: the number of platforms, centres, artists, producers and presenters has really grown. There is therefore a lot more dialogue and conversations happening within Asia. And for Singapore, for Esplanade, we are very much taking part in these regional or Asian platforms and conversations, and making friends through them.



A 20-piece Indonesian gamelan ensemble performing during *Setan Jawa*, presented as part of Esplanade’s Pesta Raya Malay Festival of Arts in 2017. Photo courtesy of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay.

And my last point is that for an arts centre, what is unique is that we make friends not only by presenting work, but also via making work. From Esplanade’s early days, we have already worked on co-productions and co-commissions with international companies. Maybe that was one way of placing Singapore on the world map, of ensuring that Singapore is seen alongside other known centres such as Sadler’s Wells or the Barbican in the UK when that piece of work travels internationally. Over the years, we have also made commissions with fairly established Asian artists outside of Singapore, for example, with Stan Lai’s

Performance Workshop, Sankai Juku and Cloudgate Dance Theatre. And that is in a way another way for the centre to say, we stand with Asian artists.

And where we are now, we are also asking ourselves, given the credibility and networks we have built up with our international and regional partners over the years, how are we going to lend all of that to also work with Southeast Asian artists? And how are we going to make work with Singapore artists, so that we can now provide a stronger profile for Singapore and our Southeast Asian context?

Daniel (one of the presenters) is probably familiar as well with what I am saying about how we have made new work with Southeast Asian and Singapore artists over the last five years. These projects often involve creatives from around the region, say, a lighting designer from Japan or a dramaturg from Singapore. We also try to co-commission the work with other arts centres around the world. And with the relationships and credibility built up over the years, we are able to approach other producers and arts centres, and ask if they are interested in co-commissioning and eventually presenting this work with us.

“We make friends by trying to understand what the artistic vision of the artist is, because that is at the core and heart of everything. What is it as an artist you are trying to do, where is this journey and how can we, in presenting this work, continue to be part of that journey?”

I am going to end with three examples of works we have co-commissioned with artists and partners in Asia. One is called *Painted Skin*. This was presented last year and it was a co-commission with the Singapore Chinese Orchestra and the Shanghai International Arts Festival. It involved the Singapore Chinese Orchestra but it also involved a Chinese composer and singers. Because it is a co-commission, it is able to travel not just to Shanghai, but it is going to be in Hong Kong and hopefully it finds its way into other festivals and other cities. So that is an example of one work that we make with Singapore artists but then making sure that we are also involving another partner so that there's that potential for it to travel.

The other example was a co-commissioned work with the National Theatre and Concert Hall in Taipei. They were going to commission a work with this company called Shakespeare's Wild Sisters whom we presented and we were familiar with that company. They asked if we were interested, and we said, “Why not?” We have presented their work and we were curious to now be a bit more involved in the process. Since we were co-commissioning this work, we asked if they would consider having a Singapore actor as part of the cast. So, it allowed us to be involved in the production in a more concerted way. We then looked around and thought Oliver Chong would be a fantastic actor for this production. He auditioned

like everybody and got the role. It was easier for us to initiate that conversation about having a Singaporean actor on board because we were also supporting the work.

A third example. We worked with Garin Negruho, an Indonesian filmmaker, as a result of a co-commission with the Melbourne Arts Centre for the work *Setan Jawa*. As a result, we made a friend, and over the last four years, he has been coming here on and off. So, we paired him up with NADI Singapura for their latest work, *Fatih*, which Esplanade commissioned. And he helped to co-direct the work with NADI as they were doing a large-scale theatrical presentation for the first time. Again, you realise that these collaborations are actually the result of meetings, friendships and relationships built over the years, and understanding where artists are in their state of development, who they are, what they can do and then putting different parties together. It is a bit like cooking.

## Speaker 3: Jean Tan

Thank you IPS and SAM for bringing us together for a candid discussion on cultural diplomacy. I hope the Singapore International Foundation's (SIF) experience is useful to you. I expect to learn from you too and anticipate that our sharing will inspire better policy and practice in cultural diplomacy.

This is the flow of my talk today: Why I think cultural diplomacy is important. The SIF's operating model and its impact. Some of our challenges and what we can do better.

For background, traditional diplomacy refers to interactions between government officials. When governments communicate with their own citizens, it is called public affairs. Public diplomacy involves both state and non-state actors engaging foreign publics in a transparent manner. The communications that occur between these groups across borders are considered public diplomacy. This is the space that the SIF occupies and we call our unique value proposition, people diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy is a subset of public diplomacy.

Efforts to explain our ideas, values, policies and actions to foreign publics, as opposed to their governments, are hardly new in international relations. However, public diplomacy has become increasingly important as the conditions of international relations have changed radically in a globalised world. Clearly, Singapore should invest in public diplomacy for the following reasons:

**Ascendancy of soft power** (and limitations of hard power). In today's world — threatened by terrorism and civil strife, for instance — the solutions are inter-faith or inter-cultural dialogues. In other words, the use of soft power and not weapons to persuade and influence opinion, both abroad and domestically. Public diplomacy, which typically promotes mutual understanding and respect, can help undermine the appeal of violent extremism.

**Foreign policy is no longer the preserve of governments.** Gone are the days when international relations was the exclusive preserve of foreign policy professionals and statesmen. Today, individuals, corporates and civil society also initiate discourse and action at the grassroots level. These “non-state actors” help draw attention to issues and considerations that, in a world where change is rapid, may have been overlooked by the government. They also work better with publics increasingly cynical about government statements and deeds.

**“New style” citizen movements require new approaches to global engagement.** The digital revolution presents new challenges (and opportunities) for exporting ideas, and influencing opinion (with states no longer monopolising power). Today's publics, mobile and hyper-connected, can group rapidly online on

any number of complex transnational issues to export ideas and influence opinion. Given a new environment in the international system to win the hearts and minds of people, we need new engagement methods, multi-dimensional communication strategies and collaborative partnerships.

Thus, the growing importance of public diplomacy provides an opportunity for non-state actors, like the SIF, to strengthen Singapore's engagement with the world.

Indeed, across the globe, nations are investing heavily in public diplomacy. Each year, the British Council spends S\$2.1 billion, the Korea Foundation S\$247 million and the Japan Foundation about S\$250 million, on cultural outreach. These are agencies tasked and funded by their governments to undertake cultural relations. The Chinese have their Confucius Institutes whose stated aim is to promote Chinese language and culture, support local Chinese teaching internationally, and facilitate cultural exchanges.

More countries are also proactively developing their soft power. Beijing, for instance, is investing billions to reshape its image as China's global power grows. To improve perceptions abroad and allay fears that its rise is a threat, China set up 475 Confucius Institutes in 120 countries to teach Chinese and showcase Chinese culture. China also launched CCTV International, a 24-hour English-channel broadcast in six languages around the world, and pumped US\$50 billion (S\$67.8 billion) into the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which it founded. Then there is the visionary Belt and Road Initiative. China's public diplomacy expenditure is estimated at US\$10 billion a year.

Compared to other countries, Singapore's public diplomacy efforts do not benefit from state-funded largesse. We lack a coherent and strategic national framework for public diplomacy. Instead, Singapore's public diplomacy efforts have grown organically (beyond state-centric activity) to involve more private actors, partners and networks.

One among many such non-state actors is the SIF. The SIF is a people-to-people diplomacy agency. Our aim is to strengthen ties and trust between the peoples of Singapore and the world.

We do this through our programmes that enable us to meaningfully make friends for a better world such as through volunteer cooperation, social entrepreneurship, cultural exchange and Our Better World, the SIF's digital storytelling platform.

Our work is focused on five areas where Singaporeans can contribute — education, healthcare, environment, arts and culture as well as business and livelihood.

The SIF's Volunteer Cooperation programmes contribute to positive and sustainable development in Asia when Singapore International Volunteers (SIVs) work alongside their overseas counterparts to share expertise and effect change, while fostering greater intercultural understanding.

To date, over 4,000 Singaporeans have volunteered abroad, collaborating with local communities in 17 countries (including India, Indonesia, China, Cambodia and Vietnam). Our volunteers can be classified into two groups — direct community service volunteers and specialist volunteers.

Specialist volunteers work with their overseas counterparts, transferring skills to build individual and institutional capacity, particularly in the areas of healthcare and education. For example, we recently concluded a three-year project to raise standards of Maternal and Child Health in Tamil Nadu. The collaboration resulted in 1,000 healthcare professionals trained to benefit 100,000 mothers and babies. It also led to policy change when the state's healthcare leaders agreed to allow more nurses to be deployed to the labour room — a cause our Indian partners had championed for more than a decade.

Social entrepreneurship is a powerful means to engage people to work together to address global social challenges. To foster a world free of poverty, hunger, inequality and where “no one is left behind” (2030 United Nations Development Programme Agenda).

The SIF's Young Social Entrepreneurs (YSE) is an eight-month-long programme that seeks to inspire, equip and enable youth aged 18 to 30 to embark on social entrepreneurship in Singapore and beyond.

Launched in 2010, the network counts today 1,084 young change-makers and representing 30 nationalities. They have worked on 514 social enterprise ideas to create impact across various sectors — from agriculture, energy, education, healthcare and women empowerment to digital technology. Commendably, to date, 83 per cent of our winning YSEs remain in business. For instance, we are very proud of YSE 2015 winner WaterOAM.

WaterOAM is a social enterprise founded by two Singaporeans and one Indonesian studying at the National University of Singapore. It aims to build a world where no one shall face prolonged thirst by providing clean water access to rural communities. With YSE's support, they managed to improve their business model and refine the water filtration systems they had prototyped. As of 2019, WaterOAM has provided safe and clean water for 72,000 people across rural and disaster-hit areas in 28 countries.

I will now share with you in greater detail, our arts and culture programme. At the SIF, we partner art creators as cultural ambassadors, to bridge communities for positive change. From 2000 to 2016, the SIF supported 773 artists in presenting a slice of Singapore culture overseas in more than 50 countries.

A few years back, we switched our focus from supporting the presentation of Singapore's creative works overseas, to harnessing the arts for good. We believe

that arts and culture can aid sustainable development, particularly in fostering inclusive communities, enabling livelihood and promoting sustainable urban living.

In 2016, we launched SIF’s Arts for Good initiative, which seeks to make a difference through collaborations between Singaporeans and their international counterparts, as well as galvanise greater community involvement in sustainable change.



Photo courtesy of the Singapore International Foundation.

Here, you see Singapore producer Imis (above photo) in a collaboration with the Indonesian Cancer Foundation to raise funds via “CHAIRITY, Arts and Design against Cancer”.

We very quickly found that there were few “players” in this nascent field. So, the SIF took a step back and in 2017, launched an Arts for Good Fellowship. The idea was to grow the Arts for Good ecosystem, by fostering a community of practice that harnesses the power of arts and culture for positive social change.

The Fellowship brings together cross-sector professionals, such as artists, art administrators and programmers from the social sector to form a global alumnus where they can connect, support and collaborate with one another.



Through the Fellowship programme, we aim to foster multidisciplinary capabilities in leveraging arts and culture for social impact programming and nurture a community of practice of Arts for Good practitioners and enablers in Southeast Asia and beyond.

The six-month programme has three components for optimal learning and networking: Webinars, an exchange programme in Singapore and an exchange programme in an overseas city. The exchange programme typically involves workshops, dialogue sessions with thought leaders and industry experts, site visits, experiential learning sessions and peer-sharing. It typically culminates in a community project, in this instance to empower underserved youth (in Chennai) through the arts.

In two years, we have grown the Fellowship to 61 Fellows from over 17 nationalities. This year's Fellowship, themed "Creative Empowerment for Children and Youth", has attracted some 300 applicants. We are in the process of selecting Fellows for the programme which begins in October.

I'll now like to share with you an innovation in global engagement on the SIF's part, in response to digital disruption. To engage the virtual community in coming together to do good, we built Our Better World.

By telling stories of people and non-profits doing good in Asia, we leverage the power of digital media to connect communities and inspire collective actions, globally. Through our stories, online audiences have been moved to support our story subjects, causes and non-profits in tangible ways.

In 2018, we asked our online community what difference watching or reading Our Better World stories made to them. Ninety-six per cent said they were more aware of people doing good in Asia and three out of four felt inspired and wanted to contribute to social causes. Of note, six in 10 took some action — they shared, volunteered, donated and collaborated.

For instance, we told this story about local charity Angel Hearts which recycles gowns into burial clothes for infants. In four months, it hit 1.9 million views and was shared over 10,000 times. And within a month after the video was posted, 341 volunteers had signed up with Angel Hearts, a huge jump from their monthly average of 10 sign-ups.

Over the years, we have covered different causes across the region which have resulted in greater awareness and support, impacting more lives.

Many, online and offline, have resonated with Our Better World's mission and have come alongside to support the various social causes highlighted by advocating, volunteering with or funding them. Our online community now numbers 7,500-strong, with an online viewership of 37 million.

Our Better World aims to be the pioneer “digital disruption for social impact” in Asia from Singapore. Do visit [OurBetterWorld.com](http://OurBetterWorld.com) to learn more about the causes we support through our stories. See for yourself how digital networks can power movements for change.

By now, you should have a good idea as to how “networking is the new model of persuasion in the global communication era.” As Prof. Zaharna, Fellow at the Centre for Public Diplomacy, University of Southern California, puts it: “If the Cold War was about information command and control and the Information Age was about bits and bytes, the global communication era is about networks. Disseminating information is spam, networking is strategic.”

The SIF’s model of engagement is centred on building relationships with civil-society actors in other countries and facilitating networks between publics at home and abroad.

At the heart of all SIF programmes — Volunteer Cooperation, Good Business, Arts for Good, and Our Better World — are our efforts to connect communities, and enable collaborations for positive change globally.

There are many ways to build networks. One is to identify and explore potential links. Another is to reinforce existing links, for example, by organising training workshops. A third approach is to create links where none existed before — such as tri-sector links in our Arts for Good programme.

At the SIF, we see infinite possibilities when people come together to do good. Lives change when people and organisations collaborate to address social challenges and shape new realities.

The SIF is blessed to have its work enabled by many. We received both public and private funding.

We leverage partnerships to do more. Over the years, we have worked with over 650 institutions from the private, public, and people sectors.

Then there are those who give of their time, talent and treasures freely. Over 4,000 Singapore volunteers we call Citizen Ambassadors. And their overseas counterparts we call Friends of Singapore.

At the programme level, we measure social impact. We do our part to contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), as set out by the United Nations. We have mobilised our efforts to address social needs in these areas:

### **SDG 3 — Good Health**

In a survey commissioned by the SIF to understand how Singapore volunteers contribute to capacity and skills-building in the host countries, 97 per cent of beneficiaries and partners surveyed said that SIF volunteers were effective in

transferring new skills. Eighty per cent said the collaboration led to greater trust in their organisation by others.

#### **SDG 4 — Quality Education**

Access to quality education is key to improving lives and sustainable development. Some of our initiatives in education seek to empower youths to achieve literacy. Others seek to enhance the quality of education through cooperation in teacher training. To date, we have trained 10,000 education professionals and brought the joy of reading to some 30,000 children in rural villages.

#### **SDG 6 — Clean Water & Sanitation**

We also work to reduce the number of people without access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation. Through our community development programme, 112,000 villagers and school children now have access to clean drinking water, with a 95 per cent reduction in gastro-intestinal diseases.

#### **SDG 17 — Partnerships for the Goals**

A sustainable development agenda requires partnerships between governments, the private sector and civil society. In this regard, the SIF has worked with 4,000 Singapore volunteers and 37,000 Friends of Singapore, and leveraged the resources of 650 partners across the private, public and people sectors. Many of our beneficiaries say the “value add” of the SIF is in opening doors for them or their organisations to work with new national or international people or organisations.

Collectively, to date, the SIF has impacted 14.5 million lives positively through our programmes and initiatives, both directly and indirectly.

At the strategic level (which is in line with our public diplomacy mission), the SIF’s activities are guided by two key outcomes: First, for us, it is not just the numbers in networks that matter, but the quality of Singapore’s relationships with key publics. And, if it translates to any measurable support for Singapore.

Second, the other strategic outcome we measure is positive mindshare of Singapore — as a responsible global citizen — given the work we do.

We track reach and free press value achieved through our programmes in focus markets. We also conduct perception surveys.

In summary, the SIF’s programmes can be categorised into three forms of people diplomacy, namely, deeds, cultural and digital diplomacy.

Our programmes seek to engage policy and decision-makers, opinion shapers, and next-generation leaders. And in all that we do, we aim to foster a quality network of Friends and positive mindshare. And our work is made possible by

many caring and innovative Singapore citizens and institutions who give freely of their time, talent and treasure.

“While traditional diplomacy (between governments) still plays a central role in the management of relations between nations, countries that bring their citizens into the fold and proactively engage the publics of another state in order to build mutual trust, respect and a shared future, have the edge. What are we doing to involve more private actors, partners and networks to enrich the tapestry of relations between nations and Singapore?”

I have been asked to talk about challenges in the practice of cultural diplomacy. For one, the world is experiencing strong headwinds in globalisation (i.e., anti-globalisation). With greater domestic focus, there is less attention and support for international work. There is also increasing regulation of international organisations, most recently by China and Indonesia, for instance. This increases the cost of doing business.

Other pressing concerns are intensified global uncertainty and security risks — threats our volunteers and staff might face while working overseas. In this regard, we constantly review our operating risks, to provide a safe environment (as far as possible), and invest in better safety procedures and protocols and insurance.

Increased connectivity has shifted the power balance between people, business and governments. Governments, foreign ministries and public diplomacy practitioners today would do well to keep pace with changing trends in global engagement. What are you doing in your own industry to leverage digital disruption?

In a sense, Our Better World was the SIF’s response to harnessing social networks and engaging digital natives for change. Similarly, is people-to-people diplomacy the future of international relations, given today’s hyper connectivity and dynamics?

While traditional diplomacy (between governments) still plays a central role in the management of relations between nations, countries that bring their citizens into the fold and proactively engage the publics of another state in order to build mutual trust, respect and a shared future, have the edge. What are we doing to involve more private actors, partners and networks to enrich the tapestry of relations between nations and Singapore?

In Singapore, public diplomacy is not prominent in policy deliberations. Compared to other countries, funding for Singapore’s public diplomacy efforts is small. My wish is to see greater leadership in developing a coherent and strategic national framework for public diplomacy. And better funding for such cross-border people and cultural initiatives.

Singapore has benefited in its early days from the assistance of other more developed nations. Today, we can afford to pay forward the help we had received. As a small country, Singapore also needs to be global in its outlook. Everyday Singaporeans, like you and me, can play a part — by sharing our skills and experiences to make a tangible difference in the lives of others. At the same time, fostering friendships and building goodwill for Singapore.

Thank you.

## Speaker 4: Tay Tong

Good afternoon, thanks to Tarn How and IPS-SAM for having me on this afternoon's roundtable.

I have three thoughts to share on this subject.

First, if asked to define "cultural diplomacy", I would be more inclined to subscribe to American scholar Milton Cummings' definition. That is, cultural diplomacy is "the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding." Simply because governments are not just the ones practising "cultural diplomacy"; this work is undertaken by a diverse group of people.

Once we are out there, when we cross the borders and encounter the other, through our art or even simply meeting someone for the first time at a conference exchanging ideas and information, we are immediately practising cultural diplomacy.

As such, cultural diplomacy, for me, extends to ground-up initiatives and people-to-people exchange. In my experience, that is where it begins and is the most effective. Meaningful collaborations come out of established ties that are built years before the collaborations occur. For instance, the first Singapore Season in London in 2005. In 2004, Philip Dodd, then Director of the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London gave TheatreWorks the keys to ICA for a month, which came after our first encounters with him in the late 1990s or early 2000s. And with just that offer to have the whole house to work with, Goh Ching Lee, formerly a senior director at the NAC, constructed the Singapore Season in London around it. This "personal relationship" between Philip and us in TheatreWorks was the starting point for an extensive "cultural diplomacy" initiative.

Second, the personal touch is one of the most effective means to influence and to make "friends". I cannot emphasise this more. The ground-up initiatives and the individuals know who their audiences are, and understand the relevance and resonance they have on their audiences. These individuals and initiatives have a means to "win the hearts of the other...", to quote the former *Straits Times* arts correspondent Corrie Tan, who wrote that the strategy of cultural diplomacy could not be simply to conquer cities; it must win hearts.<sup>2</sup>

The idea of the Singapore Season in the 2000s and other similar initiatives were good but it was not sustained. These were like UFOs descending onto a city for that few weeks; they shine a torch on the potentials of what Singapore can offer;

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<sup>2</sup> Tan, C. (2015, May 7). The arts as new global ambassador. *The Straits Times*.

but it is the individuals and organisations who consistently continue to work in those cities, that fulfill the potentials.

So, given that cultural diplomacy work is not limited to the MFA nor the MCCY or the NAC or just government-related agencies, it does mean that more support mechanisms and, more importantly, trust and space, are put in place to encourage and permit the individuals and their initiatives to be “cultural diplomats”. Diverse independent initiatives by individual artists or a group of artists like Jee Leong and Daniel Koh — who are at this roundtable — who are out there making things happen, should be continually encouraged and nurtured in ways, which are equitable and acceptable to them.

“And so instead of public agencies and government consistently figuring out which culture or cultures to present, which works or individuals to present, would it then be more effective, if ‘cultural diplomacy’ is left to the individuals who represent different creeds and cultures, who are working outside Singapore? They naturally present ‘themselves’ and who they are through their works.”

These individuals are part of the larger fabric. Cultural diplomacy is only a small sub-set of the internationalisation of our arts and culture. And this internationalisation effort needs to have a systematic and sustained approach. I would argue for the provision of more resources and skill sets for artists or creatives to create quality works that resonate with audiences beyond Singapore. These are further complemented by mechanisms to make dialogues, exchanges and collaborations more possible. (Note: More of the individual initiatives do complement other larger national initiatives.)

The final point is about pluralism — what does it mean for cultural diplomacy? Which culture or cultures to present?

I was reading an opinion piece in the *New York Times* two weeks ago. Written by David Brooks, it was entitled “Your Daily Dose of Optimism”. In it, he proposes that in a world of racial pluralism, we have no choice but to build a mass multicultural democracy, a society that has no dominant centre but is a collection of creative minorities. That pluralism today is creating a new sort of person, especially among the young. They do not just relish in diversity; they embody it. Many have mixed roots. Many live between cultures, switch back and forth, and work hard to build a single coherent life for themselves. They hold opposite ideas in their minds all at the same time.

The reality and challenge is that we are pluralistic. We are multi-polar, we are all minorities together.

And so instead of public agencies and government consistently figuring out which culture or cultures to present, which works or individuals to present, would it then be more effective, if “cultural diplomacy” is left to the individuals who represent different creeds and cultures, who are working outside Singapore? They naturally present “themselves” and who they are through their works. Should we not then have their cultures and their beings permeate, percolate and gestate into the psyches of those around them? Would it not then be a better way to create awareness, and have an organic influence on the Other?

Thank you.



## Speaker 5: Koh Jee Leong

Singapore Unbound is a New York City-based literary non-profit that I founded in 2016. We are dedicated to the struggle for freedom of expression and equal rights for all in both the USA and Singapore. We see the arts not as a hobby but as a way of life. We also see the arts as a way of changing society. Right now, it is a way of combating censorship, racism, xenophobia, misogyny, homophobia and transphobia, economic injustice, and environmental devastation. In so far as Singapore and the United States are all these things, we see ourselves not as a tool of cultural diplomacy, but as a means of counter-cultural insurgency.

We organise our activities deliberately to achieve these ends. For the biennial Singapore Literature Festival in New York City, we feature authors and artists who are not only excellent in their work but who speak to current social injustices. So, at the last festival in 2018, American novelist Chinelo Okparanta spoke about lesbian love in Nigeria on the same panel as Singaporean novelist Balli Kaur Jaswal, who spoke about misogyny and violence within the Punjabi community. We were also very fortunate to have Cake Theatrical Productions, led by Natalie Hennedige, present their subversive version of the Greek tragedy of *Medea*. In its anti-colonial thrust, the production rejects both American neo-imperialist ambitions and Singaporean neo-colonial Bicentennial celebrations. All festival events being free and open to the public, we drew a diverse audience — Singaporeans and others — to engage with a true diversity of ideas and works.

In between literary festivals, we organise a monthly gathering called Second Saturdays Reading Series. We have volunteers opening their homes to host the event. Attendees bring food to the potluck to share. We have featured Singaporean writers, such as Jeremy Tiang, Amanda Lee Koe, and Philip Holden, as well as well-regarded North American writers such as Madeleine Thien and Min Jin Lee. Personal encounters at these events are important, but equally so are the long-form book reviews we publish on our blog. We have Americans reviewing Singaporean books and Singaporeans reviewing American books so that the dissemination of ideas can be captured in writing as well.

Last year, we set up our own press called Gaudy Boy, with the mission of publishing authors of Asian heritage. The name of the press is taken from a poem by Singaporean author Arthur Yap. Our first title was an American edition of Alfian Sa'at's short-story collection *Malay Sketches*. We chose the book not only for its literary excellence, but also for its nuanced and empathetic take on a marginalised community in Singapore. We have just released the co-winners of the first Gaudy Boy Poetry Book Prize. The winning books are by Lawrence Ypil, a Filipino poet teaching at Yale-NUS, and by Jenifer Park, a Korean American teaching at the University of Alabama. Yes, we want to put Singapore literature in the hands of

Americans, but we also want Singapore literature not to be parochial nor to look to the West solely, but to be in dialogue with other Asian literatures.

To encourage young Singaporean writers to look outwards, we award an annual fellowship to visit New York City and Southeast Asia on alternate years. Our first fellow, playwright Nur Sabrina bte Dzulkifli, who writes about feminism, queerness, and mental illness, visited New York for two weeks last year. Our second fellowship was awarded to Jason Soo, the filmmaker of *1987: Untracing the Conspiracy*, about Operation Spectrum, to go to Thailand to interview the Singaporean Old Left before they pass away. We have just announced the recipient of our third fellowship. Poet Ally Chua will be going to New York City to investigate the lives of ordinary workers who work the night shift.



The launch of Gaudy Boy books at the Asian American Writers' Workshop in 2019. Photo courtesy of Singapore Unbound.

The judges of the Singapore Unbound Fellowship are chosen not only for their literary expertise but also for their involvement in social action. They include the veteran activist Constance Singam, the writer and social critic Alfian Sa'at, the *New Naratif* Editor-in-Chief Kirsten Han, and the artist Seelan Palay, who was arrested and jailed for mounting a one-man art performance outside Parliament House.

To preserve the independence of our policies, programming, and personnel, it is crucial to us not to depend on state funding. Our funding comes, instead, from private individuals, both American and Singaporean. I took that decision not to apply for any state funding back in 2015. To give you an idea of my reasons, I'd like to read from an open letter I wrote then, included in my book of essays *Bite Harder*.

There were high hopes in the last days of Lee Kuan Yew that Singapore society will breathe more easily and freely. This was not to be. First, the government restricted the screening of Tan Pin Pin's documentary film "To Singapore, With Love" about Singapore's political dissidents and exiles. Then, NAC, under Kathy Lai, withdrew the publication grant from Sonny Liew's *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*, because the graphic novel was deemed politically sensitive. These actions may seem to show the lightening of the censoring hand, since neither film nor book was banned outright, but they do not. They are, instead, carefully calculated to mute any protest from the artistic community and to prevent the dissemination of film and book to the populace. The state is not bothered by film screenings to small groups of like-minded individuals. It knows that they are a lost cause and, anyway, their opinion leaders depend on it for arts funding. By restricting screenings, the state has achieved its purpose of restricting the exposure of the populace to what it considers to be undesirable ideas. The same goes for the graphic novel. Withdrawing funding is a sufficient warning to schools and other institutions to stay away from the disapproved publication. The strategy is clear: let the tiny liberal fringe protest while watching their film and reading their book, but cordon off the populace from any liberating ideas. As Tan Tarn How observed on Facebook, "things are changing, but backwards."

That the NAC is one of the state instruments for carrying out this policy is clear from Kathy Lai's letter. After dividing the "well-travelled, deeply engaged" arts lovers from "others who want the arts to uplift them, to be simple expressions of joy and beauty" (meaning the HDB heartlanders), she warns that "[t]he one thing we won't — and must not — do is to be patronising or even insulting to audiences and potential audiences on their choices." By her twisted logic, to encourage Singaporeans to eschew the ersatz and the simplistic, to appreciate the profound and the complex, is to patronise (even insult!) them. This statement alone disqualifies her to be the chief of the National Arts Council. But we must not overlook the political hackwork done by the statement. In political terms, the statement says to artists and art lovers, do what you like but leave the electorate alone.

Just as insidious, and even more upsetting, is her argument that artists' complaints about censorship are exaggerated. Look at "our lively theatre scene," she wrote. "Similarly, the marketplace has never seen a more diverse range of Singaporean-authored and published books than today — from the

reverential and celebratory to all manner of contrarian narratives.” In arguing thus, she is using works produced under a restrictive regime to prove a lack of restrictions, conveniently ignoring the fact that many of the most vibrant works were produced despite of these restrictions. What she argues is tantamount to saying that queer writers cannot be oppressed in Singapore since they can publish their books in the country. This kind of logic is what has stopped LGBT writers such Cyril Wong and Ovidia Yu from representing their country. To display the vitality of Singapore writing is to contribute to their own oppression. You can write and publish, right? So you cannot be so badly off. In the meantime, 377A, the law against sodomy, remains on the books, and prevents any progress towards achieving equality. Kathy Lai seems oblivious to the irony in her phrase “all manner of contrarian narratives.” What did she do to *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* under her watch? Whitewashed tomb.

Because of the reasons above, I have decided to embark on a policy of non-cooperation with the NAC until it changes its approach, until it champions freedom of expression....

I wish, instead, to heed Haresh Sharma’s clarion call, given in his speech on receiving the Cultural Medallion: “The most fundamental frontier of change is the mind. If our mindsets can’t change then there is very little hope for our attitudes to change. Our attitude towards censorship and regulation, our attitude towards openness and dialogue, our attitude towards risk-taking, and ultimately, our attitude towards the value of the artist in society. I wish to decolonize my mind.”

— From “Decolonizing the Mind: Open Letter in Response to Kathy Lai”

What are these cultural attitudes or values that Haresh Sharma is asking us to change? In the remainder of my talk, I will highlight, briefly, three tenacious and malicious values that hinder not only the development of the arts in Singapore, but also the pursuit of cultural diplomacy abroad.

First, Singapore, the state and the people, believe that culture is instrumental to obtaining some greater good, but no, it is not; culture is not instrumental but essential to life, it is a good in itself. I know I said at the start that the arts can be used to change society, but it changes society by effecting deep and lasting change within individuals. When we read the novel *Abraham’s Promise* by Philip Jeyaretnam, we re-examine youthful idealism and adult cynicism and experience their possible reconciliation. When we look, really look, at the artwork “Sungai, Sejarah,” by Boedi Widjaja, we feel our beings simultaneously flow like rivers of time and solidify like river pebbles. We feel we belong somewhere and nowhere at the same time.

The idea that art is merely instrumental can lead to the crassest of mistakes in cultural diplomacy. I can still remember the opening of an art show of both Singaporean and Thai artists in a prestigious New York art gallery some years ago. The Singapore Tourism Board (STB) must have given the show quite a bit of money, as the head of STB was invited to speak at the opening. He had obviously not looked at the artworks on show at all. Instead of speaking about the show, he gave his spiel about the opening of National Gallery Singapore to encourage tourism. It was the most embarrassingly blatant act of marketing in front of a discerning crowd of New York art lovers. This is not to blame anyone. The STB head was but a symptom of a more general malaise in Singapore, the instrumental use of the arts for economic gain. The sickness will not be cured by teaching our cultural ambassadors art criticism or marketing savvy. The problem lies deeper. We do not really love the arts for its own sake.

“We need to invest at least as much in arts criticism as in arts administration. We need to be able to explain the origins, processes, and functions of our artworks to ourselves before we can successfully explain them to others. And we explain to others in order to enrich them, just as we are enriched by their explanations of their culture, and not in order to impoverish them.”

Second, Singapore believes that culture is a zero-sum game, but it is not. Culture, in its essence and direction, enriches. Whatever impoverishes, oneself or others, is not culture. However, the belief in a zero-sum game is deeply embedded in us; in fact, it is preached by the highest echelon of our political leadership. The *TODAY* newspaper reported not so long ago that Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong exhorted Singaporeans not only to protect their own lunches but to steal other people’s lunches too. This way of thinking justifies our exploitation of foreign workers within the country and our exploitation of natural resources, such as sand and fishing grounds, belonging to our neighbours.

This idea of culture as a zero-sum game is undergirded by the use of competitions and quantifiable KPIs as measures of success, as if the arts is a kind of Olympic Games, in the first instance, and a kind of widgets, in the second. We need much more holistic and qualitative measures. We need to invest at least as much in arts criticism as in arts administration. We need to be able to explain the origins, processes, and functions of our artworks to ourselves before we can successfully explain them to others. And we explain to others in order to enrich them, just as we are enriched by their explanations of their culture, and not in order to impoverish them.

Third, Singapore believes that culture is a form of presentation, a spectacle, but it is not. It is, instead, a form of criticism. Life is nasty, brutish, and short, as the pig

Old Major from George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, reminds us, but we have culture to prove that life does not have to be that way. The strongest artwork of a time is one that mounts the most stinging critique of its time. We have in Sonny Liew's graphic novel *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* such a masterpiece, which, by winning three Eisner Awards and being translated into multiple languages, showed that it spoke to audiences beyond Singapore. Why are we not mounting around the world colloquiums and exhibitions around this work and what it says about history and art, futurity and love? We cannot, for the simple reason that Someone Upstairs disapproves of it.

Instead, what we had, to celebrate SG50, was Singapore Inside Out. A gimmicky presentation of Singaporean arts that did not have the fun of a gimmick or the wow of a presentation. At the New York iteration, which I attended, visitors were more excited about Shake Shack's Singapore Spice Burger than about any of the artists on display. What on earth is Singapore Spice? Certainly not the Singaporean authors reading at the event since they could hardly be heard in the carnival-like setting.

What I hope to have drawn to your attention is the subtle but persistent link between basic values and outward manifestations. As long as Singapore believes that the arts is merely an instrument to obtaining some greater good, that the arts is a zero-sum game, and that the arts is only a form of presentation, and not a form of criticism, all efforts at cultural diplomacy will not only fail, but discredit Singapore. If, however, efforts are bent towards eradicating these beliefs and cultivating their opposites, why, you would be engaging not in cultural diplomacy, but in counter-cultural insurgency.

## Speaker 6: Daniel Kok

I want to try speaking today not about my projects as an artist but reflect on my role in the wider socio-cultural ecosystem. I am actually trying to not sound like an artist and a bit more like a bureaucrat today, as a kind of role play.

In my own experience as an independent artist, I feel like I have had to constantly switch between wearing both hats. As an administrator, I have to be organised, methodical and efficient. I diligently write and file proposals, application, timelines and budgets. My language must be precise, succinct, economical. My experiences as a junior college teacher and a Singapore Armed Forces officer have certainly helped me here. I understand desired outcomes, strategic thrusts and KPIs and I worked out how my activities dovetailed back to the mission statement.

Then as a researcher, I give time to reading and writing in order to understand discourses that underpin my ideas, to be familiar with political philosophy, cultural theory and history of the arts and of different parts of the world. In order to grasp the dynamic relationship between theory and practice, in order to be critical, articulate and erudite.

Then as a creative individual, I have to be playful, daring, perhaps eccentric and even impractical. I gave myself in to new experiences, to downtime, playtime and dreamtime, all of which are necessitated by openness, spontaneity and serendipity. Getting lost and confused can be advantageous if only for the purpose of discovering something new.

Finally, I also need to be a bit of a businessman. I have to be thick-skinned in putting myself forward and to sell my work, if not myself. I try not to bore people with the blah, blah, blah of my work. Instead, I make what I do accessible and practise my elevator pitches. Once in the public realm, the market logic takes over and I try to speak the language of marketing. When networking, my soft skills are paramount.

Perhaps, being an independent artist is to have multiple contrasting personalities, given the range of roles and skill sets that are demanded and I guess today I am addressing you more as my networker self since in the e-mail invitation, I was advised to wear smart casual.

The *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman described what he called the three great eras of globalisation in his book *The World is Flat*. For Friedman, globalisation 1.0 refers to the age of colonisation or the globalisation of countries. Globalisation 2.0 refers to the age of cooperation. Globalisation 3.0 then is the age of the internet or the globalisation of the individual. Today, the individual has become the frontier in which globalisation plays out. Friedman sees this era as

terrifying and exciting to the degree in which it empowers and enjoins, enables and requires individuals to globalise themselves and to think of themselves as potential connectors, collaborators and competitors with other individuals anywhere in the world. Friedman wrote this back in 2007.

Twelve years later today, equipped with technology and social media, an individual can now access and generate information, create, publish, communicate from almost anywhere with potentially everyone. Now, more than ever, one's problem-solving abilities, propensity for creativity, entrepreneurial drive, self-management and collaborative skills are sought-after premiums in human capital.

As a value-added economic unit unto itself, the globalised individual of today is a one-man band, able to multi-task in a wide range of responsibilities, from the practical to the intellectual, the administrative to the creative. As such, the independent artist is the globalised individual and post-Fordist knowledge worker *par excellence*. One could even claim the independent artist as a prototype for waged labour relations in the upcoming decades.

As independent artists who do the research, creation, production and distribution, we are self-driven, work at relatively high productivity rates but at low labour costs. Journalists, lawyers, chefs, accountants, more and more people will be working like independent artists. In the midst of all these, the economic value of the freelancing independent artist is not easily determinable and how much we contribute to society will remain moot.

Yet, notwithstanding the precarity of freelancing and working in the so-called gig economy, more and more artists are willing to sacrifice working within models of stability in exchange for physical mobility, operational autonomy and flexibility. Many artists innately understand that instability has its plus side. Instability necessitated different *modus operandi*. It means being able to question established structures and norms, always being prepared for contingencies and improvising temporary responses to unique situations. Surely, such essential creativity is exactly the most salient criterion for the globalised individual today.

I wish to make a case for the potential of the independent artist as a cultural agent. I am curious about this question: As an independent artist working fluidly between local and international networks, in what ways am I equipped and enabled with capabilities that my government might need in achieving its own organisational goals?

In Singapore, the role of the government is pretty much ubiquitous in everything. But what if artists can be conceived of not just as beneficiaries of the system but also cultural agents and partners whose labour and activities can help the government in achieving what it wants but cannot easily do on its own?



In globalisation 3.0, competitiveness is arguably no longer down to the state but played out on the side of the individual. In many ways, the globalised individual can think quicker, move faster and is better positioned to set up conversations, connections, collaborations with different millieus.

In the cultural domain, the independent artist can take the lead in defining what research and training capabilities need developing, what resources are available, where to go, who to work with, and how to set out desired paths to different communities and contacts.

“In Singapore, the role of the government is pretty much ubiquitous in everything. But what if artists can be conceived of not just as beneficiaries of the system but also cultural agents and partners whose labour and activities can help the government in achieving what it wants but cannot easily do on its own?”

As I read the NAC’s current arts plan, I actually got a little excited. Through my recent experiences in working not just as a maker and performer but also as a curator or even a producer, the current strategic thrusts and lists of priorities of the NAC actually make a lot of sense to me. The current global political climate has ostensibly resulted in a greater emphasis on relationality and sociality in the performing arts. A radical re-evaluation of artistic excellence, social relevance, community participation and international collaboration is already underway as important artistic questions.

In many ways, what artists are thinking about around the world is not misaligned with the NAC. It is not so difficult to find common ground, that is, if in Singapore we are prepared to work, between the state and individuals, as partners and re-evaluate relations of power and capital.

International activities of arts institutions are flourishing at an unprecedented scale. Internationalisation is becoming common practice, thanks in large part to the disappearance of every possible barrier to international exchange. In recent years, arts institutions around the world are feeling the efficacy of forming networks and partnerships with each other. We see a decentralisation of artistic conversations away from the US and Europe towards a more varied field with different nexuses of cultural production. There is no longer one centralised market for the various arts today. Everywhere, we look, new infrastructures and resources are being developed, new presentation platforms and arts centres, new spaces for creation, new platforms for artistic research, new study programmes.

When I am overseas, I often wonder about what I bring to the international context as a Singaporean. How do I speak to, say, artists from China, Australia and Europe,

about culture when it is quite possible that culture in Singaporean terms has to be conceived on a dramatically different basis? To speak about Singaporean art cannot be the same as speaking about Indonesian art. The difficulty in discussing identity in Singapore and Indonesia, for instance, is completely different. There is no cultural hinterland from which Singapore can easily position itself. Our contemporary notions about art are more abstract than they are connected to actual land, ground or physical geography.



*MARK*, by Daniel Kok, commissioned by the Singapore International Festival of Arts 2017. Photo courtesy of Bernie Ng.

We are a product of postmodernity, a poster child of postcolonialism and post-industrialism. Virtually everything in Singapore comes from somewhere else. It is in the process of change and transformation, and connected to somewhere else. Conceptually, in my opinion, we have mainly been a node within a network. Whether we are an entrêpot or a hub, networking is in our DNA.

My ideal of a Singapore model is one that is based on open concept and fluid exchange. As an artist, I have a few close ideas about what being an Asian artist means. I call myself a cultural orphan, a term coined by Kuo Pao Kun. I go on to find other means of cultural identification in a sea of possibilities. This also means that when I think about cultural networking, I do not think of myself as a representative of a singular identity but tapped into the ostensible freedom that

being Singaporean gives me to better engage with other cultures, and to understand them better. To be Singaporean for me is to be decentralised, hybrid, multiple and open.

Amidst the production-centric international marketplace, I am also curious about how a market for qualitative engagement can also emerge. An international market that is also stimulated by knowledge and experience from a great many informal networks. A market for divergent opinions. At present, informal initiatives for cooperation cannot be yet properly recognised in international and local arts policies. The existing range of instrument is simply inadequate.

In the era of the globalised individual, if information is accessed, generated, published and shared between individuals at hyper speed and super efficiency, then it begs the question of how institutions are currently equipped to capture the plethora of simply unimportant, haphazard, smaller-scale upstate activities and experiments that sit on the long tail of the graph of upstate productions.

I also see the informal networks that I personally build with different arts practitioners around the world as a viable form of social capital. In my work in Dance Nucleus, a lot of my attention is placed on building relationships among local, regional and international artists in ways that allow us to empower one other. My hypothesis is that by supporting one other, artists can accrue social capital that they can in turn leverage in their negotiations with their respective cultural contacts. In short, what if my social capital as an independent artist, like a financial and symbolic capital wielded by the state, is just as valuable?

So far, I have been deliberately trying to put the spotlight on the role of the individual artist, as someone who is already doing a lot of state diplomacy work. It is not the intention of the artist to do cultural diplomacy. Artists do not work and say they are contributing to cultural diplomacy.

We should trust artists to work independently and with all their objectives and different skill sets, they will find their own cultural paths. Artists can be cultural feelers themselves, and they will find the contacts. They know how to engage and who to engage with. Hopefully, with that trust, artists can make things happen. It does not always have to be led by institutions and the government.

I would like to conclude with a description of the idea of the rhizome. As a model for culture, the rhizome resists the organisational structure of a root tree system, which charts causality along chronological lines. A rhizome, on the other hand, is more about the connections which instantaneously reconfigure organisations of power.

The rhizome treats history and culture as a map and a wide array of attractions and influences with no specific origin. A rhizome has no beginning or end. It is always in the middle, between things. The planar movement of the rhizome resists

chronology and organisation, instead favouring a nomadic system of growth and propagation. In this model, culture moves like the surface of a body of water, spreading towards available spaces or trickling into new spaces, fissures and gaps, eroding what is in its way.

## Discussion

IPS Adjunct Senior Research Fellow Tan Tarn How started the discussion by asking for an update of the Cultural Diplomacy Fund, in terms of the amount of funds that have been disbursed and the number of arts groups and artists that have benefited from the funding. Relating to Ms Yvonne Tham's presentation, he pointed out that Singapore's advantage rested on its financial might, which has been useful in negotiating for the inclusion of Singapore artists in co-productions. He wondered if other countries would still be interested in collaborating with Singapore if the latter did not have the economic resources. "In other words, what is our cultural advantage over and above our monetary and financial advantage? What is our culture, our presentation?" he asked.

### **The status of the Cultural Diplomacy Fund**

Mr Kenneth Kwok replied that there might have been some misunderstanding surrounding the Cultural Diplomacy Fund. Unlike the NAC grants for market and capability development, the Cultural Diplomacy Fund is not meant to be an open fund whereby information pertaining to its spending would be made publicly available. The Cultural Diplomacy Fund is to be used by government agencies, including the MFA, MCCY and the NAC, to achieve their cultural diplomacy agendas. He added that for the NAC, such cultural diplomacy agendas also coincided with creating opportunities for artists. "The money is managed by government agencies but the money is used to benefit artists," he said. According to Mr Kwok, portions of the Cultural Diplomacy Fund have been used to support platforms for ASEAN, artist collaboration in Australia, and the George Town Festival.

### **Better use of cultural diplomacy funding?**

In response to Mr Tan's question, Ms Tham said that artists needed the financial resources to produce their works but for an arts centre like the Esplanade, the decision to work with a particular artist would revolve around several considerations: whether the particular artist's work would resonate with the Esplanade's audience for it to be presented there, whether partners such as commissioners and producers would share the Esplanade's vision, and whether these partners are the best people to support the artists involved.

With regard to large-scale cultural showcases of Singapore artists overseas, which are often supported by substantial budgets, Ms Tham highlighted the importance of understanding the context. If arts administrators and arts groups went into a city with few contacts and little understanding of the city, its audience and the venues in which the showcases would be presented, there would be a high chance that the money would be wasted. She suggested that the impact might be greater by building deep and long-term relationships with artists.

Mr Daniel Kok also questioned the usefulness of “buying our way” into cultural diplomacy. Using his sponsored participation at Dance Massive, a festival for Australian contemporary dance, as an example, he said, “... so much money was spent. We set up a booth, people gave out name cards, DVDs, some meetings were conducted. And at the end of it, we wondered what happened? What did we get out of it?” He said the money could have been spent on artists’ development and trusting them to work independently.

While acknowledging that cultural diplomacy showcases might not always be the best platforms for artistic development and that artists may have better people-to-people networks than the government, Mr Kwok clarified that not all of the NAC’s cultural diplomacy efforts were “big spectacular showcases”. In fact, there has been a shift by the NAC, MFA and MCCY towards smaller showcases and some of these were individual artist-based, which had allowed for more intimate exchanges. “What the NAC is trying to do is to have multiple ground-up opportunities and government-to-government opportunities, and hopefully, with both working together to help the arts scene to grow,” he explained.

Moreover, Mr Kwok observed that the overseas showcases that arts groups such as the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, Teater Ekamatra and Drama Box had participated in have likewise translated into meaningful collaboration. Nevertheless, he made an appeal for cultural diplomacy showcases: “We seem to be lumping everything into one big thing and saying that there is no good that comes out of them. Just as artists hope that the government does not put down certain artistic practices, I do hope that the artistic community will not put down artists who are creating excellent work for these big cultural showcases.”

He added that cultural diplomacy was simply one part of the NAC’s larger efforts of internationalisation, which also included market and capability development, amongst other objectives. Hence, any international effort is not for the sole purpose of promoting cultural diplomacy and the NAC supports capability and market development with international components through its grants.

### **Funding and Key Performance Indicators**

To the moderator of the discussion Mr Colin Goh, the question central to cultural diplomacy is that of “who funds it?” If he had accepted funding to run an arts programme like the Spotlight Singapore series (a platform that promotes collaborations between Singapore’s arts and business communities and other countries), he would have had to listen to the powers that be. Previously, when he presented pieces that were fairly controversial, concern from state funders “was very gently put across to us.” He added that funding from private individuals had given them “a bit of leeway” for their programming. However, the corporate funding approach of the arts, as summed up by the “business with a cultural handshake” tagline of the Spotlight Singapore series, was not without criticism — there were perceptions of the essence of the arts being diluted by economic imperatives.

A participant noted that obtaining state funding to promote Singapore filmmakers through the screening of Singapore films was often accompanied by having to justify audience attendance numbers, even when such figures mattered little to him. Similarly, tangible outcomes were expected to justify funding for literary exchanges between Singapore and Southeast Asian writers. These KPIs included the number of books to be published or translated. To some artists, what was more important was that they were still not familiar with their regional counterparts and their works, and the purpose of such exchanges was to meet them, engage in conversations and build relationships. Hence, what was less emphasised in these measurements of cultural diplomacy was the people-to-people relationships, which had to be cultivated over an extended period of time and with extensive resources.

Nevertheless, the same participant said that funding, or the lack thereof, should not deter artists from building cultural relations: “If you really want to showcase Singapore artists or Singapore filmmakers, you always find a way with or without state funding. So the cultural diplomacy part is, you do it, you will do it on the ground, you will still be cultural agents or you try to promote the arts and culture on your own through different ways.”

### **Focusing on people-to-people relations**

According to Ms Jean Tan, the state has historically and globally been in charge of cultural diplomacy given the fact that it was an enormous endeavour that required deep pockets. However, the power dynamics of today have shifted, as characterised by the ascendancy of the people, businesses, academics and non-governmental organisations “getting into this whole play of enriching that tapestry of relations between nations.” She added that a smart government would leverage, and not constrain, the networks of these individuals and groups as it cannot do everything on its own.

Citing the presentation by Ms Tan, Ms Tham agreed that at the highest level, cultural diplomacy should help countries avoid war and the public diplomacy level would be defined by the state and ministries such as the MFA. However, while artists and arts institutions are not involved at the state-level conversations, they do contribute to feelings of goodwill because of the people-to-people relationships. Ms Tham agreed with the participant too that Singaporeans were not investing enough of our time to make friends with and get to know more of other artists. The focus was on selling one’s work and she wondered if it had to do with the goal-driven trait of Singapore culture and funding requirements. She added that she had learnt tremendously from artists and producers by having different conversations with them and these experiences stemmed from the basic value of being curious about other people and their work. Being a little more human might bring about cultural diplomacy too, she said.

The idea of investing in relationships as part of cultural diplomacy also resonated with Mr Kok, who said that it would be far too “reductive” if cultural diplomacy was

to be defined as selling Singapore abroad. It has always puzzled him that little understanding existed in the arts and culture between Singapore and its immediate neighbours. He suggested that if money had to be spent to further Singapore's cultural diplomacy agendas, it could be spent on building relationships with neighbours possessing cultural capital but lacking in financial capital. Describing himself as "some kind of a double agent sometimes", Mr Kok said that while he was working with Singapore's interests in mind, he was also thinking of how he could benefit his colleagues working in other places. His belief was that if he had the money to bring them to Singapore and involve them in his dance projects, their participation would also enrich the cultural space in Singapore.

### **Tension between cultural diplomacy and cultural exchange**

A participant recalled his involvement in a Singapore-Malaysia theatre co-production. He noted that there was "so much policing" of the materials and the topics discussed in the play, and there was concern that the content of the play would affect bilateral relations between the two countries. He wondered if "this whole idea of cultural diplomacy actually ran counter to the idea of a genuine and honest cultural exchange." Another play of his on political and religious issues was allowed to be presented in London but not in Singapore. That incident led him to conclude that "episodes of dissent" could only be displayed overseas to depict an image of Singapore as not authoritarian, as part of international branding. In the process of cultural diplomacy, artists became co-opted to project the softer side of Singapore, he added.

Joining the discussion, Mr Koh Jee Leong said, "Singapore does not go out into the world blank. Singapore already has a reputation that precedes it. We can ask ourselves of course what is that reputation? I don't think it's very hard to understand we are out for ourselves, that if we do something else for people, we want something back, that we are not creative." He added that Singapore has become sensitive to this image problem and has been growing "the image of being creative, vibrant and viable without actually growing the other part... which has to do with social, political vibrancy." Diplomacy, Mr Koh continued, was not just about politics but also commonality in values and, for example, following the mosque shootings in New Zealand, the country's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern stood for certain values to which many worldwide aspired.

Another participant, a filmmaker, said perceptions of Singapore were constantly being challenged and changed by counter-narratives from the different art forms. He added that when he travelled to overseas film festivals, with or without state support, he was a representative of Singapore. With every screening of his films, especially those with controversial themes, he was opening the eyes of audiences that already had certain impressions of Singapore. On cultural diplomacy, the same participant pointed out the futility of policymakers trying to "reverse engineer" and



fit the work of artists into the purpose of cultural diplomacy, as art would have become propaganda in the process.

On the issue of content regulation and censorship, Mr Kenneth Kwok said that it would be odd if artists were to always agree with what the government did, and it was “the role of the artist to be ahead, to push boundaries, to create new thought, advance thinking.” He acknowledged that all governments had to be a bit more careful and conservative than the artist community because they had to think “about not just the arts but all the other things” like political and trade relations. He, however, echoed Mr Koh’s point on presenting a diversity of what Singapore means, adding that the NAC has worked very hard in creating diversity in its presentation of Singapore artists while acknowledging more could be done. “I think all of us have the same vision that we want people around the world to see a different side of Singapore, see what Singapore is... I know what Singapore is, for all its richness, its complexity, its talent, its creativity, I hope through cultural diplomacy, the world can see that as well,” he said. Given that cultural diplomacy is relatively new and amorphous in Singapore, Mr Kwok added that there was still a lot for the NAC to learn.

### **Arm’s-length funding**

Some participants disagreed with Mr Goh’s point on listening to the funders and instead called for arm’s-length funding. The participant, whose play was vetted due to concerns over bilateral relations, said that the incident reflected an authoritarian way of thinking, a notion that the government was responsible for all the art that was being produced, and therefore it needed to exercise control over art production. A more liberal society, he added, would provide funding to artists but would not control what they say or produce. The understanding in such a society is that the arts is in a politically autonomous position and there is the recognition that the positions of the government and artists differ, whatever the artists say or do is not reflecting of the government’s position.

Similarly, Mr Tay Tong said that arm’s-length funding would have an impact on the development of arts and culture, not just in Singapore, and the development of the individual artist. Referring to artists like Mr Koh Jee Leong who have eschewed state funding in order to exercise autonomy in their artistic practice, Mr Tay said, “... at the end of the day, those people who are outside Singapore are actually flying the Singapore flag but we have not given enough support to them to do that work.” Hence, he called for a rethink of cultural diplomacy that was “more apolitical and actually having less involvement of the government agenda” while allowing artists to do what they do best. To him, artists often reflect what is happening in society and are the best people to tell the world our stories.

## About the Speakers

**Colin GOH** is Chief Executive Officer of The RICE Group of Companies, a social enterprise dedicated to harvesting the arts. A strong advocate of cultural diplomacy, he is instrumental in designing *Spotlight Singapore*, a platform that enables sustainable collaborations between the arts and business communities of Singapore and other countries through multidisciplinary events.

*Spotlight Singapore* premiered in Hong Kong in 2006 and in Tokyo the same year. It crossed new borders in its third edition in Moscow (2008), Cape Town (2011), and Bratislava and Prague (2012). Its sixth edition was held in Mexico City in 2015. The closing chapter was held in Delhi in September 2019, celebrating 50 years of ASEAN-India partnership. *Spotlight Singapore* is an initiative that has lasted more than 10 years and with over 5,000 participants! In a bifurcated world, Mr Goh continues to advocate diplomacy by culture as a means to build the simple word called “trust” for Singapore.

**KOH Jee Leong** is the founder and organiser of Singapore Unbound, a New York City-based literary non-profit dedicated to the struggle for freedom of expression and equal rights for all through cultural exchange and political activism. He is also the author of *Steep Tea* (Carcanet), named a Best Book of the Year by UK's *Financial Times* and a Finalist by Lambda Literary (LGBT literature) in the USA. He has published three other books of poems, a volume of personal, political and literary essays, and a collection of *zuihitsu* (Japanese essay form), the last shortlisted for the Singapore Literature Prize.

**Daniel KOK** holds a B.A. in Fine Art & Critical Theory from Goldsmiths College in London and an M.A. in Solo/Dance/Authorship (SODA) from the Inter-University Centre of Dance Berlin. He completed the Advanced Performance and Scenography Studies (APASS) programme in Brussels. In 2008, he received the Young Artist Award from the National Arts Council.

His performances have been presented across Asia, Europe, Australia and North America, notably in the Venice Biennale, Maxim Gorki Theater (Berlin) and Festival/Tokyo. His recent works include *Bunny* (2016), *MARK* (2017) and *xhe* (2018). Mr Kok is the artistic director of Dance Nucleus, a space for artistic research and creative development. He curates the annual da:ns Lab at the Esplanade. He is a core group member of the Asia Network for Dance (AND+).

**Kenneth KWOK** is Assistant Chief Executive (Planning and Development) of the National Arts Council. He oversees the council's Education and Capability Development policies and programmes, as well as the Policy and Planning, Research, and International Relations teams. He has helped to establish opportunities for Singapore artists and arts groups in countries such as the US, the UK, Australia and China. Mr Kwok has also spoken at arts and culture conferences in Australia and Malaysia, and represents the council on international platforms such as the Festival City Network.

**Jean TAN** is the Executive Director of the Singapore International Foundation (SIF), a non-profit dedicated to international peace-building and development. Prior to the SIF, she served at the ministries of Manpower, Foreign Affairs, and Information and the Arts. Ms Tan is a graduate of the National University of Singapore and was awarded the Singapore Government Merit Scholarship to pursue postgraduate studies in the US. In her spare time, she volunteers on the Board of the International Forum on Development Service, a global network of volunteer-driven development agencies, and chairs its annual conference committee. She also serves on the Global Public Diplomacy Network as a Founder Board Member and on the Board of SG Enable, an agency dedicated to serving persons with disabilities.

**TAN Tarn How** is Adjunct Senior Research Fellow in the Institute of Policy Studies. His research areas are in arts and cultural policy and media and Internet policy.

**TAY Tong** is an internationally experienced arts worker, enabler and consultant, whose 30-year experience spans international performing arts, intercultural practices and arts mobility. Until April 2018, he was Managing Director/Producer of the high-profile performance company TheatreWorks (Singapore) and was Aide to the Festival Director for the first four editions of the Singapore International Festival of Arts (2014-2017). From 1999 to April 2018, Mr Tay was the Director of Arts Network Asia, which brokers Asia-to-Asia dialogue through the arts. It is funded by the Ford Foundation. Currently, he serves on the selection panel for the Asia-Europe Foundation's Mobility First! programme.

Mr Tay is an advocate for engagement with diverse cultures and supports the philosophy of "celebrating differences" and cultural negotiation. He is keen to uncover endeavours that unlock the full potential of the arts and culture in cross-border/cross-cultural relations that aim to generate sustainable links among different peoples.

**Yvonne THAM** is the Chief Executive Officer of Esplanade where she is responsible for its overall management and direction, as a performing arts centre for everyone. Prior to Esplanade, she was the Deputy CEO at the National Arts Council where she oversaw the council's strategic planning and capability development departments, as well as the development and implementation of policies and programmes for arts grants, arts education, community engagement and arts infrastructure. Before that, Ms Tham was the Director of the Arts and Heritage Division at the then-Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (now Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth). From 2002 to 2009, she was involved in the development of policies such as the Renaissance City plans, as well as the setting up of the School of the Arts, the DesignSingapore Council and the National Gallery Singapore. She had also worked at the Ministry of Manpower as the Assistant Director for Labour Relations and Welfare, and had taught literature at Raffles Junior College.