

Do our cultural leaders “get” the arts?

Full Report on the IPS-SAM Spotlight on Cultural Policy Series:
Roundtable on The Future of Cultural Leadership in Singapore

Tan Tarn How, Adjunct Senior Research Fellow

Shawn Goh Ze Song, Research Assistant

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Executive Summary

This is a report of a roundtable discussion organised by the Institute of Policy Studies in collaboration with the Singapore Art Museum, on “The Future of Cultural Leadership in Singapore”.

Cultural leadership refers both to the leadership of government and quasi-government agencies that formulate and implement policies promoting arts and culture, and the leadership of institutions that create, promote, and showcase the arts and culture. They include the Minister of Culture, Minister of Education, senior management and board members of the National Arts Council, the National Heritage Board, and of cultural institutions such as National Gallery Singapore and the Esplanade. Cultural leaders face not only similar challenges as leaders in other domains, but also unique ones arising from the nature of the arts. Specifically, the arts are creative and open-ended, involve risk taking, are difficult to evaluate in terms of success, and are closely tied to larger political, societal and philosophical issues.

At the roundtable, policymakers, academics, artists and arts practitioners, and management and board members of arts groups discussed the kind of cultural leadership that Singapore needs.

The key questions included: Who should lead major cultural institutions of a country? What values should they be driven by? Is there sufficient capacity for capability development of cultural leaders? What are the issues of cultural leadership specific to Singapore in its current state of political, societal, and artistic development?

Cultural leadership as navigation

In her opening remarks, Dr June Yap, Director of Curatorial, Programmes and Publications at the Singapore Art Museum, likened cultural leadership to “navigation” by sailors. For effective navigation, they have to use the “guiding light” provided by constellations in going ahead and also understand the “vessel” they are steering. Successful cultural leadership not only requires knowledge, skill, logic, an understanding of context, but also the ability to have foresight and vision.

Cultural leadership landscape

The three presenters were Baey Yam Keng, Parliamentary Secretary for the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth; Arun Mahizhnan, Special Research Adviser at the Institute of Policy Studies; and Thirunalan Sasitharan, Co-Founder and Director of the Intercultural Theatre Institute.

Mr Baey spoke about the programmes by his ministry to promote the arts and culture. They included implementing museum-based learning for Primary School students, setting up the Cultural Matching Fund, and making the arts and culture more accessible to the less fortunate. The ministry also has initiatives to upskill cultural leaders, ranging from job rotation, to training at the Culture Academy and through the Creative Industries Workforce Skills Qualifications Framework. An effective cultural leader must have a good understanding of both arts and culture and administration; the social acumen to know the ground sentiment; and the ambition to try new things.

A “dual-track” system for cultural leaders

Mr Arun pointed out that the current government system was unable to foster strong cultural leadership. The system assumed that “generalist” administrative officers on frequent rotational assignments — with little or no domain knowledge when first appointed to their senior posts — would eventually gain the necessary expertise over time. However, governing Singapore has become highly complex and requires “specialists” with specific domain knowledge. Mr Arun proposed having a new “dual-track” system where “generalists” and “specialists” advance with equal rank and rewards. The government must gain more cultural literacy and artistic sensibilities to make informed decisions about arts and cultural policies. However, he also reminded the arts community not to expect the government to behave like artists, and to recognise their own need to have administrative sensibilities as well.

The tension between cultural leaders and artists

Mr Sasitharan spoke about the unavoidable tension between cultural leaders in the public service and artists on the ground. This is because good bureaucrats are trained to objectify culture as they would any other public good. For artists, however, culture

is deeply infused with their sense of who they are. This difference often translates into bureaucrats of “not getting the arts”. As a result, they fail to understand the instincts, impulses and needs of the arts community on the ground. Effective cultural leadership needs to engage artists on their own terms, be open to embracing differences and new diversities in expression, and be prepared to risk the possibility of failure.

Discussion

The main points raised in the discussion were:

1. **The need to address the tension between policymakers and artists.** Cultural leaders in the government have the responsibility to grasp the spirit of the arts, and understand the difference between “policy-ing the arts” and “policing the arts”. Conversely, artists need to possess greater administrative sensibilities to better understand challenges faced by bureaucrats on contentious issues such as funding. One possible way to achieve this is to establish a “buddy system” in the administration where “generalist administrators” are paired with “specialist administrators” in order to facilitate the exchange of complementary perspectives.
2. **Policymakers have a responsibility to protect the “safe space” in which art is produced.** In a time where conservatism is on a global rise, the ability of the arts to address issues in an accessible manner and create platforms for discussion and better understanding is more important than ever. Thus, cultural leaders in government need to protect this “safe space” in which artists operate. Nevertheless, different people might have different ideas of the kind of arts that should exist within in this space. Hence, cultural leaders in the government also need to come forth to defend artworks that a vocal minority finds offensive and tries to censor. Both cultural leaders and artists need to think about how to pursue contentious issues and controversial topics in a manner that would bring different segments of society together.

Introduction

Together with the Singapore Art Museum, the Institute of Policy Studies organised a roundtable discussion on 27 October 2017 to look into the subject of the future of cultural leadership in Singapore. Held at the Singapore Art Museum, the roundtable examined the following issues of cultural leadership:

- Who should lead the major cultural institutions of a country?
- What types of expertise — such as the artistic, administrative, and entrepreneurial — should cultural leaders bring to the job?
- What values should cultural leaders be driven by?
- What visions are the most appropriate for the work of cultural leaders?
- Is there sufficient capacity for the development of capability of cultural leaders?
- What are the issues of cultural leadership that bear specifically on Singapore in its present state of political, societal and artistic development?

A total of 60 participants attended the roundtable, which included policymakers, academics, artists and arts practitioners, and leaders of various cultural organisations.

The roundtable was chaired by Mr Tan Tarn How, Adjunct Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies.

First, Dr June Yap, Director of Director of Curatorial, Programmes and Publications at the Singapore Art Museum, gave her Opening Remarks to kick off the session.

Next, three speakers — Mr Baey Yam Keng, Parliamentary Secretary for the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth; Mr Arun Mahizhnan, Special Research Adviser at the Institute of Policy Studies; and Mr Thirunalan Sasitharan, Co-Founder and Director of the Intercultural Theatre Institute — each gave their presentation on the topic. Finally, there was an open discussion for all participants moderated by Mr Tan.

Opening Remarks: Dr June Yap

The topic of the day is cultural leadership; and in pondering the subject, I thought I would look to a historical method for divining directions, beginning also a little lighter in tone before we embark on more serious discussion.

In the midst of a vast and seemingly endless ocean, with no land in sight, sailors have historically, and even in the present, relied on the skies above to navigate their journeys; especially with stars as their guide, where light from age-old constellations act as signposts.

What is leadership? One might say it is knowing that there are these compass points, holding steady even as the world turns, and not just an inky-black and empty sky. And then, even as one looks to the heavens or guiding lights, one also needs to turn around to see what one might be steering.



Dr June Yap giving her opening remarks.

Is it a luxury mega yacht such as the one owned by Chelsea Football Club owner, Roman Abramovich, that stands at an eclipsing length of two football pitches?

Is it estimable English author Douglas Adam’s fictional Heart of Gold, the first spacecraft to make use of the Infinite Improbability Drive that allows it to past

through every point in the universe, thus able to go anywhere without having to deal with hyperspace and other traveling inconveniences?

Or perhaps, it is *The Raft of Medusa*, the unfortunate wreck of a French frigate that was memorialised in painting by the artist Theodore Gericault in the 19th century. The French royalty navy warship with 150 soldiers on board ran aground on a sandbank. Lacking lifeboats, the attempt at survival upon the raft that drifted for a period of 13 days was characterised by violence and cannibalism. That said, Gericault’s painting has been read by some as hopeful in its depiction of the sighting of a distant ship and the possibility of being saved.

But before I stretch the metaphor too thin — going back to the idea of navigation that cultural leadership implies, one might say that navigation rests on the possibility of knowledge, in a combination of skill, logic, fact, and context. These abilities of sighting, positioning, and drawing relations may be said to underlie leadership and its vision.

However, one might also then add that in visioning, vision too, is needed to distinguish between projection and seeing things for what they actually are.

So, with these couple of thoughts and mental images on constellations and charting, I leave you to the many important questions of today’s discussion of who, how, and what drives cultural leadership.

What is leadership? One might say it is knowing that there are these compass points, holding steady even as the world turns, and not just an inky-black and empty sky. And then, even as one looks to the heavens or guiding lights, one also needs to turn around to see what one might be steering.

Speaker 1: Baey Yam Keng

I had a chance to address the topic of cultural leadership briefly at the Committee of Supply debate in Parliament earlier in 2017, when Arts Nominated Member of Parliament Kok Heng Leun raised the point about developing leadership in our major cultural institutions. But there is much more to the topic, and it bears delving into deeply. So, I am very glad that the Institute of Policy Studies and the Singapore Art Museum have chosen to make it the focus of today’s session. I look forward to our dialogue as a fraternity and hope that there will be fruitful discussions on how we can work together to nurture the current and future generations of cultural leaders.

I speak as Parliamentary Secretary for the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY), but my interest in championing the arts and culture goes back more than 20 years, when I founded the Chinese theatre company, The ETCeteras, with my wife, Hai Yen, who is the company’s artistic director. The growing interest and increasing emphasis on cultural leadership is perhaps a sign of how far the arts and culture scene has come, and how much it has grown. If we look around this room, we will see that we are a diverse group of cultural leaders who come from different genres and sectors of the arts and culture scene.

We have among us artists, arts practitioners, critics and policymakers. Despite the differences in our scopes of work, we are all cultural leaders. We believe in the importance of arts and culture to a people, society and nation. The arts and culture have the power to connect us firmly to our roots and to each other, diverse as we may be. The arts and culture also spur innovation and creativity. And in a volatile and ever-changing world, they allow us to imagine and hope. Based on these beliefs, each one of us has championed and promoted culture as part of everyday life, and we do so not just within the arts community but also among the wider public, including among people who do not yet appreciate the value of culture. We do so because we have a genuine passion to grow the arts and culture scene in Singapore.

Cultural leadership landscape

The political leadership holds our cultural leaders in public service to high standards of governance and accountability. Our cultural leaders in public service have been tireless in making the case for the arts. They have championed the creation and appreciation of arts and heritage as an integral part of our lives. And they have done so by securing strong support from stakeholders, both within and beyond the arts and culture sector, by presenting a robust case for the value of the arts and delivering sustained high quality outcomes. A recent example is our efforts to grow appreciation of arts and heritage among young audiences. MCCY has been working with the Ministry of Education, as well as the National Arts Council, National Heritage Board and cultural institutions such as the Singapore Art Museum, the National Museum of Singapore, National Gallery Singapore, and The Esplanade to introduce immersive, place-based learning visits for students. Between August and November 2016, the National Arts Council and the Ministry of Education piloted museum-based learning for primary four pupils from 15 schools as part of the revised primary art syllabus development. Response to the pilot was encouraging, with more than 80 per cent of students surveyed indicating that their experience was positive. The Ministry of Education intends for museum-based learning to form one of the core learning experiences in the revised primary art syllabus, which will be implemented across all primary schools from 2018.



Museum-based learning experiences for primary four pupils piloted by the National Arts Council and the Ministry of Education. Image courtesy of MCCY.

Another example of our cultural leaders’ commitment to growing the arts and culture scene sustainably, and involving Singaporeans in developing our culture, is the Cultural Matching Fund. Set up in 2013, the \$200 million Fund provides dollar-for-dollar matching grants for private cash donations from companies, organisations and individuals to arts and heritage groups. In 2017, MCCY announced that it would top up \$150 million to the Fund to sustain the momentum of giving to arts and heritage and encourage a sense of shared ownership between the community and the cultural sector.

Our cultural leaders in public service have also worked with arts and heritage groups and practitioners, as well as partners in the social service sector, to make arts and heritage accessible to the less privileged and those with special needs. This includes the initiatives ArtReach and HeritageCares by the National Arts Council and National Heritage Board, respectively, which involve corporate organisations and members of the public to enrich lives through arts and heritage.

With Singapore’s expanding arts scene, cultural leadership has also grown within the arts community. Our national companies, major companies, and key arts groups have come far because of strong leadership that has not only raised their level of artistic excellence, but also gained the support of patrons and audiences. Some arts companies are helmed by artistic directors while others thrive on the model of corporate leadership working in tandem with creative leadership.

One good example is the evolution of the Singapore International Festival of Arts. The Festival started as the Singapore Festival of the Arts in 1977 with the Ministry of Education. By 1986, the Festival was helmed by Singaporeans, beginning with impresario Robert Liew. The edition that concluded in 2017 was presented by the Arts House Limited, with Sarah Martin as the Chief Executive and Ong Keng Sen as Festival Director. The incoming Festival Director, for 2018 to 2020, is Gaurav Kripalani. For such organisations, the chief executive often manages overall matters, while the artistic director provides leadership in matters that require specific arts expertise.

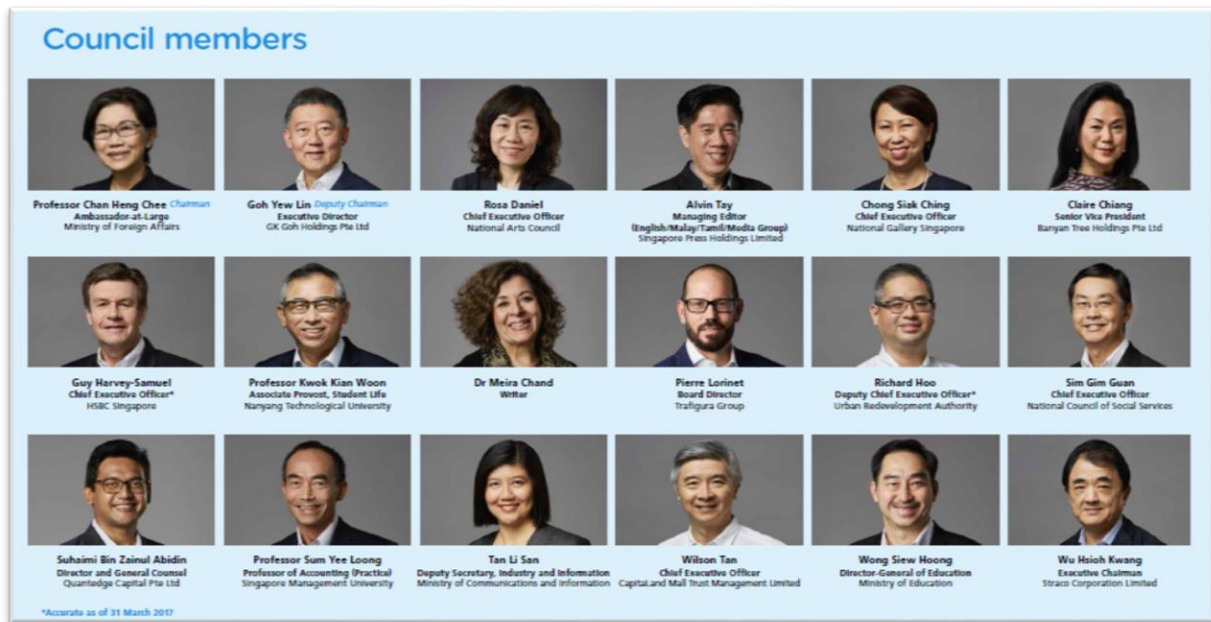
Leadership styles can differ, but effective leaders of our cultural sector require not only a good understanding of the arts and culture, but also administrative skills and whole-person capabilities. They must have vision, but also recognise that they need to harness talent and get the best out of others. Our cultural leaders should also have acute social acumen. He or she should be close to the ground, sense the concerns of the diverse arts community and the wider society, and manage those sentiments

sensitively. This means having the aptitude to rally people from diverse backgrounds to share in the same purpose for the arts and culture, and move in the same direction towards a common vision.

If that sounds like a tall order, we can perhaps take some comfort in the knowledge that other industries too, including technology companies at the forefront of tomorrow, face the challenge of fielding a single leader who possesses all the leadership qualities required by an organisation. The Chief Executive of Apple, for example, might be the face of the company, but it is the Chief Design Officer who is responsible for the look and feel of Apple hardware and interfaces.

Indeed, cultural leadership should embrace diversity within its ranks. It cannot be insular. It is for this reason that we strive to ensure that the Board of Directors of public cultural institutions are inclusive and comprise leaders who come from both the arts and non-arts fields. The meshing of different backgrounds and expertise can often result in interesting perspectives and ideas on how to grow our arts and culture scene. We are privileged to have as well, distinguished arts practitioners sitting on the Boards of our cultural institutions and groups. They include author Meira Chand, who serves as a Council Member at the National Arts Council, Aidli Mohamed Salleh Mosbit, a highly regarded playwright, director, actor and educator, who serves on the Board of the School of the Arts Singapore, and composer and Cultural Medallion recipient Kelly Tang, who serves on the Board of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra.

“The needs and interests of the different constituencies, however, are sometimes divergent, so it is not always possible to please everyone. In such circumstances, a cultural leader should acknowledge the plurality of views among all the different stakeholders and make room for their ideas through robust yet respectful dialogue.”



National Arts Council Board of Council Members. Image courtesy of MCCY.

Cultural leaders who push for excellence know that they need to be outward looking and actively seek to expand their relevance, including among those outside of the arts community. The participation of cultural leaders in the Centre for Liveable Cities’ Leaders in Urban Governance Programme is an example of seeding collaboration with key public sector agencies to achieve systemic changes in activating public spaces for art. The programme is targeted at public leaders in the infrastructure and environmental sector, and the participation of cultural leaders in the programme brings fresh insights to Singapore’s urban development. Another example of outward-looking cultural leadership is the inaugural Australia-Singapore Cultural Leaders’ Forum. Held in Adelaide in September 2017, it brought together more than 150 culture sector leaders from across Australia and Singapore to network, share best practices, and identify opportunities for future collaborations.

As cultural leaders seek to make the arts relevant to the wider public, their pool of stakeholders will also expand. The needs and interests of the different constituencies, however, are sometimes divergent, so it is not always possible to please everyone. In such circumstances, a cultural leader should acknowledge the plurality of views among all the different stakeholders and make room for their ideas through robust yet respectful dialogue. The process should be unifying and help to build trust and common understanding, but it is not an easy one.

Developing cultural leaders

While our cultural leadership landscape is diversified, there remains room for us to grow more leaders, as well as to help them be better equipped. Within MCCY, we actively seek to grow and train leaders by offering them job rotation opportunities with cultural institutions in the MCCY family. The Culture Academy, which is supported by MCCY, also promotes the growth and development of culture professionals and leaders in our arts and culture scene. It holds professional development workshops and curatorial talks, and it also publishes the journal, *Cultural Connections*.

Culture Academy
SINGAPORE

Supported By:
mccy
Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth

- **Centre of excellence in the training and development** of arts and heritage professionals
- Catalyst for forming **cultural networks**
- Platform for **thought leadership**

The image also contains two photographs: one showing a group of people in a meeting room looking at a large board with colorful sticky notes, and another showing a man and a woman sitting in armchairs on a stage during a talk, with a presentation screen in the background.

The Culture Academy, supported by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth. Image courtesy of MCCY.

The nurturing of cultural leaders, however, is a process that cannot be achieved through singular effort. Just as it takes a village to raise a child, the growth and development of cultural leaders requires the entire arts ecosystem to pitch in and contribute. This concerted effort to nurture cultural leaders and champions starts from early exposure to arts and culture in pre-schools. At the pre-tertiary level, the School of the Arts Singapore offers an arts-integrated education that seeks to groom future generations of artists and creative professionals to be leaders in all fields, including the arts. The tertiary arts institutions have also contributed to the nurturing of arts and culture leaders. LASALLE College of the Arts and the Nanyang

Academy of Fine Arts, for example, offer arts management programmes that have groomed leaders in various disciplines of arts.

Nation-wide, the SkillsFuture movement empowers individuals in the arts and culture scene to strive for excellence and be adept leaders in their fields. And under the Creative Industries Workforce Skills Qualifications framework there are three development tracks for arts and culture, design, and media and communications. Programmes offered under the arts and culture track range from cultural heritage conservation and curation to creative entrepreneurship and arts management.

The role of mentorship in developing cultural leaders cannot be underestimated either. Good cultural leaders have the potential to inspire others around them to play a more active role in building up and expanding the reach of arts and culture. They show others the way and spur leadership at all levels, thus creating a virtuous circle. To this end, MCCY recognises leading practitioners in the field of arts and culture through the Cultural Medallion and Young Artist Award and empower them to do more as cultural role models.



2017 Cultural Medallion and Young Artist Award recipients. Image courtesy of MCCY.

Aravinth Kumarasamy, a Young Artist Award recipient in 1999, for example, has been tireless in teaching and mentoring young talents in Indian classical dance and music. Now the Creative Director of Apsaras Arts, he counts the more than 10 years he spent serving on the National Indian Music Competition’s advisory committee as being among the most memorable of his time serving in the culture sector. Of the young talents he nurtured, some of them have since pursued their passion in Indian music as full-time professionals and are making their mark both in Singapore and internationally.

Future-ready cultural leaders

Along with the rise of a new generation of arts and culture leaders, and the establishment of more arts companies, succession planning has become ever more critical. Without a deliberate plan to groom a pipeline of cultural leaders, arts groups and cultural institutions may find themselves in a position where their sustainability is threatened by the longevity or retirement of their founders. And when companies fall away, a part of our collective heritage and institutional knowledge is lost with them.

Besides grooming cultural leaders for the future, our cultural leaders also have to be future-ready. They need to be disposed to change and willing to embrace it. They need to be plugged into conversations and developments concerning the future world. How people consume information in the digital age will impact how artists work, as well as how arts and culture is experienced and disseminated.

The growing gig economy, for example, presents an opportunity for cultural leaders to spearhead changes that take care of the needs of freelance workers. The arts scene, unwittingly, has been ahead of the curve on the gig economy by decades. Many arts practitioners in Singapore, as with their global counterparts, have long held a portfolio career or worked from gig to gig. Riding on the growing momentum of gig workers in Singapore, the National Arts Council is now engaging arts freelancers to roll out changes that will benefit them, and perhaps offer other industries an example of how to improve the employment welfare of freelancers.

Future-ready cultural leaders also need to be ambitious to try new things to surpass what has been done before, and not be anxious about failing. As the saying goes, “*It is better to have tried and failed, than never to have tried at all.*” Cultural leaders should not hold themselves back from introducing new initiatives and projects,

simply because they are afraid of failing. There will be hits and misses along the way because the journey is never a bed of roses. Success and judgement is never defined by a single moment or episode.

Conclusion

It is heartening to know that Singapore’s journey in growing cultural leadership over the years has been a public, people, and private partnership. But there is still much to be done and we can do more together than as individuals. I look forward to your continued collaboration and partnership in growing our current and future leaders in the arts and culture sector. Let us work together to take Singapore’s art and culture scene into the future.

Speaker 2: Arun Mahizhnan

I do not subscribe only to theories in textbooks, though I have read enough of them; my views are shaped by the actual experiences I have personally undergone or observed very closely from my ringside seat. I will be drawing heavily from my direct exposure to Singapore’s cultural leaders and how they perform as leaders.

Organisational DNA

I have a simple understanding about organisations. The DNA of every organisation has three genes — ideas, systems, and people. For the organisation to be good, all three genes must be good and function well together.

Therefore, cultural organisations too need good ideas, good systems and good leaders. In my book, good ideas are a dime a dozen. They are not as rare as people make them out to be. What is more difficult is to build good systems to implement those ideas. What is most difficult is to find the good people, especially the good leaders, to work the system and carry out the good ideas. Today, I will focus on good systems and good leaders for cultural organisations.

Government system

Let me first take the Singapore government and its cultural agencies as the system. Is it a good system for cultural development? The short answer is, it is good, but far from good enough.

The entire Singapore government structure is mostly a legacy of the British colonial empire and the subsequent parliamentary system. As such, I find the system severely handicapped. The Singapore cabinet and the administrative service have systemic, built-in limitations in developing and deploying the right leaders for the right domains within the government.

The organising principle of the Singapore government is primarily based on “administration by generalists”. Lately, it appears to be “administration by generals”, going by the number of military men in civilian administration. I believe

that governing Singapore has become so complex and challenging that it is in dire need of domain knowledge and specialisation in many areas of governance – in addition to the generalist perspective.

The very small number of cabinet posts prevents the government from appointing a domain specialist for each ministry. Unlike the American system, or even in some other Commonwealth systems, our cabinet ministers need to be elected. The nature of the electoral process demands that office-holders are politically savvy and electable first, and then rotatable among various ministries. As far as I can recall, only the Ministry of Law seems to have had a professionally qualified minister all through these 60-odd years. No other ministry is deemed to require a domain specialist. This situation is still tolerable if the minister is served by able specialists in the administrative service.

When we look at the administrative service, where numbers are not the constraint, the Singapore system deliberately chooses the path of the generalist administrator. Though there are the rare few permanent secretaries who are specialists, such as Kishore Mahbubani and Bilahari Kausikan who had only worked in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs all their lives and rose up from the ranks to become permanent secretaries of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the overwhelming majority of the administrative service officers — from permanent secretaries, deputy secretaries, senior directors, to the director levels — are generalists and have little or no domain knowledge or experience until they are appointed to their posts. This is an extraordinary system because in most other jobs in our lives, the first thing that is demanded is relevant qualification or experience or, preferably, both. The administrative service does not play by those rules. It is assumed that rookie administrative officers are capable of mastering the brief, any brief, in short order because they have about 15 years of academically brilliant educational record under their belt. It is assumed that they will do the job at a high level of competence in the next three or four years before being posted to the next unfamiliar domain. It is also assumed that by such frequent rotational assignments over the next 15 years or so, the officers will be ready to take on top positions in ministries because they have become well rounded.

In the last 47 years of my work life, I have had the honour and privilege of getting to know some extraordinary ministers and permanent secretaries. I will mention two.

Goh Keng Swee was an economist by training but he was a magician as a minister. Whatever he touched, he turned into something exceptional and enduring. Not that

he made no mistakes, but his intellectual and administrative gifts were such that he stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Lee Kuan Yew as the co-builder of Singapore. The other is J. Y. Pillay, an engineer who became a permanent secretary, who outdid most other permanent secretaries not only in government but also in quasi-government organisations and the private sector, making Singapore Airlines the best airline of the world. I should add one more – Professor Tommy Koh, who is strictly not a civil servant but seconded to the government. Trained as a lawyer, promoted to the deanship of the law faculty at the National University of Singapore, he became a world-class diplomat, a global thought leader in environmental issues, an outstanding patron of the arts, a champion of the disabled and many things more. All these three leaders had little domain knowledge or prior experience in the many areas they later excelled in. These three examples may then disprove my basic point that one needs to be a specialist in order to do the job well. Because of them, it may be argued — indeed, it has been argued — that many ministers, many permanent secretaries, or many diplomats could do what these three men had done, and we have seen many appointments that reflect that thinking. How deleterious some of these appointments have been! Not all, for sure, but many have been underwhelming in their performance.

The reason is obvious. Government business has become so big, so complex, and so unpredictable that we need to look at a different model of administrative service. If ever the government was simple enough to be run by generalists, it is not any more. The system is congenitally weak. I am not arguing that we must get rid of generalists. On the contrary, my own idea has been — which I first put forward in the early 1990s, after working at least a decade each in the public and private sectors — that we must reconfigure the administrative service to have a “dual-track” system whereby generalists and specialists advance in the administrative service with equal rank and rewards. I can see that after decades of debate, some attempts have been made in this direction and I am happy to note the setting up of the Public Service Leadership Programme that allows for specialisation and career progress. However, in my humble opinion, we have taken too long and made too little progress so far. Let me add that in many of the huge multinational corporations I worked with, most chief executive officers were from the same or similar industries and even when they are not, they were well served by managers with decades of industry experience and expertise. So, specialisation is very much part of their system.

It is because of this structural impediment in the administrative service that the culture ministry too has not been performing at optimal level.

Peculiarities of the Culture Ministry

The culture ministry, however, has some additional challenges, quite different from many other ministries. Therefore, I would suggest that in administering culture, the government should put culture on a strong footing, watch it with a sharp eye, but keep it at arm’s length. Let me explain briefly these anatomical exhortations.

Government should provide most of the infrastructure for the arts such as the Esplanade or the National Gallery, as the Singapore private sector is not able to undertake such burdens. There are no Singaporean Solomon R. Guggenheims yet.

Then the government should watch where culture and the arts are going and facilitate whenever they need subsidies or safety nets, and regulate wherever they cross the “red lines”.

However, when it comes to the day-to-day administration of the arts and culture, I share the view that the government should make a strategic retreat. Unlike education, health, housing, or transportation, there are no minimal or universal standards in culture and the arts. They are defined by diversity, individuality, and for the most part, non-conformism. Government administration and structures are especially suited to the former set of public services and especially unsuited to the latter. So, the government should outsource and distance itself as much as possible.

I have long advocated that government should keep cultural agencies once or twice removed. For example, when my committee drew up the blueprint for what is now known as the National Arts Council in 1989, we argued that the Council should not be a ministry department or division, it should not even be a statutory board. We recommended that it be set up as a company limited by guarantee, very much like the Institute of Policy Studies, reporting directly to the Culture Minister. Though our recommendation was at first accepted, the National Arts Council was later turned into a statutory board. Likewise, I had argued that even within the National Arts Council, the Arts Festival should be outsourced rather than be run by the National Arts Council. The main reason we argued for extensive autonomy was precisely because of the difficulties the government has been facing in each case. From the appointment of leadership jobs to the choice of programming to the way public criticism is handled, the customary government approach just does not work for this domain. I do not have time to go into the details but let me share with you a couple of personal experiences.

Mobil was the company that seeded the idea of the Singapore Arts Festival and helped shape it in its formative years. Having migrated from the civil service to Mobil in 1979, and having had first-hand experience with the then Ministry of Culture, I strongly felt the festival should have an experienced artistic director rather than be run by civil servants. I persuaded my management to pay for the potential artistic director’s visit for a no-obligation trip to Singapore. There was much resistance from the Ministry but eventually they succumbed to the charms and talents of Anthony Steel, who became the first professional artistic director of the festival. Though the relationship did not last, the idea of professional leadership for the festival was established at that time. I am glad to see that that idea persists to this day. And our idea that the festival should be moved out of the National Arts Council has also come to pass. I would not say every festival since Anthony Steel’s days has been great, but I would certainly submit the festival has reached much higher levels than it would have under the leadership of regular civil servants. I should mention here an anecdote that Steel used to cite. When asked who should the artistic director programme the Festival for, he was purported to have replied, “*The artistic director should programme the Festival for an audience of one — himself.*” While this is certainly an exaggeration, the basic fact remains that personal judgments, impulses, instincts, and a high level of risk-taking built on a solid foundation of years of watching, studying and analysing artistic productions are the qualities that mark a good artistic director. Very little in the training or work experience of an administrative officer prepares one for such a position.

“Just as artists demand that the government must have artistic sensibilities, the arts community should also recognise the need for administrative sensibilities.”

Let me add another example. When Mobil was the sponsor of the festival, we not only provided the funding but actually took over the chairmanship of the marketing committee. Why? Because neither the civil servant nor the artistic director could match the marketing skills and experience of private sector companies. Very few ministers and civil servants had to sell anything for a price to unwilling or disinterested buyers. And those who equate selling government policies to an

electorate to the selling of arts productions would seem to know very little about either politics or the arts. Though there are some similarities, there are vast differences.

Arts community

Now that I have sufficiently irked the government leadership, let me go on to do the same with the artistic leadership. Again, I will draw on my personal experiences.

I joined the board of The Substation at the personal request of Kuo Pao Kun whom I had known and admired from the time he was detained by the government because he was working in the same Radio Television Singapore where I started my career in the civil service. By the time The Substation was set up, I was in Mobil and he had invited me to join the board of directors despite the fact that I do not have an artistic bone in my body. Then T. Sasitharan took over as Artistic Director of The Substation and he too wanted me to carry on serving on the board. Later, when these two gentlemen established what is today known as the Intercultural Theatre Institute (ITI), they again invited me to the new board. After 17 years, I am now the Chairman of ITI, and I am still as unartistic as I had been in the 1980s. Even the highly artistic Tan Tarn How, who has rubbed shoulders with me every day over the last 10 years as a colleague in the Institute of Policy Studies, could not “artify” me, no matter how much he tried. Yet, he too, as a fellow board member of ITI, advised me to stay on the board. Why is this so? Because just like how a government agency cannot be confined to the administrative type, with the arts organisation, the leadership cannot be confined to the artistic type. I know I have been a thorn in Kuo’s side as well as Sasitharan’s, but they insisted that I should be around because I bring administrative experience to the table. My administrative judgments, instincts and impulses are decidedly different from Sasitharan’s but he sees the difference as an asset to ITI. And I’m not alone on the board in having differences. We have a “rain maker” who knows how to milk cash cows, a “financial wizard” who knows cash flow management and budgeting like the back of his hand, and a brilliant academic with decades of teaching and research experience which is at the heart of the Intercultural Theatre Institute’s mission. While none would claim artistic talent, they bring deep expertise to the table. The ITI board has such a multiplicity of talents in leadership positions just so it will function well as an arts organisation. However, the question is, “Do all arts organisations have such leadership?” Quite often, artists over-privilege the artistic process and under-privilege the administrative process. In

my view, they are shooting themselves in the foot. Just as artists demand that the government must have artistic sensibilities, the arts community should also recognise the need for administrative sensibilities.

Conclusion

Let me sum up with a few specific points.

The government can and should bring in more cultural literacy into the administrative service so that it can make informed and judicious decisions. However, as an elected government accountable to the public at large, it has severe limitations regarding where it can take risks. To expect the government to behave like artists or private sector entrepreneurs is naïve and simplistic. This is why an enterprise such as cultural and artistic development with high levels of subjectivity and risks need to be removed as far as possible from government administration, but not so far out as to be left in the cold to wither and die.

Second, the government should learn to respect and trust artists and non-governmental actors much more, and assume that they too are concerned about the well-being of Singapore as the government is. Dissent and divergence are not marks of subversion. Similarly, artists need to understand that no matter how perceptive or insightful they may be, they are not and cannot be the final arbiters of public good. Only the public can settle that. But artists can demand to be given a chance to convince the public but not to the extent where they cross the “red lines” drawn by the law of the land. So, they have to accept that a certain amount of caution and conservatism on the part of the government is endemic.

Looking to the future, I personally hope the leaderships in the government and the arts community would build on mutual respect and trust and serve the public better — which is the reason they both exist.

Speaker 3: Thirunalan Sasitharan

I was surprised to learn, but not entirely so, that Mr Baey had to seek permission from the Minister for Culture, Community and Youth to speak here. I, on the other hand, was directed to speak here by my “two bosses”, Tan Tarn How and Arun Mahizhnan.

I think being a civil servant and a bureaucrat in the civil service means that you have to respect a certain chain of command. There is no escaping the chain of command and the circuit of authority, which you have to be beholden to. And I respect that. In fact, I think the best civil servants are the ones who are able to work within that ambit of authority.

But the question that I want to pose today is, “If you are a cultural leader, what is your responsibility to the arts? Who speaks for the arts? Who speaks for the artist?” We know that as civil servants and bureaucrats, you are working for the state and the people. But who works to support the artist? This is an area that we need to think about very deeply.

“When I hear the word ‘culture’, I reach for my revolver.” This remark is often attributed to Air Marshal Hermann Göring, Chief of the Luftwaffe in Nazi Germany. Actually, this is not true; he did not say this. It was in fact a line from a play called *Schlageter* by a Nazi party member, Hanns Johst, in which a character says, *“When I hear the word ‘culture’, I release the catch on my Browning.”*

It is amazing to note that so many regimes, totalitarian and dictatorships place such a significant importance on culture. The Stalinists, the Nazis, Mussolini, the Maoists — they were all keen to control culture. Why? Because ultimately, the artist seeks to speak truth. Ultimately, the artist seeks to reflect what he sees is the reality on the ground to his people.

It is as Polonius said, *“To thine own self be true, and thou canst be false to no man.”* *“Live in truth”*, said Vaclav Havel. *“Let the lie come into the world but not through me”*, said Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.

The artist rightly or wrongly, politically or apolitically, courteously or discourteously, is concerned about reflecting the truth — the truth as they are given the light to see it. They choose to reflect this because they see this as their calling

within the society that they represent. So, for the artist, the word “culture” is deeply infused with the “self”. There is no separation and no objectification. The way in which they make art and create art is tied up with a sense of who they are, where they are, how they may speak to fellow citizens, and ultimately their address is to all human beings.

“Culture”, for the bureaucrat and the civil servant, must be a different thing. Like the economy, health, housing, or transportation, it is something that happens to other people. All the training the best and brightest get in order to become good bureaucrats serve for them to objectify “culture”, distance it, and separate it from the bureaucrat “self”, so that they may attend properly and impartially to the business of managing and governing it. And this is as it should be! As we know, if you are a doctor treating a patient, the last thing you want is to be emotionally connected to the patient. There is professional distancing. There is a separation.

But the artist cannot work that way. For the artist, there is no separation. Sure, the distancing is part of a process of craft, technique, learning, experience, seeing, and watching. But ultimately, the artist is completely conjoined to the work that he or she is prepared to put out to society. You cannot meaningfully separate cultural concerns from the artist’s “self”; it absurd to even try.

So, there is an integral and irresolvable tension between that community of people whom we call “artists”, and the people who run the systems and manage bureaucracies. The chasm is virtually unbridgeable. This is something we need to accept. And for the last 40 years of my life, I have been working to bridge this chasm.

By any statistical, anecdotal, or survey evidence, it is overwhelmingly true that development of arts and culture in Singapore has been phenomenally successful! Numbers may not lie, but they do not always tell the entire truth either. My point is that the material progress made in Singapore, since the time when the arts were a dispensable luxury; when the arts were an icing on the cake, to the present when they appear to be at the very centre of life in Singapore, the material progress is a mask which fundamentally hides deep problems and shortcomings.

The problem with structuring a system as efficiently and effectively as it has been done in Singapore is that there is inevitably the distancing that I talked about. The leaders cannot understand the instincts, impulses and needs of the artists and arts communities on the ground. Often, cultural leaders are found wanting and

floundering. Often, they do not recognise the significance of a work, a way of working, a practice, or an audience that needs to be addressed.

There is some truth to the argument that Singapore is probably the best-resourced city for the arts in the world. The question we need to ask then is, “What have we made that is a commensurate return on our investment?” For these resources that have been put into the arts, I would say that we have seen poor returns.

The instrumental and top-down conceptualisation of artistic and cultural programming — whether it is in terms of discreet racial, nationalistic, genre, or sectorial models like CMIO festivals for Chinese New Year, Hari Raya, Deepavali; even festivals like the Singapore International Arts Festival, Singapore International Film Festival, Singapore Film Festival, Singapore Biennale — tend to create silos. They tend to create efficient channels for a particular kind of work to be made in a particular way, without sufficient natural movement and understanding. They tend to separate creative processes, and disconnect the impulses and instincts of artists. So, to some extent, cultural leadership has evolved, unsurprisingly, to become yet another layer of officialdom, which serves only to please their own masters — political masters, bureaucratic masters, or worse, moneyed patrons.

“The leaders cannot understand the instincts, impulses and needs of the artists and arts communities on the ground. Often, cultural leaders are found wanting and floundering. Often, they do not recognise the significance of a work, a way of working, a practice, or an audience that needs to be addressed.”

It is generally out of step and out of place in the chaos that is the crucible of creativity. Singapore was one of the first countries that explicitly stated in the 1990s that it was going to embrace contemporary art. Liu Thai Ker, who was then chairman of the National Arts Council, made this statement. But what is it to embrace contemporary art? Contemporary art is a very different animal from modernist, classic or classical art. Contemporary art has a certain studied distance from history, and a certain autonomy from supposed artistic standards that are

imposed on the work and genres of non-contemporary work. It is about the present and the “now”. It denies these standards. It denies a connection to a tradition. It came after post-modernism.

But in order to be able to manage the field contemporary art, we need to have bureaucrats and cultural leaders who are prepared to engage the contemporary artists on his or her own terms. There has to be a broadening of the idea of what it means to be “creative” and “innovative”, and what it means to be able to do something which is new. I am not merely making the suggestion that the “new” has to be shocking or outrageous. But the “new” has to be different from what is available now. Unless our cultural leaders are open enough to embrace difference, trusting enough to enable diversities in expression, and prepared to risk the possibility of failure, there will be no progress in art. And this is a complex thing! It comes from years of experience, from a particular kind of taste, and from an openness of mind and heart. At the same time, it comes from an understanding of the rigour, technique, and craft of making things in art, whether it is music, theatre or painting.

This is why I was appalled to learn that the majority of students who are going to graduate from the School of the Arts Singapore will not be artists. It does not make sense to me. If you were running a medical school or a college for carpenters, would you think that your students who go through the system should not become doctors or carpenters? Of course you would not! But somehow, when it comes to the arts, we are prepared to allow a kind of fuzzy logic to take over — “It is okay as long as they are sympathetic, exposed to, and are likely to support the arts in the future.” No, it is not enough; it is not sufficient. We only put up with it because it is the arts. We would never put up with a similar cast of mind if it were any other area of significance to the country.

So, I get the feeling that bureaucrats and the people who are running the arts in Singapore, do not get the arts! They do not get what it is to make art, to want to make art, create art, put out art, and want to tell the truth. And it is something that we cannot change — it is a cast of mind, it is a habit of the heart.

Cultural leadership also has to stop pretending that the arts are not political. Of course the arts are political! The arts are not politics — yes, artists are not interested in politics — but any artist who tells you that he or she is not political does not understand what he or she is doing. It is significantly political and it has to be political if it has meaning, moves, transforms, informs and connects. Unless we are

prepared to accept this, we are not going to make any changes and there is going to be no improvement.

Seventeen years ago, when the Intercultural Theatre Institute was launched, Liu Thai Ker, whom I count as a man who was, and is, probably the clearest leader in culture and the arts, had this to say, “*The life of a cultural worker is nothing less than a long march.*” According to a *Straits Times* editorial piece on March 3, 2000, I quote:

He made this observation in the course of a tribute to two exemplary Singaporean artists, the dramatist Mr Kuo Pao Kun and the dancer-choreographer Ms Goh Lay Kuan. Calling them “cultural warriors”, he recalled their pioneering beginnings in 1965, when they formed the Practice Performing Arts School (PPAS)...

Less than a decade after the Marxist conspiracy, the term “long march” was significant. It was significant because he understood that there is a commitment that artists need to have. And artists still have that commitment. Anyone who is doing significant work still has that commitment. And I go on to quote from this editorial:

... art does not reside in buildings and institutions ... but in individuals ... if they matter at all, [they] matter because of because of them.

This is the significant thing that I think we have lost. In focusing so much on systems, outcomes and structures, we have lost touch with the individuals who make the art. Their concerns and their needs — not just material needs; their needs that go beyond the material, which speak to the spirit, the conscience, and which speak to their need to speak. Unless and until cultural leadership can embrace artistic practice and artists as they are, we will always remain good, but not quite good enough.

Discussion

Cultural leaders and artists: An unbridgeable chasm?

Issues relating to the chasm between bureaucrats and artists, the different values they hold, and how these different values may come into conflict with one another were discussed.

Mr Arun said although many cultural policies stemmed from good intentions, they often led to unintended outcomes, which suggested that perhaps bureaucrats do not fully *get* what the arts are about. Mr Sasitharan agreed and said cultural leaders had a responsibility to grasp the spirit of the arts. Furthermore, cultural leaders must have a nuanced understanding of two issues in particular. First, they must understand the difference between “audience” and “address”. Artists often sought to address everyone but there might be different audiences for their work. Thus, cultural leaders must sift out and understand this difference. Second, cultural leaders must understand the difference between “policy-ing the arts” and “policing the arts”, which affects their decisions in supporting the arts.

Mr Arun added that another fundamental difference between bureaucrats and artists was a question of representativeness. While one could reasonably assume that Mr Baey’s comments were representative of the government’s stance on arts and culture, the same cannot be said about artists and the wider arts community. This was because the arts community was not monolithic and was without a consensus of the collective, which stemmed from the fundamental nature of the arts.

Mr Baey acknowledged that there was a natural tension between bureaucrats and artists. While Mr Sasitharan urged bureaucrats to better understand artists and the arts, Mr Baey called for the reverse. For example, artists often saw a cut in funding as symptomatic of the government’s lack of support for the arts. However, this was not necessarily so. A cut in funding in one area of the arts did not necessarily mean less funding in total but that it was channelled to other areas. The Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth was also answerable to the Ministry of Finance and needed to justify why the arts and culture in Singapore deserved a certain amount of funding. This often involved negotiations behind the scenes that artists do not see.

One participant expressed interest in Mr Arun’s proposal of a “dual-track administration” with equal ranks and rewards. He said this system could potentially be designed such that a “generalist-type” administrator would be paired with someone who is more familiar and invested in the arts as a “buddy” to facilitate the exchange of different perspectives. Another participant agreed and said certain values and perspectives held by artists could also be translated to inform how bureaucracy could be done better.

Cultural leaders: Guardians of safe spaces or curators of safe arts?

Mr Tan posed the question, “What kind of space does the arts provide?” He quoted then Senior Minister of State for Education Dr Tay Eng Soon, who had publicly said the following about theatre and the politics of culture in Singapore in the 1980s:

Ours is still a traditional society which values what is private and personal and is not comfortable with public and explicit discussion of sexuality and what it considers as deviant values. By all means, let our “cultural desert” bloom. But please let the blossoms be beautiful and wholesome and not be prickly pears or weeds!

Mr Tan asked if the arts were meant to provide a safe space to do safe things — for example, no discussion on race, religion, and sexuality — or if the arts were meant to provide a safe space to discuss difficult and controversial subjects that could not be discussed elsewhere. He added that many artists felt that bureaucrats treated the arts as the former. However, the arts provide an uncommon space that is unlike any other spaces, and thus should not be regulated by bureaucrats as such, he said.

In response to Mr Tan’s point about the arts as an uncommon and safe space, Mr Sasitharan said he did not wish to make a special plea for artists and the arts, and that he did not believe artists had any special license for expression. Instead, it is the constitutional right of every citizen in a democratic society to be able to speak. Thus, any proscription of speech, thought, or expression (artistic or not) is a violation of the constitution and should not be allowed. He added that bureaucrats should not assume that Singaporeans only wished to “savour sweet pretty pears”. In fact, Singaporeans ought to be ready to “grapple with prickly nettle” and challenge, confront, and contest ideas. Unless Singaporeans are prepared to accept “the contrary” and “the contrarian”, we would not develop as a people, he said.

Mr Arun agreed with Mr Sasitharan, and said he did not believe in the idea of having a safe space for the arts. He acknowledged that there would always be a tension between an individual’s right to speak or act and the public good. When these two confront each other, crucial decisions should be arbitrated by the rule of law. By and large, artists should not cross any “red lines” drawn by the law, although they may continue to struggle to move it and push the boundaries and “out-of-bounds” markers. Mr Arun added that mutual respect and understanding between bureaucrats and artists is the “safe space” that is needed.

Mr Baey said the arts could create a platform for discussion and better understanding. However, whether there would be a better consensus was questionable. While the government hoped for dialogue to come from different ends of the spectrum, they were often speaking among the converts because some people did not feel the same way and did not want to participate. This is why we need to think about how we can pursue contentious issues and controversial topics as a society, as a nation, and progress in that conversation, he said.

A participant said he felt that spaces for the arts in Singapore, as well as the public space in general, have become more conservative. Cultural leaders have in turn become risk averse and called for “safer arts”. Furthermore, he felt that artists were censoring their programmes even before approaching any “red lines”, and was very concerned that artists themselves were beginning to think that the public space should be more regulated. He disagreed with the idea of having “safe arts”, but called for more safe spaces for cultural leaders and artists to openly discuss their concerns. He added that while cultural policies were largely positive in general, the existing mutual suspicion and distrust between policymakers and artists need to be addressed in order to move forward.

Another participant said the government was so dominant that it had moved into spaces that were the province of artists, for example, in arts outreach, arts for seniors, and arts for children. This results in the lack of space for independent ground-up efforts. State-sponsored arts also often have a particular narrative of what the arts should mean in Singapore, for example, that the arts should connect people to their roots and embody multiculturalism. She asked whether such a situation would allow spaces for alternative narratives to emerge. She added that it was the role of cultural leaders to be able to mediate these alternative spaces and be aware that the construction of space determines the kind of arts that can occur.



From left to right: Thirunalan Sasitharan, Arun Mahizhnan, Baey Yam Keng and Tan Tarn How.

The role of cultural leaders of intermediary cultural institutions

Picking up on the discussion on “safe spaces for safe arts”, a participant spoke about the role of intermediary cultural institutions such as the Singapore Art Museum and their leaders. She agreed that there is increasing conservatism in public spaces and on a wide range of issues from immigration to climate change, and embracing diversity in general. As such, contemporary artists are increasingly crucial because they address such issues in a non-dogmatic way that is accessible to people, and often in the interest of common humanity. While it is the role of artists to communicate through the artwork, it is the role of intermediary cultural institutions to protect the “safe space” in which artists operate. By extension, it is incumbent that cultural leaders of intermediary cultural institutions protect this space for art marking and art showing. One important element is the communication to three different segments of society — “for”, “indifferent”, and “against”. Cultural leaders should weigh things in favour of those who are “for” a piece of artwork, while at the same time showcase it in a way that persuades people who are “indifferent” to become “for”, as well as consciously put across the message to those who are “against” the artwork of its significance, stressing that it is not meant to alienate but to invite them into a conversation. In short, when setting governance directions, cultural leaders of intermediary cultural institutions need to communicate the history and context of an artwork, explain its significance, and through this bring these three segments of society closer together.

The price of measurability: Conformed creativity and stifled imagination

Participants also talked about the issue of bureaucrats’ need for measuring and quantifying the success of arts and cultural programmes, and the price on creativity and imagination of such an approach.

Referring to Mr Arun’s three genes of organisational DNA, a participant asked if Singapore’s system was so entrenched that new ideas could not be implemented. She also noted that Mr Baey had mentioned a syllabus in his example of museum-based learning experiences for primary four students, which was an example of a system often justified by measurable and quantifiable learning outcomes. However, research has shown that active participation in the arts often manifests only later in life as a result of exposure in early years, she said. Thus, she challenged cultural leaders to reconsider if measurable and quantifiable outcomes were the best way to evaluate the success of such programmes. She also wondered whether the most creative and imaginative minds would end up conforming to the system as a result.

Mr Baey replied that the government was most concerned about making the biggest impact and expanding the audience for the arts. He added that the function of a syllabus was to facilitate students’ understanding of the context of a piece of artwork, which hopefully would inspire students to interpret the artwork for themselves. However, he acknowledged that this was merely a starting point and it alone would not be enough to change the next generation of students’ reception to the arts. Thus, he called for artists to support the government’s efforts to produce art that would resonate with diverse groups of people.

A participant said although the arts in Singapore had experienced exponential growth, much of this growth was also immeasurable. While bureaucrats need predictability and measurability, artists either did not see the arts as measurable or used a very different language to talk about measuring the arts. She added that artists had become “domesticated” in order to navigate the bureaucracy — they have learnt how to produce reports for bureaucrats and make grant applications. However, she wondered what was the impact of this “domestication” on artists’ imagination and creative capabilities?

Another participant said the obsession with measuring tangible outcomes to justify arts and cultural programmes resulted in short-term planning without a properly thought-through long-term strategy to develop the arts and culture in Singapore.

Culture was about “who we are” and people’s behaviour, which do not change overnight, said the participant. Thus, the success of arts and cultural programmes might not be captured in the immediate numbers and statistics. Instead, success and achievement should be measured in terms of whether a generation of people has changed their attitudes, mindsets and behaviour. Thus, cultural leaders need to have the determination to stand firm on what they believe is important in shaping this behaviour, and support the arts that is valuable in the social context or to our own cultural evolution.

Different responsibilities of cultural leaders

One participant said cultural leaders must be defenders of arts and culture. While it was easy for cultural leaders to cry out for more funds or wax lyrical about the enriching qualities of art, art also required defending. When controversies like the objection to certain art works from small but vocal segments of the population arise, cultural leaders should stand up and defend that art. This would be the litmus test of cultural leadership. He added that, however, such a defense need not be confrontational. Cultural leaders could remind offended parties that laws have not been broken; that it is normal to be offended by art; and that it is perfectly alright to ask others not to attend or consume offending art. Cultural leaders need to speak out for these artists as it would send a strong message to younger budding artists that there is a supportive ecosystem out there. Currently, cultural leaders seemed to only be able to praise art and were nowhere to be found when shrill conservative groups try to censor art that they found offensive.¹

Another participant felt that cultural leaders are people who were constantly searching for the “new” and protecting the space for the “new”. She said cultural leadership rests on an ability to think for all individuals and also collectively for society, and to project into the future. As culture necessarily evolves, cultural leaders had to carve out and protect the space for continuous searching and creating of new meaning, values, and practices that will continue to inform and nurture future generations to come. Otherwise, cultural leaders would be handing a “death sentence” to the next generation — giving them only economic survival, security or wellbeing, but one that transacts on spiritual death.²

¹ This comment was given by a participant after the roundtable discussion.

² This comment was given by a participant after the roundtable discussion.

Another participant, an educator by profession, said the term “cultural leaders” should include all school teachers, even those not teaching art. Teachers are crucial in building cultural and artistic literacy among students, which goes beyond exposure to and appreciation of the arts. This would develop students into becoming actively concerned with and involved in the arts and culture in greater depth.

However, a participant took issue with the term and concept of “cultural leadership” entirely. She said “cultural leaders” seemed to be more of a descriptive category of certain people in certain positions doing certain things. However, we need to ask questions such as, “What exactly is the ‘thing’ cultural leaders do?”, “What are the different ways in which cultural leaders do their work?”, and “What does this mean in the Singapore context?”

What’s next? — The future of cultural leadership

A participant was worried about succession in cultural leadership. He said many young adults would come into the sector with passion and ambitions of making change, but leave after a very short period of time, probably because they lack commitment or were worn down by the system. He was worried that we were not able to train, nurture and retain enough young people to become the next generation of cultural leaders. This had to be addressed, he added.

Another participant said young adults often had a skewed notion of leadership as a result of their experience in schools. For example, it was teachers rather than students who would plan co-curricular programmes and activities. Students end up equating “leadership” to “following what other people tell you to do”. Furthermore, co-curricular programmes were primarily geared towards preparing for competitions such as the Singapore Youth Festival, which meant that co-curricular activities would become yet another site where students were being prepared for an “exam” of sorts. Thus, a crucial opportunity to learn and hone leadership, collaborative, and reflective skills, is lost.

Another participant said cultural leadership should involve more of bringing artists, musicians, and authors “in” the institution, and be involved in decision-making processes regarding content and artistic direction right from the start. She added that this however involved risk and required a greater operational transparency.³

³ This comment was given by a participant after the roundtable discussion.

Some participants also called for programmes that aim to mentor and develop young cultural leaders similar to those provided by some governments overseas. One participant mentioned a programme supported by the New Zealand government, which was a week-long conference that provided mentorship for women in leadership, with universities nominating women in emerging leadership roles to participate. The Singapore government could learn from such an example and establish a regular conference for arts and cultural leaders, with a programme led by senior arts and cultural leaders prepared to share their experience and provide mentorship.⁴

⁴ This comment was given by a participant after the roundtable discussion.

About the Speakers

ARUN Mahizhnan is Special Research Adviser at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS). Currently, he is leading the effort to publish *Singapore Chronicles*, a 50-volume book series to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Singapore’s Independence. He was previously Deputy Director and the head of the Arts, Culture and Media research cluster in IPS. Mr Arun was previously also Adjunct Professor at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information at the Nanyang Technological University. Before joining IPS in 1991, he worked in both public and private sectors for 20 years, mostly in public communication fields.

BAEY Yam Keng entered the Singapore Parliament in 2006 and was appointed Parliamentary Secretary for the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth in October 2015. He sits on the National Youth Council and is also Director of the Chinese Development Assistance Council. He started his career in 1995 in the public sector, where he served in the Economic Development Board, Ministry of Trade & Industry, Ministry of Information, Communications & the Arts and National Arts Council. Mr Baey switched to the corporate sector in 2006 as Vice-President, Corporate Marketing & Corporate Social Responsibility at real estate company CapitaLand Limited, and was concurrently General Manager of the CapitaLand Hope Foundation. He joined international communications consultancy Hill+Knowlton Strategies in 2009 and was its Singapore Managing Director from 2011 to 2012. He was also an adjunct lecturer at Nanyang Technological University from 2013 to 2015. He has over 20 years of theatrical production experience as the founding President of The ETCeteras. He has produced more than 10 original plays. Mr Baey graduated from Imperial College of Science, Technology & Medicine, London with a BSc in Biotechnology (first class honours) and he obtained a MSc in Biochemical Engineering (distinction) from University College London. He is married with three children.

Thirunalan SASITHARAN is Co-Founder and Director of the Intercultural Theatre Institute (ITI). Together with the late Kuo Pao Kun, he conceived and started ITI in 2000. He was the erstwhile Artistic Director of Substation (1995–2000), Singapore’s only independent arts centre, and the theatre and visual arts critic of *The Straits Times* (1988–1995). Between 1983 and 1988, he taught Philosophy at the National University of Singapore. For more than 40 years, Mr Sasitharan has worked in theatre as an actor, performer, director and producer. He writes and lectures internationally on art, theatre training, performance practice and Singapore culture. He received the Cultural Medallion, Singapore’s highest award for artists, in 2012.

TAN Tarn How is an Adjunct Senior Research Fellow at IPS. His research areas are in arts and cultural policy and media and Internet policy. He has written on the development of the arts in Singapore, in particular, fostering partnerships between the people, private and public sectors; the creative industries in Singapore, China and Korea; cultural policy in Singapore; and arts censorship. His research interests also include arts education and role of education in cultural and human development. He has also carried out research on the management and regulation of media in Singapore; the impact of the Internet and social media on society; the role of new and old media in the 2008 Malaysian election and the 2006 and 2011 Singapore elections; and the way in which the Internet and social media have influenced the development of civil society and democratic development. He is working on a book called *Flourishing Life*, which examines issues arising from instrumental economics-oriented thinking in politics, society and education and argues for more comprehensive and humanist indices of development and education achievement. He was a journalist for nearly one and half decades before joining IPS. He has also been a teacher and television scriptwriter, and is a playwright and arts activist.

June YAP is Director of Curatorial, Programmes and Publications at the Singapore Art Museum, where she oversees content creation and museum programming. Her prior roles include Guggenheim UBS MAP Curator (South and Southeast Asia), Deputy Director and Curator at the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, and curator at the Singapore Art Museum. Amongst exhibitions she has curated are “No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia”, part of the Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative; “The Cloud of Unknowing” at the 54th Venice

Biennale with artist Ho Tzu Nyen; “The Future of Exhibition: It Feels Like I’ve Been Here Before” at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (Singapore); “Paradise is Elsewhere” at Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (Germany); media art exhibitions “Interrupt” and “Twilight Tomorrow” at the Singapore Art Museum. She is the author of *Retrospective: A Historiographical Aesthetic in Contemporary Singapore and Malaysia* (2016).