

**IPS Seminar on "One Foot In: An ‘Arts NMP’ on Politics and Activism
Influencing Cultural Policy"
15 June 2011
Question and Answer Session**

*By Crystal Neo
IPS Intern*

Mr Arun Mahizhnan, IPS Deputy Director and moderator of the session, prefaced the discussion with an observation from Ms Wong’s presentation of a “central dilemma in the arts field”. Artists, he said, were clearly not dealing with a “bad government”, but a “struggling” government with which Ms Wong has tried to negotiate by learning to pitch her arguments in certain terms and forms. He drew out four paradoxes of policy that reflected such a ‘struggle’ on the part of Government:

- Arranging for economic dividends while bringing on artistic deficits;
- Instituting legislation hailed as liberalising in some aspects but also limiting in others;
- The nomination of a special NMP for the arts and the exhortation to artists to “stay away from politics”; and
- Singapore’s aim to be a Global City of the Arts and its lack of desire to be part of a “global conscience”.

Below is a summary of the question-and-answer session organised under two broad areas.

Engaging the State: ways, means and approaches

Mr Graham Berry, board member of The Substation, kicked off the discussion by expressing the concern that having one “champion” for the arts, in the form of “arts NMP” Ms Wong, might not be sufficient. Such an anointment of an “arts NMP” may, in fact, “let” the other MPs and NMPs “off the hook” in speaking for the arts, he said. What can other parliamentarians also do for the arts? He suggested that members of the arts community could also engage with other Members of Parliament, especially because they might not know as much about the community as Ms Wong.

Ms Wong replied that arts and cultural policy issues were often not regarded as important as more commonly-raised bread-and-butter issues such as housing prices. While a number of her fellow MPs “do have arts as a hobby”, she agreed that it was important for arts groups to

talk to these MPs and to invite them to see what the arts community is doing. She suggested that it might be good to start with having a member of the Government Parliamentary Committee for MICA as an ally for the community. In fact, she did invite one such member to a show she was involved in, as she thought it would be good to show him a “different perspective” of “something that was not a big glitzy spectacle”.

Associate Professor Ong Soh Khim from National University of Singapore, also a former Nominated Member of Parliament, asked Ms Wong if she restricted her work to only arts and cultural issues, or if she had also spoken on issues outside the area, especially as issues were often intertwined and some have broader impact beyond specific policy areas (e.g., arts and culture and housing). She also asked Ms Wong if she felt that she was more effective in the House, or outside it.

In response, Ms Wong said that in her term as NMP, she had also covered non-arts issues in Parliament such as loan sharking and inclusive growth. She found that she had begun to include in her speeches what she called the “humanity aspect” of policy, which she felt was missing from existing debate. For instance, she had called for “a stronger sense of ethics” in private business. She felt that she was more effective, however, outside Parliament House, as she was invited onto government and statutory board committees for input on policy decisions.

Associate Professor C.J. W-L Wee, from the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Nanyang Technological University asked Ms Wong if she found herself “reined” or “trapped” by the economic framework in the course of her advocacy. The larger social structure and forces in Singapore, he observed, made it hard for cultural pluralism – critical for a Global of City of Arts – to flourish. Arts housing was cited as an example: if artists lose their living and studio space due to economic imperatives, it would be difficult for them to work.

Ms Wong agreed that the economic argument had the potential of becoming what she called a “trap of thought”. Based on her service in various committees, she sensed a growing recognition on the part of Government for the need to measure more intangible policy outcomes. High rentals and the general high cost of business compared to other places in the region was an issue commonly raised by artists, and in this area Singapore probably needs to encourage support from non-government actors and philanthropists apart from Government.

Mr Tan Tarn How, IPS Senior Research Fellow, picking up on Ms Wong’s earlier comment that she needed to win the trust of office holders in the Parliament, said that it is important to think about who her “constituencies” were. Her constituency when speaking in Parliament was not just Government ministers but also those outside the House, namely, the arts community and the public at large. She thus needed not only to convince ministers, but also fellow artists and Singaporeans. The latter might then bring pressure to bear on ministers to do what was right. He also commented on Ms Wong’s plea for patience that “patience is a much overrated virtue,” and suggested that going by the experience of the 2011 General Elections, perhaps pressure from the arts community and the public might yield change at a quicker rate. Another approach would be to reject the Government’s OB (out-of-bound) markers for what was allowed, but to question these markers themselves.

In response, Ms Wong admitted that one of the “internal debates” she was grappling with was indeed the issue of how to engage the state in the course of her advocacy. While tossing out OB markers and going for broke was indeed an option, her preferred approach of negotiating with policy-makers possibly came out of a combination of factors: her personality, her schedule, as well as existing considerations of how the arts community as a whole could benefit from her advocacy.

Dr Robert Liew, Director of Arts Management Associates, observed that the path of arts advocacy was a long one, with “no shortcut” on the road for change. Speaking from personal experience, he noted that advocacy and lobbying for an issue such as a reduction of withholding tax for artists took seven years for a concession that could however lapse in a couple of years. Time and passion were essential for the process, he said. Ms Wong agreed with Mr Liew, and added that professional and community associations were “absolutely essential” for the arts as they are needed for community members to communicate, put out policy positions and to engage the powers-that-be.

Arts Education and the Future

Mr Koh Seow Chuan, Chairman of The National Art Gallery, Singapore (TNAGS) made the following comment. He said that while the Government has been pumping in money into the arts, from policy-makers’ perspectives returns have not been seen. He noted that Singapore’s art and cultural policy was going the right direction with greater interest and support but would take some time to mature. Mr Koh asked Ms Wong how she would “get everybody to come together”, “find a way of educating everybody” and get everyone to be excited about the arts, especially as he noticed more “buzz” and “commitment” in neighbouring cities where government funding is not as ample.

In response, Ms Wong said that the prevailing emphasis on return on investment (ROI) was precisely why she had earlier talked about arts advocacy in its two aspects and why she has also adopted the economic framework when making some of her arguments. She also felt that Singapore needed to develop other ways of measuring outcomes and ROIs, particularly in the qualitative aspects. However, she felt that in terms of arts and culture, Singapore “has already achieved quite a bit” with works and initiatives, but somehow the public was not in the know. Similarly, schools and museums have been doing good work in terms of education and outreach. What needed to be done, she said, was rigorous evaluation in order to establish policy impact on students.

Mr Nicholas Chee, Managing Director of Sinema, wanted to know what Singapore’s “native art consumption” behaviour was like, given the tepid ticket performance of the recent Arts Festival and Singapore Biennale. Further, was consumption “holistic and organic”, i.e., were consumers imbibing art for the sake of art, or for some instrumental purpose? He cited the example of a visiting school group to Sinema, which requested that he speak on censorship in film so that students could prepare for their General Paper exam on the issue. Mr Chee further raised the example of secondary school teachers choosing arts programmes as “post exam activities” because they could make use of the Arts Tote Board Grant. He also learnt that some companies might be abusing the grant.

Responding, Ms Wong said that the use of the word “consumption” was apt in describing how most Singaporeans experienced the arts. Admittedly, she said, such consumerist behaviour was also something artists themselves have sometimes exploited, but artists would need to think more about how their work could create more lasting value and passion. There was a need for more self-reflection, data-gathering and research on the arts to look at the ground effects of arts policy, and also regional and global trends affecting Singapore.

On the private arts sector, Dr Liew commented that Government could pay more attention to the private sector even if it did not seek assistance, as developments in this sector also reflected development of the arts field in general. Noting that there were no private arts sector representatives on the Arts and Culture Strategic Review Steering Committee, he pointed out that attention to the commercially-viable private sector was also crucial for Government to know where returns could be made.

Mr Kwok Kian Chow, Director of The National Art Gallery, Singapore (TNAGS), commented that various aspects of arts professionalisation in Singapore were usually thought of in terms of “global conventions” often external to Singapore. The difference, if any, between an administrative thinking about the arts and the practice and discourse of the arts, was that the former was more focused on economic returns. This has occurred despite different historical trajectories and localised artistic practices. The “big question” for him was: is there a real difference between “arts” and “culture”, and when we talk of educating Singaporeans about the arts, is that an elitist approach towards arts appreciation and understanding? Is there “culture” out there in the form of existing wisdom and traditions, he asked, which must form the foundation of the community-at-large in their cultural outlook, and would therefore differ from the administrators who looked at professionalisation in global and in economic contexts?

Ms Wong replied that he had also identified another commonly-known “trap of thought”, which was to ignore the “real culture” around us in pursuit of higher concepts of what Singapore culture ‘should be’. Valuing local and traditional artistic output, she said, is important.

In closing the discussion, Mr Arun Mahizhnan noted that several of the issues brought up during the session gave him a sense of *déjà vu*, as they have been mentioned repeatedly in previous discussions about the arts. However, he believed that there was a “new moment” in Singapore at present, and given how some of these questions concerned fundamental issues, he suggested that the present moment would be a good time for various parties to re-examine at the meaning of the terms that were raised during the discussion.
