Report on
IPS Seminar: "Singapore's Cultural Policy: Authenticity, Regulation and Stratification"

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The closed-door discussion was attended by about forty participants from government, academia, arts and other civil society groups. In his welcome remarks, Ambassador Ong Keng Yong, IPS Director noted that the Singapore government has ambitions of turning Singapore into a "Renaissance City" and a centre for the creative industries. Putting the country's cultural policies in service of this goal, he said that the motivation is not just to make Singapore a culturally more vibrant place for its citizens, but also to serve as a magnet for foreigners who wish to enjoy a culturally-rich life when they work away from home. The other motivation is to bring in more tourists, as other big cities have found that the arts and cultural aspects of a country serve as powerful draw for visitors. Towards that end and from very early on, the Singapore Tourism Board conceived of Singapore as a "global city for the arts", resulting in the government's investment in arts and culture. This has borne fruit in the last decade and a half, as Singapore has made significant progress towards becoming a centre for the arts in the region.

Ambassador Ong said that cultural policy in Singapore as anywhere else has consequences, and also conflicts with other policies. He had three questions in this regard:

1) What is the real status of arts and culture in Singapore's creative economy?
2) Where are the boundaries in expressing social and political issues through art, and what are the implications of these boundaries?
3) How authentic could Singapore's adapted branding of a global city of the arts be?

Dr Ooi's presentation dealt with the three major issues in Singapore's cultural policy:

a) The relationship between government policy and Singapore's cultural authenticity;
b) An economically driven "stratification" in both Singapore's creative industries and arts education; and
c) The issue of regulation and the arts in both a local and global context.

He also pointed out issues in arts funding and suggested alternative ways forward.

Dr Ooi began by providing four models of relationships between the creative industries and the overall economy. These models were put forth by Dr Jason Potts, an economist from the University of Queensland.

The first was a welfare model, which posits that the arts are not profit-oriented; rather, it has a "moral standing" that deserves public support to nurture its growth. Second, the competitive model proposes that the creative industries should operate only on the terms of economic viability. A third model posits that that intellectual property rights are the future engine of economic growth, and creative industries should thus be pursued. Lastly, the fourth model, an innovation model, argues that creative societies provide a conducive environment for an innovative workforce and thus spur further growth.

"Authenticity" in Singapore's Cultural Policy

The authenticity of Singapore's culture as presented through dominant discourses was a key theme in Dr Ooi's presentation. He highlighted the state's "CMIO" (Chinese-Malay-Indian-"Others") framework, and language policy as a case where authenticity was being erased. Abolishing Singlish in favour of English, he argued, impedes a grassroots way of life. Living cultures from the ground, it seems, are being "selectively killed", said Dr Ooi, with the state paradoxically "keeping *Hokkien mee* but killing the Hokkien language, keeping Hainanese chicken rice but killing the Hainanese language". Such cultural selectivity poses a stumbling

block to cultural vibrancy, he noted. The Peranakans form a case in point: while thirty years ago, they were not viewed kindly upon by officials due to their "pro-colonial" views, they have since been "rehabilitated". Such "rehabilitation" in the form of the Peranakan Museum, what he called a "cultural artefact", reflects none of that political context and history, and is therefore a prime example of what he charged as cultural selectivity.

Singapore Cultural Policy: the Creative Industries and Subsequent Stratification

Dr Ooi also observed that there may have been mixed messages from the government regarding the purpose of the arts. While the nation recognises the higher moral role of the arts in nurturing humanistic values, he said, it also imbues arts policies with a strong economic vision which may marginalise this calling. The late President Mr Ong Teng Cheong had first acknowledged the higher calling of the arts in his 1989 report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts: "If we are not to coarsen the texture of our society, we must improve the cultural and recreational facilities, encourage appreciation of arts and music and create an agreeable environment that will stimulate people for further advance uphill seeking perfection."

The economic benefits of plunging wholeheartedly into arts and culture arena were highlighted later in the 1995 report titled *Singapore as a Global City for the Arts*, which was published by the then Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA), along with another report, the *Renaissance City* report published by the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts (MICA) in 2000. However, MICA's 2002 *Renaissance City Report 2.0* was "the huge turning point". The report had classified the fine arts together with media, visual arts and design under the umbrella of "creative industries". In his view, such a move had effectively prioritised revenue-generating industries ahead of the fine arts, thereby creating a hierarchical "strata" within the creative industries umbrella.

Though Singapore's official line was to celebrate the arts, Dr Ooi claimed that the ground showed a different picture, he said. Speaking to graduates from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) and LASALLE College of the Arts, Dr Ooi sensed that those who pursued fine arts only did so as a second choice when they could not qualify for more lucrative courses in fashion and the visual arts after their foundation year, though he noted some had also quit their jobs to enter art school. When he spoke to teachers at Raffles Institution, an independent secondary school which had extensive investment in arts infrastructure, a lament he heard was that

talented students would abandon their artistic callings for lucrative careers upon graduation due to parental pressure and financial considerations.

In some cases, celebrating the arts as a policy did not translate into action, suggested Dr Ooi. The lauded economic benefits of the arts were not considered along with the innate value of the artwork. He cited the destruction of iconic mosaic murals along Orchard Road to make way for the luxury mall, Orchard ION, as an example; the artist of the murals was however, not informed beforehand, he said. Artwork, it seemed, was regarded as a commodity that could be destroyed by those who held financial rights to it, for there was no sacred value ascribed to art, he said.

The Regulatory Impulse in Singapore Cultural Policy

On the subject of arts regulation, Dr Ooi noted that there is a great distinction made between the creative content and the creative process in Singapore. Though artists enjoy freedom in their personal and private capacities, he said, problems arise when they "court attention for their work". Artists could produce subversive content in their private spaces, but a "big ego" and an insistence to publicise this content would bring trouble.

But censoring dissent would not be possible in an era of new media, he said. The Singapore Complaints Choir, which was slated to sing on the various irritants of life in Singapore – including certain government schemes – at the Singapore Fringe Festival in 2008, was banned from performing in public. However, a video recording of the choir's performance at a private gathering eventually surfaced on video-sharing site YouTube, where the performance received thousands of pageviews. Societies, noted Dr Ooi, must find the balance between censorship and freedom. Too much censorship would hinder the artist from making an effective contribution as "the emotional voice for society". Too much democracy, on the other hand, could lead to anarchy, which ultimately destroys the creative environment itself, he said. However, the tension between artist and authority will always exist. Even if authorities permit avenues like online opinion site *The Online Citizen* for dissent, "authorities [would] have to maintain the aura of authority".

Dr Ooi argued that artists should be allowed to produce dissenting artworks for they are valued in the international art world. Existing impressions of a commercialised art scene might instead risk alienating international art buyers who seek romantic messages that resound emotionally. He cited Chinese modern art as an example. Certain contemporary Chinese art pieces fetch high prices in today's art market precisely because buyers pay a premium to support these artists who in their personal stories bore the "romantic" – and hence appealing – message of perseverance against tyranny in the Tiananmen era and beyond.

An Alternative Funding Model for the Arts: The Government and "Arm's-Length" Funding

Dr Ooi then spoke on the factors leading to Singapore's current lacklustre arts scene and the difficulties local artists currently face. He began by discussing the present position of the government vis-à-vis the local arts landscape. The government's role should be to ensure that artists receive sufficient funding so that arts communities may build up their capacities and not end up financially reliant. However, he also noted that funds disbursement must be thought through carefully. The present system, where the government disburses funds to artists directly, is unsatisfactory as it oftentimes places the disbursing agency in a beleaguered position. Pleasing everybody with a "little pot of money" is a thankless endeavour, he said. In such a scenario, artists compete against one another for funding allocated by the government rather than to cooperate with each other, noted Dr Ooi, and there are times when a decision to fund a certain artist may be interpreted as favouritism by others. Often, the end-result for the disbursing authority is to suffer displeasure from all stakeholders. Authorities would then have to bear the brunt of complaints and the system is stuck in what he called an "administrative iron cage".

In light of such issues which are already occurring in the Singapore context, Dr Ooi suggested that an artist-governed council be in charge of allocating government-disbursed funding for the arts. He cited the system's effectiveness in Europe, calling it a "win-win situation" where authorities avoid the political cost of being selective while still supporting the arts. The advantage of such a system is that artists are also held accountable to the public for works that they fund, he said. Artists, who are best placed to gauge the needs of the community, may also prioritise the gaps most in need of plugging within the community with funds available: in a given year, they may decide to fund a new art magazine or artist travel grants. To maintain

collegiality within the community, and also to insure the council against charges of favouritism, members of the council are appointed on a one-year basis through a random ballot. Such a system provides its own checks and balances and benefitted society, he said.

Expressing hope for such a system, Dr Ooi concluded his presentation and opened the discussion to questions from the floor.

Discussion

Mr Tan Tarn How, IPS Senior Research Fellow, chaired the session. He began by highlighting the following key points from Dr Ooi's presentation:

> a) The question of authenticity: should authenticity be determined from top-down (e.g. by the government) or ground-up (i.e. through the grassroots)? How should any exercise in determining authenticity be carried out?

> b) On the issue of stratification, he recapitulated the general point that the government and society ascribe different values to art. On one hand, the government appears to promote the arts vigorously as a policy, while on the other, students abandon a calling in the arts for a more lucrative career.

> c) On the subject of regulation, he felt that the key issue that was whether it was possible for artists operating in a regulated environment to produce great art. He cited an article from *The Financial Times*, titled "Can a nanny state rock?" in reference to Singapore's recent cultural policies as an example of the paradox being discussed.

In the discussion that followed, the following points were raised:

- *The effects of language and naming on cultural authenticity and naming*

A participant raised concerns on how the labelling of Singapore's objects, districts and cultures for tourism purposes affected Singaporeans' conception of their own national heritage. He noted that Singaporeans, especially those from a younger generation, no longer knew districts by their historical names: for instance, Chinatown is no longer known as *"*Dai Po*"* (the original Cantonese name for the area). These ethnically-centred, and non-contextual, names also had the effect of erasing the presence of ethnic minorities present in a district. The decision to use

terms like "Chinatown" and "Little India", made for the expediency of tourism planners, also created a disconnect where locals are suddenly viewing their cultural spaces through the language and eyes of the Other. The disconnect is not merely in terms of ways of seeing, but is also a heritage issue, as common knowledge and memories become more fractured. This matter, he said, places doubts on the place of government (and in particular, urban planners) as naming authorities.

 Another participant reacted to the language discussion by citing brain science research which has shown that in cultures where multiple languages are in use, such as Singapore, people never develop the depth necessary for complex and abstract thoughts to be formed when communicating and operating in a second language. Hence, he suggested that Singaporeans should decide on a single language to communicate and work in, and then "get to real depth" in the chosen language. A third participant, however, countered his suggestion by saying that the official eradication of Chinese dialects had already led to communication difficulties within multi-generational families. He also suggested that human life and activities often consisted of "layers", some in harmony and some contradictory, and the kind of standardisation proposed by the previous participant would further undermine cultural life.

In response to the language debate, Dr Ooi stated that he was more inclined towards a multi-lingual environment as he himself was brought up in one.   If one were to consider the argument that cultural vibrancy brings about cultural authenticity, he said, the imposition of Mandarin – itself a fairly new variant of the Chinese language – as "Chinese" may be a move towards non-authenticity, for Mandarin as a "foreign" tongue to some, simply does not have the emotional immediacy as "dialects" such as Hokkien or Teochew. He also cited a line of thinking that posits that societies and cultures change through evolution. The evolutionary process, suggested Dr Ooi, could be directed in a way that is "profitable" for all stakeholders. The existing context of a locale is important to include in any considerations.

- *The popularity of an arts education in Singapore*

A participant disagreed with Dr Ooi on Singaporeans' choice not to go into the arts. He cited his personal experience, saying that he knew of many who indeed underwent training in the arts when they were in school. Dr Ooi responded by saying that while parents do send their children for piano and ballet lessons, he was unsure if these children eventually do choose the arts as a profession.

- *The possibility of a grassroots arts and heritage council*

On Dr Ooi's idea of an artist-run council, one participant suggested that artists may not be in the best position to make decisions on the future of the community. He asked Dr Ooi if there was an existing example of an arts community that has proved its capability to manage and direct its developments.

Another participant proposed that interested members of society step up and take ownership of this council and its issues. Establishing such a mechanism might be a long-drawn effort, "five years, ten years or more", he said, but he also emphasised that the value of such a council lies in more authenticity, spontaneity and ownership from citizens. In his opinion, people from the grassroots should define authenticity for themselves and the role of bureaucrats might simply lie in running the secretariat for any such grassroots-initiated council.

- *Who should decide what good art is? Or, the value of unconventional art?*

In his presentation, Dr Ooi mentioned that the well-to-do buyers of art have been "arbitrators of good aesthetics" due to their purchasing power. A participant said that this was not new in Singapore or internationally. Given that the market for art could be potentially market-driven, he asked who then, should be the arbitrators of aesthetics. Problems might surface if the job is entirely left to critics, he said.

Dr Ooi also said that using the same influential artists or "arbitrators of aesthetics" would risk alienating unconventional artists who deserve to be recognised. He added that unconventional art may also raise certain questions and lead to valuable conversations within society. He noted an example of a Danish artist who had asked for funding to bleed himself to death in public by way of public performance. The performance did not take place, he said, but it started a dialogue about the issue. Another provocative installation saw five goldfish put in blenders and museum-goers could choose to turn on the blenders and have "goldfish juice". The installation had raised societal debate on the right to life, even as the police eventually stepped in and switched off the main power supply, as a means to defuse the heated debate, he said.

- *Alternate means of funding the arts*

A participant raised the issue of transiting to the proposed artist-run funding council. A "two-arms-length" funding where artists decide on the course of the community, and where

governments concentrate on maintaining public order requires an unprecedented way of conceiving accountability for the use of public funds, he said. He questioned if Singapore's civil service is ready for that transition in an incremental way, or if this new order requires abrupt change wherein government-run arts councils are abolished swiftly.

With regard to the option of an artist-run funding council, another participant wondered if the bureaucracy was "exhausting" itself in what she called "a complex area" by being overly involved in the arts. She proposed a second alternative funding suggestion, where a private sector pilot fund, managed by artists for artists, could first be instituted in new colleges like the School of The Arts (SOTA). MICA could also step in to monitor the progress of these pilot programmes, she suggested.

A third participant responded to this suggestion, saying that similar ideas had been tested out before in the Singapore context. He cited examples of private sector arts funds in Singapore, including one funded by the Tote Board and another set up by the American Chamber of Commerce. He noted that these efforts have been sporadic and expressed hope for a more full-hearted engagement of the private sector with regards to arts funding, in a mould more similar to the way arts are being funded in the United States.

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