

The Negotiation for Space:

The Arts and Culture in Singapore

ABSTRACT

Singapore's fast, rapid and phenomenal economic growth and development has been a source of pride for the nation and her policy-makers since Singapore declared independence in 1965. However, economic progress and prosperity has not meant a commensurate progress or development in the sphere of the arts and culture. In fact, the following essay would argue that the successful rapid industrialisation and modernisation of Singapore has been that important obstacle that has impeded and stunted the growth of the arts and culture in Singapore. Central to this argument is the concern with the pragmatist stance that the Singapore government adopts when dealing with policy-making. Commodification, utilitarianism and meritocracy have worked well, in the local context, and have bolstered our economic growth and modernisation. However, rapid modernisation has also meant that economic drives and imperatives have become the only collective basis of life in Singapore. The arts and culture have little impact on society as a whole and any conception of the arts and culture in the local context ultimately serves economic purposes as well. There may not be a ready solution at this point of time but certainly a re-imagining of the role of the arts and culture and

how they should and could impact society must be considered if Singapore does not want to display and embody only a philistine modernity.

MODERNISM AND CULTURE

Singapore's economic development has been a wonder to behold, being executed as fast and as efficiently as it was. The quantum leap from developing to developed country took place in only a couple of decades and the speed and efficacy of public policies have been a source of pride for the local government since the nation's infancy. But what impact does this rapid industrialisation and modernisation have on culture and the arts? This essay will discuss, with specific reference to the status and problem of culture and art, the unique situation of Singapore in its bid to become modern and to correspondingly create a global city that is not only economically successful but also culturally successful and what being successful at both means. By focusing on the case of Esplanade – Theatres by the Bay, which is the premier centre for the arts in Singapore, the essay will also explore how government policies commodify the arts, interact with and impact the arts community, and the consequences that result.

SITUATING THE ARTS AND CULTURE IN SINGAPORE

It should not come as a surprise that the foundation on which Singapore's success lies is its economic development and its ability to stay competitive in the global market. The ideology of the government remains, to this day, a pragmatic one that is based on a very utilitarian approach in all areas of social and economic development, for example, industry, education and in the later years of development, culture. As Chua Beng-Huat observes, "From the beginning of [the People's Action Party's (PAP)] rule...economic pragmatism has been its guiding principle. Every government policy is rationalised and justified by one single measure: whether it enhances the likelihood of economic growth." (107). And this view is echoed by C.J. W.-L. Wee when he explains Singapore's modernisation and its corresponding effect on and control of culture as an "industrial and commercial understanding of culture; manufacturing and productive institutions have become the collective basis of social life (84-97)."

Wee's argument above points us in the direction of the formation and articulation of culture in Singapore's globalised economy. As a developed nation, it is important for Singapore's ruling elite that Singapore should not appear as "display[ing] only a philistine modernity (Wee 85)." Hence, "public policies have been set in place since the 1990s to foster artistic creativity and even create an arts market, in the hope that such creativity will in turn encourage technological and entrepreneurial innovation (Wee 85)." But therein lies the problem. With a top-down, statist approach, the arts, contrary to flourishing, has instead become hampered by this interventionist stance. The government, in its bid to "create a cultural sphere to match the city-state's existing 'hub' status within the global economy (Wee 91)," envisions and circumscribes this sphere in purely economic terms and drives. What, to the government, is of greater importance than the aesthetic and critical quality of the arts is its economic value in terms of attracting foreign investment and maintaining an economic edge over other nations in the region. Only a superficial fragment of what culture and the arts can do and mean for the people is retained in the government's conception of culture and the arts: culture and the arts will bring a certain intangible quality into the lives of Singaporeans and will result in a more *gracious* society.

This economic view of the arts can be seen very vividly when we consider how the Arts in Singapore, tied up as it is with the idea of progress, is intricately bound up with global capitalism and the state. Economically speaking, Singapore appropriates economic models from successful economies throughout the world then tweaks them to suit the local context and situation. For example, how the local government adopted a free trade policy when it noted and studied the success of the Hong Kong economy, which leveraged upon entrepot trade. In the same way, arts and culture in Singapore is also appropriated and imported from other culturally successful societies and then given the 'Singaporean makeover' before being touted as the next big thing we can call our own as well as export. We must recognise that underlying all these efforts to *construct* a culture and a culture of the arts in Singapore is the economic drive to succeed. In the context of this discussion, Lee Weng Choy's astute observation is especially relevant: "Singapore appropriates plurally and radically; it is totally committed to progress and an Asian essentialism that has less to do with advocating cultural diversity than with

disciplining its society to be economically competitive (648).” And economic concerns certainly predominate the arts in Singapore and perhaps in no better form than that of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay.

UNPACKING THE SPECTACLE OF ESPLANADE - THEATRES BY THE BAY

The economic conception of the arts and culture in Singapore is certainly encapsulated and embodied by the image of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay. The Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts, which was chaired by then Deputy Prime Minister, Ong Teng Cheong, recommended, in 1989, that a centre for the arts be built. This centre for the arts was officially opened on October 12, 2002 and was the crown jewel of the local government’s efforts to make Singapore culturally successful and noteworthy. Wanting to be on par with other cultural capitals of the world, the government spared no expense in the construction of the Esplanade and approximately SGD 600 million was spent to erect the arts centre.

More than just a physical structure, the spectacle of the Esplanade literally, metaphorically as well as ideologically delineates as well as isolates Singapore’s cultural space. The image of the Esplanade becomes the last word in the local government’s conception of what the arts—especially the performing arts—should be. The imposing complex delineates the local cultural space because it dictates and embodies certain artistic standards and criteria for selection and acceptance into the mainstream locally. As *the* centre for the arts in Singapore, the Esplanade enjoys and benefits from government endorsement and financial backing. Ergo, performing at the Esplanade becomes symbolic of having arrived in the local arts scene, of having been accepted and recognised by the discerning arts elite. If being able to perform at the Esplanade is a pinnacle of sorts, it is also an implicit buy-in into the commercial cult of art that is symbolised by the Esplanade. As Guy Debord so eloquently writes in *The Society of the Spectacle*, “The spectacle is *capital* accumulated to the point where it

becomes image (34).” (Author’s emphasis). The Esplanade *is* that image of capital accumulation, is that image of the commodity reified for all to admire and gape at.

In addition to dictating artistic standards and norms, the Esplanade, as embodiment of the local government’s position with regards to the arts, also isolates the cultural space in Singapore by virtue of its propensity to trace and chart the arts space in Singapore. Anything outside, or considered outside, of that space so marked out by the Esplanade would be considered unacceptable and would be liable to sanctions and the like. As such, what is considered as part of the arts or as art is already subjected implicitly and explicitly to certain norms and standards that serve to bolster that spectacular image of the Esplanade and all it represents.

As a centre for the arts, the Esplanade is that central space where tensions and contradictions within the realm of arts and culture are played out incessantly. It epitomises that negotiation of space in the title of this paper and is that spectacular image that is the “self-portrait of power in the age of power’s totalitarian rule over the conditions of existence” and by which “the ruling order discourses endlessly upon itself in an uninterrupted monologue of self-praise (24).” This totalitarian rule, which is manifested in the spectacle of the Esplanade, is predicated on discourses of an economic and capitalistic nature, which is so very evident even on the Esplanade’s website which lauds the centre as a place which “offers a complete lifestyle experience – dining, shopping, and the performing arts (*Esplanade*).” The arts and commercial ends are articulated within the same breath and seem to be tied in neatly without due consideration of the implications that follow from this yoking together of the arts and the economic; or even if this convenient marriage embodied in the Esplanade is beneficial or detrimental to the development of the arts and culture in Singapore.

Unravelling the Tension

What then of the tension mentioned previously? The tension discussed in this paper is most keenly felt in the tussle between the state and its notion and formulation of what the arts in Singapore is and should be and what a more nuanced conception of the arts for and by the people can offer. To better elucidate the central tension, it will be relevant and useful to consider what Janadas Devan terms “singularity” and “plurality (84-97)”. The term “singularity” can be envisioned in terms of the state’s interventionist approach to culture and the arts and their desire to commodify the arts. “Plurality” on the other hand speaks of the arts as a space where critical and aesthetic value are privileged against that very commodification preferred by the state and is indicative of an art that can speak to the people and their concerns in the pluralistic setting that is Singapore. Some of these concerns are “issues of memory, ethnicity, and other identity issues (Wee 85)” which, owing to the largely immigrant population and lack of roots, are salient issues for consideration. As Singapore’s theatre doyen Kuo Pao Kun elaborates, “History has proved that there is no way [Singaporeans] could reconnect to their parent cultures per se. However, having lost their own — cut loose and therefore set free — they have thus become natural heirs to all the cultures of the world (127).” It is imperative that local art can speak of and must speak of and engage with these larger issues. In this sense, this is the art we *need* versus the type of art that is *wanted* by the state.

However, due to the Singapore government’s appeal to the notion of ‘Asian values’, which is rooted in the Confucianism, to form a national identity based on these very values, the ruling elite have largely tried to ignore or to crack down on anything other than what is espoused by these values. These values advocate a certain Asian or New Asian essentialism that is calculated to combat or counter Western influences that have appeared largely as a result of globalisation and that are seen to be detrimental to the Asian-ness of the local society. Therefore, values like the sanctity and the importance of family, of patriarchy, of respect for elders and the like have been promoted and repackaged in this ‘Asian Values’ rhetoric. What this means is that the plurality of Singapore has been reduced to a manageable national identity, with its correlating emphasis on English as the national language, a utilitarian and meritocratic approach, and supposedly uniform value systems that all Singaporeans are supposed to hold on to.

As Wee observes, “The state’s *petit-bourgeois*, philistine modernity, with its objectifying, analytic, and pragmatic modes of thought, meant that high or mass art, history and memory at best played a weak role in transforming society until the 1980s, when commodified, official ‘Asian traditions’ were put on public offer (2007, 125).” These Asian traditions and values were meant to unify a society so as to ensure economic progress and improvement. And this emphasis on Asian values and traditions needed to permeate all areas of life in as naturalised a way as possible in order for it to be effective; hence the corresponding infiltration of these Asian values and traditions into the realm of the arts and culture in Singapore as well. The Esplanade, as that apotheosis of the arts in Singapore also stresses on this Asian perspective and niche: “Its programme line-up spans all genres to encompass music, dance, theatre and visual arts, with a *special emphasis on Asian culture (Esplanade)* (My emphasis).”

This tension is also very marked when we consider the division between that creativity which is so integral to the arts and the economic reality that works against it. The government, through the arm of the National Arts Council (NAC), gives funding to the arts and mainly to the prominent theatre arts. However, with funding come the attendant rules, regulations and requirements, which the theatre companies are hard-pressed to follow. Creativity, aesthetic quality and critical engagement with salient and pertinent issues become secondary to the bottom-lines that these theatre companies have to maintain. It is typically a wrestle and struggle between aesthetic quality and culture, and results—critical engagement often has to be sacrificed for more commercially viable work. Additionally, the supposedly stringent selection process for performances at establishments like the Esplanade and its infrastructural limitations (there is no medium-sized theatre space for performances and the larger spaces are hard to fill as well as daunting for the performers) means that the local arts are quite effectively cut out from the arts scene, a testament to which is the Esplanade, which was erected as a monument to the “commercial Cult of the Beautiful.” Local theatre and arts groups become relegated to the periphery of what is supposedly the ‘main arts scene’ of Singapore with the Esplanade’s preferred repertoire of foreign acts. In fact, as previously mentioned, the Esplanade is the embodiment of that central tension that lies at the heart of Singapore’s conception of the arts and culture. Eschewing local art in favour of foreign,

more commercially viable art (remember that the Esplanade was built primarily to attract foreign ‘world-class’ art into Singapore’s shores), the local government has pushed local arts and culture to the boundaries of its borders. In some cases, as in the case of Ong Keng Sen, TheatreWorks’¹ artistic director, the push has literally propelled him overseas. Ironically, Singapore’s government is more in favour of local exportable art rather than to nurture to the local arts scene for locals. In this aspect again, the Esplanade is a case in point. Ticket prices, even for local acts who do perform at the Esplanade, are so high that they exclude most ordinary people from attending or participating in the event (Wee 87).

This situation in Singapore is akin to the situation in South Korea where “the nation’s intense, widely held desire to achieve international cultural recognition (Lee 54)” is reflected in the people’s ardent support for Ho-Jin Yoon’s musical *The Last Empress*, which was the first Korean musical to be performed in western venues. The Singapore government also places a huge emphasis on achieving “international cultural recognition”—a vision in which the Esplanade is only one piece of the puzzle—and Ong Keng Sen’s contributions in putting Singapore on the world’s cultural map with plays like *King Lear* and *Desdemona*, which were performed on the international stage, were duly rewarded and he received the Cultural Medallion Award in 2003. Singapore and Korea, touted as the Four Asian Tigers together with Hong Kong and Taiwan for their strong and highly-developed and successful economies, have arrived, speaking in terms of their economy, and are now hoping and wanting to export more than just goods and services to the world market. Their wish to have successful cultural exports leads them to package and project an image of themselves as being already successful

¹ Theatreworks was established in 1985 and has been under the artistic directorship of Ong Keng Sen since 1988. The performance company is a non-profit organisation and distinguishes itself from other theatre and performance companies by its engagement with issues of Asian identity and its integration of traditional forms of Asian art into contemporary art. It is also committed to the development of contemporary art in Singapore and nurtures budding and emerging artists through workshops like ‘The Writers’ Laboratory’. It has also enjoyed worldwide recognition with projects like ‘The Flying Circus Project’, which has become an internationally known and sought-after. Ong Keng Sen is a member of the Asia-Europe network which promotes artistic exchange between Asia and Europe. He is well-known for plays such as *King Lear* and *Desdemona*, which reinvents and relooks at the traditional canon in the context of Asia and Asian identity.

culturally; however, we must realise that this conscious projection is precisely what calls to attention the lack of an authentic culture.

RE-IMAGINING ART AND CULTURE

Ultimately, the problem lies in the government's attempts to control and contain the counter-culture or sub-culture impulses that are alive in any creative and critical engagement with the arts and culture. In the stifling environment of statist imperatives, artists have to find and maintain that "liminal arts space (Wee 93)" that is so very integral to a more authentic notion and concept of culture as opposed to what is available now. Let us not forget that "[b]eauty was once a subversive protest against the markets' instrumentalisation (Wee 92)" in the local arts scene. This "subversive protest" against the commodification of the arts and the reduction and simplification of what is necessarily complex, multi-faceted and plural must be maintained in a creative tension between that singular purpose of the state to subsume all art under its heading of 'Global City'.

In order to be able to negotiate the terrain, we have to recognise and bring to the fore the attendant state impulses and rhetoric. One of these is the articulation of 'Asian Values and Traditions'. We must recognise that these packaged and "self-orientalising (Wee 2004, 652)" values only perpetuate and maintain former colonial hegemonies of rule. Moreover, art and culture have been subsumed and appropriated under the service of economic progress and in the state's bid to turn Singapore into a 'renaissance city' "[a]rt and culture are coveted, but only now, in the 'last phase' of national development, in order to fully arrive as a world-class society...and to generate a workforce that can compete in the top tier of the global knowledge-based economy (Wee 2004, 652)." The arts seemingly have no value apart from building a more economically viable and successful society that is able to stand its ground against other capitalist giants.

The state can be a catalyst for the arts if the artists and performers as well as the receivers of that subversive art are prepared to stand their ground against the state's

tendency to commercialise and commodify. As Wee notes, in talking about Kuo Pao Kun and Ong Keng Sen, the arts needs to “culturally relocalise deterritorialised Singapore (2007, 124).” State funding and support is necessary but with it comes its attendant problems and quandaries. In order to maintain the tension effectively and for it to bring about creative, critical and aesthetic engagement with art and culture, we must be aware of and sensitive to these dilemmas and tread carefully to negotiate an arts and cultural space that will give rise to an authentic space where voices can be heard and more importantly, understood.

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