

Marratives

Notes On A
Cultural Journey

Cultural Medallion Recipients

1979 ~ 2001

Locating Culture

Art, Policy and the Production of Culture in Singapore

By Venka Purushothaman

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of heritage that one has received in an undivided form. The nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavours, sacrifice and devotion. - Ernest Renan, 1882¹

A nation is shaped by the narratives that are put forth by its artists, philosophers, historians and politicians at different points in time to help make sense of the world. While a declaration of war, dependence, or independence may mark the invention of a nation, a nation remains an abstraction and a myth and only comes into existence through people's recitation of social and cultural narratives, in exactly the same form, over and over again. It is common, and often naive to read the concept of a nation within the ideological constructs of state power, rather, it should be read within a larger and richer rubric of a socio-cultural-political-economic-historical tapestry. Artists play a critical role in engaging with things social, political and historical and their works reveal the high and the low points of the human condition in a given society. Furthermore, their works play an important role in revealing to the people and the world the 'inner vision' that guides the society as a nation. The Cultural Medallion recipients and their contributions anchor cultural production in Singapore and in narrating about them, their works and the stories their works tell, we locate them as observers, recorders and key players in the making of a nation which, as Ernest Renan contends, is the culmination of endeavours, sacrifice and devotion.

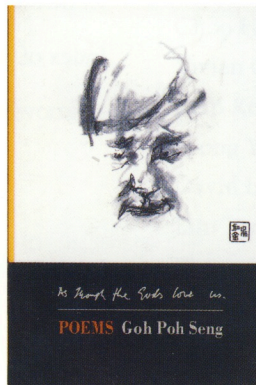
Cultural Production in Singapore

Much has been written and said about the arts and cultural development in Singapore from its political investiture to its social relevance. It would not be misplaced to say that the arts have evolved historically and culturally from one of pre-independence revelry to post-independence nationalistic solemnity to a seductive lifestyle of a post-modern thirty-something. It would not be indulgent to contend that the arts, particularly its aesthetic status, technical precision and moral desirability have warranted more attention

than its practitioners and unrelenting promoters over the decades, though this may be less so in some genres, namely, theatre or visual arts. The need to understand the concept of Singapore through its arts and artists is immediate but the understanding has inevitably to be sieved through its political economy.

Within Singapore's morphing cultural milieu, the arts and culture inherently constitute an economic metaphor of use and exchange value between people and ideas. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, in his seminal work, *The Field of Cultural Production*, was one of the first to articulate and frame social and economic functions of culture as *capital*.² For that matter, these narratives on the Cultural Medallion recipients serve as capital on several levels. As *judicial capital*, they are evidence on people and events, pinning them to a moment in time where their concentration on their artistic practice was paramount. Poets, painters, dancers, musicians all form a consolidated cultural history of a nation by inventing a tradition. As *social capital*, these narratives reveal a social practice that bonds and connects people and their families outside the pragmatic make-up of the society revealing the infra-structural significance of the arts in nation building and enforcing its integral role in the social fabric of society. At a more fundamental level of cultural production, these narratives form the basis of *symbolic capital*, symbolic for its degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity status, or honour. Artists are acknowledged for their contribution to the larger knowledge pool from which a society taps for its sense of being.

On the other hand, for the practitioner and patron alike, the artists and their works become Singapore's *cultural capital*: valuable for its knowledge potential and ability in framing history and marking a value nexus on the international arena. Bourdieu sees *cultural capital* as a form of knowledge, an internalised



As the soul of the nation...

POEMS Goh Poh Seng



code - that is accumulated over a period of time through acquisition of information and inculcation through personal, familial and social education - which equips one with empathy towards, appreciation for and competence in deciphering cultural relations and the various genres of the arts. Here the paradigmatic shift is from information to knowledge. For the individual, instant and fleeting information has to be processed on many levels before it becomes knowledge that is internalised and life-long. This becomes all the more critical in an information age where the ability to quantify information is privileged over the quality of information.

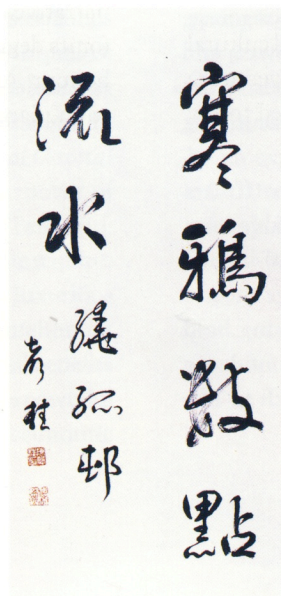
All of these capital and more, fuse and diffuse into everyday life potentially leading to changes in cultural practice and behaviour which become identifiable through policy shifts in things global and matters close to heart. But the very fact that the arts is fielded as cultural or symbolic capital with low economic output, leaves it vulnerable to subordination by economic and political power, thus leading to a seemingly thorny relationship between the arts and the State which only reveals the arts to be economically marginal albeit symbolically central to the fabric of the nation.

The arts in Singapore have had a vibrant presence throughout British colonialism through the concerted efforts of the expatriate community, (eg. Stage Club) and pre-independence activities operated at the multi-cultural community levels and less so at the official level. The 1950s were invariably more colourful and vibrant with the looming Cultural Revolution on the horizons of China, as well as with the introduction of cinema and its attendant production houses coupled with a newfound nationalistic fervour. The 1950s were also a period when the ideal of a 'New Malaya Culture' was cultivated as then Minister for

Culture, S Rajaratnam said, "the cultural integration of our people is best brought about by conscious voluntary effort...talents...should be directed towards experimenting with a new type of concert in which the varied cultural elements will actually mingle in the same art form."³ Many schools and individuals working in the arts integrated localised themes into the weave of multiculturalism, as seen in the many school productions of the time eg. *The Kampong Story* by the Chinese High School (1953), community cultural festivals (eg. Aneka Ragam) and the art of the famous Nanyang artists - Georgette Chen, Liu Kang, Chen Chong Swee, Chen Wen Hsi, and Cheong Soo Pieng. Importantly, the natural osmosis between ethnic communities was most pronounced in the film credits of the Malay films of the time, which recorded a strong multi-cultural production crew.

Singapore in the 1960s was a hotbed of cultural activism inspired by many things, including psychedelia and the Cultural Revolution in China. The construction of the National Theatre⁴ in 1963 hallmarked the cultural ballast of a group of immigrants calling themselves *one people*; literary works by Lim Chor Pee, Goh Poh Seng, Kuo Pao Kun and Stella Kon; the emergence of Leong Yoon Pin and his symphonic works; the theatre of Bani Buang; the poetry of Edwin Thumboo; the paintings of the Nanyang group and many more, added poignancy to the period. Notably, the formation of the People's Association in 1960 also marked an ethnicity-based social agenda otherwise known as multiracialism or CMIO⁵ that became a determinant of cultural production for some two decades.

The formation of the National Dance Company in the early 1970s also marked itself as a cultural voice of Singapore to the rest of the world. The ephemeral *Unity in Rhythm* dance, choreographed by Madhavi Krishnan,





Som Said and Lee Shu Fen, was a vessel of diverse dance styles brought together by drums and similar rhythmic structures. This style of performance brought to a natural conclusion the concept of 'New Malaya Culture' by presenting ethnic relations in a highly precise and aesthetically probable manner removing all social and political tensions as improbable. This style of collaboration become idiomatic of Singaporean culture throughout the 1970s and early 80s. The role of the State in the arts was already eminent as the cultural activism was also paralleled with political activism, which, some believe, was pulling the trampoline of nationhood in multiple directions. Political consciousness was evident and was marked by the detention of playwright/director Kuo Pao Kun in 1976.

The State's patronage of the arts was pronounced in the late 1970s. Two reasons attest to this. Firstly, political overtones found in the arts were seen to be fractious of a new nation, which needed to be addressed, and secondly, the value of culture as social glue was gaining slow but ready acceptance at the State level. Notably in 1977, the then Ministry of Culture established committees to promote dance, visual arts, literature, music and drama in the four official languages. The launch of the Singapore Festival of Arts in 1977, at first as a private enterprise and subsequently absorbed under State patronage; the formation of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra in 1979, under the patronage of then Deputy Prime Minister, Dr Goh Keng Swee; and the introduction of the Cultural Medallion Awards, in the same year, by then acting Minister for Culture, Ong Teng Cheong staked the State's claim in the arts.

The 1980s were marked by the need to find a Singaporean language and voice that was inalienable from the social and cultural context of the people. Multi-lingual explorations, particularly in the English language theatre (notably the works of Max Le Blond) were taking hold and Singaporeans at once felt at home. Renewed confidence saw the formation of newer artist initiatives such as The

Artists Village, theatre (eg. TheatreWorks and The Necessary Stage) and dance companies (eg. Singapore Dance Theatre).

The 1990s were indeed a new beginning with a clearer consciousness of the co-relationship between art, commerce and national identity. Marked by the change in political leadership, the social agenda was premised on the need to build a cultural soul for Singapore, the viability of the arts as a cultural and economic asset was pursued rigorously under the rubric of a renaissance. The *Report of the Advisory Council for Culture and the Arts* (1989) mapped out a cultural policy to make Singapore a global city for the arts. Under its recommendations, the formation of the National Arts Council and the National Heritage Board sought to centralise many duplicitous areas of work under the parent Ministry of Information and the Arts. Significantly, the focus has also shifted to arts education and the development of infrastructure such as the Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay, libraries and museums. Arts groups too had a share, albeit a small but significant one, through arts housing schemes and grants. This cultural policy was conceived to map out and put in place cultural hardware (institutions, infrastructure) to position Singapore as a global city for the arts but the arts community felt that software (art production and education) was sidelined in this mapping.

The early 1990s were also enviably contentious and colourful with both the State and artists shocking the public with their actions and reactions. This included the introduction of RA (Restricted [Artistic]) ratings for movies,





the circumscription of performance art and forum theatre on moral and insidious grounds and novelist Catherine Lim drawing stern reactions from the State for her socio-political commentary on governance. The arts as business flourished with the Singapore Tourism Board taking on an active role in promoting Singapore as a cultural destination. The arrival of mega-musicals, circuses and family entertainment shows opened a new vista for art appreciation and development.

But there were reservations. Reservation that "while what ensured Singapore's success is a technocratically planned, top-down, consensus-generating and stability-ensuring approach, this same approach might not augur too well for the integrity of artists, who would set about their creations very differently, starting from deep within their individual selves and making their way outwards in whatever manner they found most meaningful towards the life and people around them."⁶

The directions for the arts in the 21st century seem to address this reservation in part, through the review of the censorship guidelines and the attempt for greater integration of the arts into contemporary life in re-making Singapore amidst the debris of globalisation. The thrust towards cultural policies marrying art, commerce and national identity was further reinforced by the *Renaissance City Report* (2000), which sought to redress the cultural software development, which the 1989 Report de-emphasised. Funds were pumped into various aspects of artist development and artistic practice, research and education benchmarking Singapore with major meccas of culture worldwide. In 2002, the buzzword of cultural policy is *Cultural Capital* which re-emphasises commerce as the prime mover of culture. As Deputy Prime Minister Tony Tan said: "Encouraging creativity and ingenuity in our people requires us to look at our arts and cultural assets, not as a luxurious activity, but as a strategic national resource to anchor our nation's future success. Apart from conferring social benefits to the nation, building such cultural capital is also a powerful determinant of our innovative capacity and economic competitiveness."⁷



The Cultural Medallion

In every civilized society there are awards of one kind or other instituted at various levels to recognise exceptional artistic talent and achievement...the institution of national awards for artists could not be more appropriate than at this stage in our young republic's history and national development. Art is charged with social values and moral significance. It humanises because it seeks out various responses to social problems and questions of life.

- **Ong Teng Cheong**, 1980

The Cultural Medallion award was instituted in 1979, as an initiative of the late President of Singapore Ong Teng Cheong who was then the acting Minister for Culture.⁸ The purpose of the Cultural Medallion was to acknowledge the "exceptional artistic talent and achievement" of artists in Singapore and in the early years the award was instrumental in boosting the cultural confidence of a young nation and in the formation of a cultural identity in Singapore. Today, it has taken on a prestige of excellence being the highest arts award in the republic. Many see the Cultural Medallion as a long overdue acknowledgement of the importance of the arts by the State, recognition for good work done by artists and encouragement for the younger generation to persevere in the development for the arts.

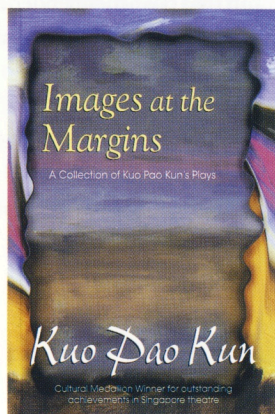
Procedurally, the Cultural Medallion recipient is nominated and thereafter recommended to the Ministry by an expert panel of practitioners and peers. Bearing in mind that post-independence artists operated under varying socio-political spheres, many of them, more than being



artists, were tireless promoters, educators, champions and professionals of an art that lacked State patronage. One thing is certain, the award acknowledged, encouraged and supported professionalism as former Minister for Foreign Affairs, S Dhanabalan noted at the 1986 Cultural Medallion award ceremony: "We must encourage and support professionalism. But we must be realistic in our expectations of standards. We must accept that only a few works of say a painter or a poet or the performance of an actor or dancer will rise above the commonplace and stand the test of time."⁹

Awards, be it the Oscars, Nobel Prize, Turner Prize or the Cultural Medallion, while they provide a sense of achievement for an artist they are not without contention. In the instance of the Cultural Medallion, critics lament the validity of the adjudicating panel (appropriateness and qualifications), about the framing of artistic standards (whose standards, whose benchmark), the State's presence in the due process (the Ministry's role and final endorsement) and finally, the credibility of the recipients (here the lament concerns who should be given the award - artists with a body of work, arts promoters, short-term vs long-term Singaporeans/Permanent Residents, or those waiting in line for an award). All laments affect each other and jade the significance of the award.

These laments highlight the stormy relationship between the State and the arts, a perennial disposition not peculiar to Singapore. In his book, *The Culture Industry*, Theodor Adorno notes that the role of administering the arts has always sat as a thorn on the seemingly utopic nature of the arts and artists.¹⁰ For the artist, the production of the arts is about particular matters of concerns (individual, metaphysical and everyday life), while for the State concerns are over general matters (masses, production-oriented and long-term benefits). There is a degree of irreconcilability as both the arts and the State polarize



themselves within the margins of common sense and the State refusing to be involved in questions of immanent quality (thereby appointing peer panels to assess artists works) and the arts refusing to acknowledge the fundamental role of State in art making (as in making connection to audiences and funding). Such conflicts pepper the history of the arts.

The conditions of today marry managerialism and the arts and if either chooses to ignore the other, they would be brandished as being provincial and suspect. Adorno asserts that the creators of culture cannot withdraw themselves from the due process of administration as it would deprive them of an earning but more incisively he points out to the reality of the role of the State in connecting a work of art and artist with various audiences in this day and age. It is within this framework that the discussion of the cultural development in Singapore has to be seen. The founding of the island republic, penned on an economic imagination, presupposes a cultural industry that works hand in hand with the state since the social and economic structure of society consumes the industry's very basis of existence.

New Paths

This hyperbolised narrative may have touched on a familiar critique of the hegemony of the State and the arts. However, history is best written when the players and their idealism and the State as patron and stage-setter, are understood within their own contravening and contradictory objectives. The Cultural Medallion forms a central core to this discourse. The ensuing narratives will surface up many of the concerns mentioned above. They will be notes, notes which we should take on a journey that mark the myriad milestones in the cultural life of an island, an island stumbling and working towards a destiny.

...we have to work at a destiny.
We stumble now and then. Our nerves are sensitive.
We strive to find our history...

Edwin Thumboo¹¹



NOTES

¹ Ernest Renan. "What is a Nation?" Lecture delivered in 1882, France. Reproduced in *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Homi Bhabha. New York: Routledge, 1990. p. 19.

² Pierre Bourdieu. *The Field of Cultural Production*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993.

³ S Rajaratnam. Statement adapted from his message in the Singapore Indian Association Annual Cultural Night programme book, 17 Sept 1961.

⁴ The loss of the National Theatre, when it was demolished in the 1980s, was heartfelt by many Singaporeans.

⁵ CMIO - refers to Chinese, Malays, Indians and Others as being ethnic categories for the organisation of people in Singapore.

⁶ Thiru Kandiah (Ed). *Beyond the Footlights: New Play Scripts in Singapore Theatre*. (Prize Winning Plays. Vol VI), Singapore: Unipress, 1992. p. 23.

⁷ Tony Tan. Speech delivered at the launch of the Singapore Tyler Print Institute, 10 April 2002.

⁸ The late Ong Teng Cheong's contributions to the arts are not limited to initiating the Cultural Medallion. A trained musician and architect, Ong, who in the late 1970s as the Acting Minister for Culture, planted the seed for the development of Singapore into a global city for the arts long before current sloganeering. He proposed the idea for a cultural centre in the late 1970s, which today is the Esplanade-Theatres on the Bay. In the late 1980s, as Deputy Prime Minister, he spearheaded the first attempt at formulating a cultural policy, which became the famous 1989 *Report of the Advisory Council for the Culture and the Arts*, which saw the formation of the National Arts Council and National Heritage Board and, as the President of Singapore in the 90s, he was patron of many small but significant projects that promoted artists.

⁹ S Dhanabalan. Speech delivered at the Cultural Medallion/Patron of the Arts Awards. 30 Jan 1986.

¹⁰ Theodor W Adorno. *The Culture Industry*. New York: Routledge, 1991. p 98.

¹¹ Edwin Thumboo. "Catering for the People" in *A Third Map: New and Selected Poems*. Singapore: Unipress, 1993.

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