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Title of the paper:
**Great Expectations:
Tracing the Policy of Community Arts in Singapore**

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Abstract:

Arts and cultural policies in Singapore have often been criticised as reifying the arts as expedient resources for economic survival and global competitiveness. However, since the release of the latest cultural policy – The Arts and Culture Strategic Review (ACSR) – in 2012, there has been a shift in focus towards harnessing the social values and community impact of the arts.

This paper is a critical consideration of the nature, extent and implications of this socio-cultural focus in Singapore’s cultural policy. This paper has two key objectives. Firstly, this paper will demonstrate how this socio-cultural focus is not a “discrete and discontinuous act” (Chua, 1995, p. 69) in Singapore’s arts and cultural policy. Rather, it has been remarkably consistent in terms of Singapore’s “bureaucratic imagination” of, and approach towards the arts (Chong, 2015, p. 20). Secondly, this paper will highlight how, despite the active role of the government and the proliferation of community arts projects and programmes, community arts remains a complex site of tension and profound ambivalence in Singapore.

Ultimately, this paper is a starting point towards a new mode of analysis that will provide critical insights into both the policy and practice of community arts in Singapore, and new terms for (re)thinking the relations between government, artists and society.

Keywords:

Cultural policy, Singapore, community arts, social turn, access, participation

Introduction

Arts and cultural policies in Singapore have often been criticised as reifying the arts as expedient resources for economic survival and global competitiveness. However, since the release of the latest cultural policy – The Arts and Culture Strategic Review (ACSR) – in 2012, there has been a shift in focus towards harnessing the social values and community impact of the arts. Many community arts programmes are now being run at the grassroots level, giving citizens easier access to the arts and allowing them to participate in a diverse range of activities by more artists, arts groups and civic organisations. More efforts have also been made to make the arts more inclusive to targeted communities, from children with special needs to the elderly. Concurrently, there have also been numerous independent arts practices and projects with similar community-building and engagement aspirations.

Yet, despite the active role of the government and the proliferation of programmes and projects that position themselves as community arts, there is a lack of common understanding of the contours and characteristics of community arts in Singapore. The term “community arts” itself is currently ill-defined and under-theorised, which gives rise to several points of contention and tension.

This paper is hence a timely critical consideration of the nature, extent and implications of this aggrandising of “community arts” in Singapore’s cultural policy. This paper has two key objectives. Firstly, this paper will demonstrate how the ACSR is not an illogical discontinuity from previous cultural policies. In fact, the ACSR’s focus on harnessing the social values is not a “discrete and discontinuous act” (Chua, 1995, p. 69) in the state governance of the arts and culture. In fact, it has been remarkably consistent in terms of Singapore’s “bureaucratic imagination” of, and approach towards the arts (Chong, 2015, p. 20). Secondly, this paper will highlight how, despite the consistent focus, community arts remains a complex site of tension and profound ambivalence in Singapore.

Ultimately, this paper is a starting point towards arguing for a new mode of analysis that will provide critical insights into both the policy and practice of community arts in Singapore, and new terms for (re)thinking the relations between government, artists and society.

Policy Genesis: Contextualising the Emergence of Community Arts in State Discourse on Culture

Arts and cultural policies have not been conspicuously featured in the Singapore Story. This is expected, given the ruling government’s emphasis on pragmatism and economic survival. The existing scholarship on Singapore has largely focussed on how the post-colonial governance of Singapore has always been based on a developmental model of modernity, where economic development, survival and success are prioritised as the logic of government intervention and management (Perry, Yeoh and Kong, 1997). As Chua (1995, p. 59) states, “the economic is privileged over the cultural because economic growth is seen as the best guarantee of social and political stability necessary for the survival of the nation”.

Consequently, local scholars such as Lily Kong (2000) have critiqued state governance and policy-making in the arts as instrumentalising the arts and culture into expedient resources for economic survival and global competitiveness. This is most evident in Singapore’s global city

for the arts project, which was first conceptualised in 1992 as a means to raise Singapore's international profile as an important nodal city in the global network of cities. This state desire to harness the arts for economic development is best exemplified by a speech made by then-Minister for the arts, George Yeo:

As our economy becomes more advanced, the arts become more important. We should see the arts not as luxury or mere consumption but as investment in people and the environment. We need a strong development of the arts to help make Singapore one of the major hub cities of the world [...] We also need the arts to help us attract talented individuals to come, work and live here [...] We also need the arts to help us produce goods and services which are competitive in the world market (Yeo, 1991).

Unsurprisingly, most of Singapore's cultural policies such as the Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts (ACCA) and the Creative Industries Development Strategy (CIDS) were formulated after a major review of the Singapore economy.

Likewise, the ACSR was initiated after an economic restructuring. In 2008, Singapore experienced its worst economic downturn since its independence in 1965. To ensure continued growth and development of the Singapore economy, the Economic Strategies Committee (ESC) was formed in 2009, and subsequently released its official report in February 2010. Importantly, one key recommendation of the ESC Report was to provide support for "the growing creative and arts clusters, which will add to the character of the city, and nurture new talents" (2010, p. ii). One month after the release of the ESC Report, Lui Tuck Yew, then-acting Minister for Information, Communication and the Arts, declared that a strategic review would be conducted in the development of the arts and culture. He explained that this strategic review would "take the broad recommendations outlined in the ESC Report, crystallise concrete strategies and propose major initiatives to realise the vision" (Lui, 2010). This strategic review eventually resulted in the ACSR Report, which was released in 2012. Lui's speech clearly highlights the ACSR as a cultural policy that was initiated in response to Singapore's economic restructuring needs.

Yet, the ACSR is what Kong defines as a "cultural social policy," that is, a policy that emphasises the social and cultural benefits of the arts and culture rather than the economic benefits per se (2012, p. 290). Indeed, although the ACSR was initiated as an economic restructuring strategy, the use of economic language and rationales is significantly more muted in the ACSR. This downplaying of the economic benefits of arts and culture is especially stark when compared to the CIDS policy.

The ACSR positions itself as a policy that would shift the focus for the next phase of Singapore's cultural development to its "people and society" (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, 2012, p. 15). According to the report, this is because the time had come for the arts and culture to play a key role in strengthening the "software" aspect of national identity, belonging and unity:

A nation cannot inspire and endear its people through infrastructural sophistication and material wealth alone. What binds a nation to its people are the softer things in life: family, friends, places, communities, memories. In the years ahead, social challenges... will increasingly take centre stage. Arts and culture can play a key role defining Singaporean-ness in a globalised world [and] promoting social cohesion across

population segments (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, 2012, pp. 9–10).

This desire to harness the arts and culture for socio-cultural benefits is encapsulated in its vision, which is to transform Singapore into “a nation of cultured and gracious people, at home with our heritage, proud of our Singaporean identity” (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, 2012, p. 15).

Nevertheless, this did not mean that the ACSR was a “discrete and discontinuous act” that may radically alter the trajectory that an early intervention may have put in place (Chua, 1995, p. 69).¹ This “softer” tone of the ACSR Report is in line with the ESC Report’s goal to transform Singapore into “an endearing home that offers Asia’s best quality of life and with which citizens and global talents forge strong emotional ties” (Economic Strategies Committee, 2010, p. 67). Accordingly, when the ACSR was first announced in 2010, it was positioned as a review based on the ESC’s call for significant investments to be made to “better our cultural landscape, especially in the software aspects” (Lui, 2010). The ACSR’s focus on strengthening software is hence a premeditated strategy to restructure the economy through indirect means.

The next section will further contextualise the ACSR by demonstrating how it is not the first official state narrative that has reified the socio-cultural importance of the arts and culture in Singapore.

Policy Analysis: Community Arts in Singapore – Old Wine in New Bottles?

Since the release of the ACSR, there has been a significant increase in the circulation of the ideology of “community arts” as a meaningful activity with social value and impact, from cultural policy makers, artists, arts groups and civic organisations. Yet, this ideology did not first emerge from the ACSR.

In fact, although the provision and promotion of arts and culture have not been state priorities and policy imperatives, the idea of arts and culture as expedient resources (Yudice, 2003) for socialising the migrant society into a cohesive and civilised community has always been of importance to the state. When Singapore attained self-governance in May 1959, one of the first ministries established was The Ministry of Culture. Along with ministries for law, labour, home affairs, finance, health, education and national development, The Ministry of Culture was established on 5 June 1959. As the first Minister of Culture – S. Rajaratnam – explained, a Ministry of Culture was set up because “culture can be an effective vehicle for fostering unity amongst the diverse peoples” (1959).

¹ According to Chua (1995), the post-colonial governance of Singapore is based on the ideology of pragmatism, which allows the PAP government to respond to situations “at hand rather than in ideological commitment” (p. 1). This means that, as long as continuous economic growth can be ensured, some of the governmental techniques and activities of the PAP government may be “discrete and discontinuous acts,” and “a particular intervention in a particular region of social life may radically alter the trajectory that an early intervention may have put in place” (p. 69).

This importance of arts and culture as expedient resources to foster community-building and bonding is clearly identified in the *1959 State of Singapore Annual Report*:

“the creation of a sense of national identity, the elimination of communal divisions and attitudes. The propagation of democratic values, conducive to the ultimate creation of a just society. The creation of a wide acceptance of a National Language... The propagation of an awareness of the ultimate objectives of complete independence through merger and the ideas of a democratic socialist way of life”.

Early ministerial speeches also highlighted the importance of harnessing the arts and culture for their community-building capabilities. For example, in 1966, one year after independence, then-Minister of State for Culture Lee Khoo Choy argued that “the days of Art for Art’s sake are over. Artists should play an integral part in our effort to build a multiracial, multilingual and multi-religious society where every citizen has a place under the sun” (Chong, 2010, p. 132). As Chong (2010, p. 146) notes, “instead of relegating artistic pursuit and aesthetic exploration to the realm of bourgeois luxury, the arts and culture were used by the government as an ideological tool whereby the orthodoxies and interests of the ruling elite could be propagated and perpetuated”.

One of the first programs initiated by The Ministry of Culture was the Aneka Ragam Ra’ayat, otherwise known as the “People’s Cultural Concerts”. This was a series of free, open-air cultural concerts that were held in various public spaces across Singapore. The aim was to help develop a sense of community, belonging and unity amongst the people through fostering better understanding of the culture of each ethnic group. Typically, the concerts would be multi-racial, with all four major cultural streams – Malay, Chinese, Indian and Western – featured. For instance, a concert could feature Chinese lion dance displays alongside with Malay ronggeng music, Indian classical dance and Western classical music. The first of these cultural concerts was held at the Botanic Gardens on 2 August 1959, which was officially opened by then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. It started as a weekly series that travelled to differing public spaces across Singapore, particularly in the housing estate neighbourhoods.

During the 1960s and 1970s, artistic and cultural activities were used by the state for nation-building purposes and to counteract the negative influences associated with the “yellow culture” of the “decadent West” (for more see Kong, 2000). During the 1970s, the Ministry of Culture organised regular “Art for Everyone” and “Music for Everyone” programmes. “Art for Everyone” was a series of monthly exhibitions that toured the community centres around Singapore. These exhibitions were targeted at “ordinary people who must learn to appreciate the beautiful as part of the process of gracious living” (Chan, 1971). The exhibitions showcased “neither well-known names nor artistic masterpieces — simply ordinary men and women from all walks of life who feel the urge for self-expressing... the themes are very ordinary ones — just those themes that are close to the lives of the people” (Chan, 1971). As explained by Ong Soo Chuan, then Parliamentary Secretary for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, these exhibitions were organised for the “prime purpose of popularising art.” This was because art was believed to “contribute positively to inter-racial understanding, harmony and hence national unity” (Ong, 1973). The “Music for Everyone” programme had similar intentions. Since then, the government has continued to organise similar programmes. For instance, before the ACSR, there was the NAC-ExxonMobil Concert in the Park series. This series was launched in 1996 with the aim of bringing the arts to the people and exposing them to various art forms through a series of concerts held at public parks all over the island.

The role of cultural policy as a formal instrument to utilise the arts to cultivate a cohesive community was most clearly stated in what has often been identified as Singapore first cultural policy document – the Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts (ACCA) – in 1989: “the government’s cultural policy is to promote widespread interest and excellence in the pursuit of the arts in our multi-cultural society, and to encourage cross-cultural understanding and appreciation” (Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts, 1989, p.3). The ACCA Report emphasised the social values of the arts and culture by arguing that the arts and culture “can provide for greater social integration and strengthen the spirit of our nation” (Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts, 1989, p. 12).

The ACCA Report also outlined recommendations for community outreach and engagement. For instance, one key recommendation was to make cultural and arts programmes more accessible to Singaporeans through community clubs (formerly known as “community centres”) and other community organisations, such as social clubs and clan associations (Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts, 1989, p. 32).

More importantly, it also utilised the term “community arts/community-based arts”. In fact, except for CIDS, the term “community arts/community-based arts” is used in all cultural policy documents. Additionally, the term “community/communities” was mobilised frequently in ACCA and all subsequent cultural policy documents. The table below shows the number of times the term “community/communities” appears in each cultural policy document.

Cultural Policy	Year Published	Total No. of Times “Community/Communities” Appear
Report of the Advisory Council for Culture and the Arts (ACCA)	1989	12
Renaissance City Plan I (RCP I)	2000	37
Creative Industries Development Strategy (CIDS) (includes RCP II)	2002	68
Renaissance City Plan III (RCP III)	2008	178
The Arts and Culture Strategic Review Report (ACSR)	2012	174

Table One: Frequency of the term “community/communities” in Singapore’s cultural policies

As the table shows, the frequency of the term community was heightened in RCP III. In fact, a key RCP III initiative was the Arts for All Community Engagement Plan, which was launched in October 2008. The aim was to foster community through encouraging deeper engagement and participation in the arts among Singaporeans. The Arts for All Plan (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, 2008) had two key components: ArtReach, which aimed to

increase access to quality arts experiences for the community at large; and ArtLink, which aimed to bring the arts to specific population segments that have been constrained by age, physical disability, income or other circumstances. The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that the National Arts Council (NAC) signed with the People's Association (PA) - a statutory board aimed at promoting racial harmony and social cohesion - in 2006 also laid the foundations for the ACSR's Community Engagement Masterplan. This MOU called for the joint development of District Arts Festivals and the development of community arts talent. These paved the way for many of the programmes and initiatives organised under the ACSR.

What is distinct about the ACSR is its amplification of this importance of community arts. This importance is most evident from the restructuring of ministries and their portfolios in November 2012. As explained by Prime Minister Lee, the restructuring of ministries is a response to Singapore's "new phase of development, where social and community issues are increasingly important" (Neo, 2012). This new phase was triggered by the need to tackle the challenges of an increasingly heterogeneous society and address the economic stress on social cohesion. The need to overcome these challenges has had a significant impact on policy making and has resulted in a whole-of-government shift towards a social focus. The ACSR is undoubtedly part of this shift.

Amongst other measures, the restructuring resulted in the moving of the arts portfolio from the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts to a new ministry, the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY). MCCY was given a mission to create a "gracious society" and cultivate "a strong sense of belonging to Singapore." This was similar to the mission of the ACSR, which was to transform Singapore into "a nation of cultured and gracious people, at home with our heritage, proud of our Singaporean identity" (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, 2012, p. 15). Apart from the arts, MCCY also handles the sports, heritage, community and youth portfolios. Grouping the arts portfolio with portfolios that handle community development and services indicates a desired alignment. In particular, the grouping of the arts portfolio with the PA is eminently significant.

Apart from the restructuring, the amplified focus on community arts is also evident from the allocation of funding. In order to translate the strategic directions of ACSR into reality, three masterplans, with a total funding of S\$274 million, were launched in 2012. These were the Community Engagement Masterplan (CEM), which was allocated state funding of S\$210 million, the Arts and Culture Education Masterplan, which was allocated funding of S\$40 million, and the Capability Development Roadmap, which was allocated S\$24 million. The allocation of funding and the ministry restructuring reveal a prioritisation of community arts above other strategic goals.

The ACSR is evidently an amplified re-articulation of the government's deep-rooted desire to harness arts and culture for community-related objectives. The ACSR's recommended methods and approaches to achieve these objectives is also consistent with previous cultural policies and state initiatives.

In order to achieve its vision to "bring arts and culture to everyone, everywhere, every day", the ACSR aspires to meet two targets by the year 2025. The first was to double the percentage of Singaporeans who attend at least one arts and culture event every year from 40% to 80%,

and the second was to increase the percentage of Singaporeans participating in arts and culture activities from 20% to 50% (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, 2012, p. 15). Increasing access and participation in the arts and culture are seen to have transformative effects on society. These effects include enriching the lives of Singaporeans, strengthening Singaporean ties and promoting social cohesion (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, 2012, pp. 8–11).

The allocation of CEM's funding of S\$210 million also highlights this top-down conceptualisation that community-building can be achieved through increasing access and participation in the arts. CEM's funding would go into three priority areas: (i) 45% would be spent providing more community touchpoints for the arts and culture; (ii) 30% would be used to promote learning and appreciation; and (iii) 25% would be used to seed new interest groups, community networks and ground-up initiatives.

Apart from the frequent use of community/communities across all cultural policy documents, the framing of community arts is also consistent. In spite of the early and frequent usage of the term "community arts" within the cultural policy documents, no cultural policy document has provided a clear definition of the term itself. However, indications of its meaning and intentions can be determined through the frequency and currency of the words associated with the term. As the work of Lakoff and Johnson (2003) on natural language metaphors, and Austin's work on performativity have argued, linguistic constructions shape not just our communication but also the way we think and act. As Table Two shows, in all cultural policy documents, there is regular utilisation of the terms "access" and "participation". For instance, RCP III advocated the need to encourage "more people to cultivate an interest in culture and the arts" and generate "widespread participation" in cultural activities (2008, pp 25–26). Oftentimes, the terms community and/or community arts are also used in association with the terms "access" and "participation". These word associations show how community arts is conceived in terms of the cultural deficit model, which views non-participants in legitimate culture as an isolated and excluded minority (Miles and Stevenson 2012). As the next section will show, Singapore is not alone in its prevailing approach to cultural policy.

Cultural Policy	Year Published	Total No. of Times "Community/Communities" Appear	Total No. of Times "Access" is Used	Total No. of Times "Participation" is used
Report of the Advisory Council for Culture and the Arts (ACCA)	1989	12	5	7
Renaissance City Plan I (RCP I)	2000	37	5	9
Creative Industries Development Strategy	2002	68	25	13

(CIDS) (includes RCP II)				
Renaissance City Plan III (RCP III)	2008	178	36	56
The Arts and Culture Strategic Review Report (ACSR)	2012	174	42	65

Table Two: Frequency of the terms “community/communities”, “access” and “participation” in Singapore’s cultural policies

Policy Transfer: Community Arts as Global Trend

Singapore is not unique or alone in its heightened focus on harnessing the social values of community arts. In fact, this focus is in line with the current “social turn” in global arts practices. The term “social turn” was first coined by Claire Bishop in 2006 to describe the recent focus on socially-engaged art that is often participatory, process-focussed, collaborative and involves people as the medium or material of the work. According to Bishop, the post-1989 period saw a surge of artistic and curatorial interest in undertaking socially-engaged projects. For instance, there has been a prevalent rise of collaborative art projects with socially-marginalised constituencies, as well as pedagogic art projects that appropriate the tropes of education as both method and form. Singapore is no exception with the emergence of socially-engaged artists and arts groups such as Dramabox in 1990, and projects such as the “Theatre for Seniors” programme by The Necessary Stage, which started in 2008.

Apart from arts practitioners and institutions, governments across the globe have also recognised the power of the arts to address social issues, especially in terms of strengthening community-bonding, social cohesion, identity and belonging. As noted by Bishop (2012), governments have also been utilising rhetoric almost identical to that of socially-engaged art to steer culture towards policies of social inclusion, and to produce cultural policies that priorities social effect over considerations of artistic quality. For instance, in the United Kingdom, there has been a push towards increasing access and participation in arts and cultural activities because it is believed that “arts and culture strengthen communities, bring people together and remove social barriers” (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2013). A key example, which has also been cited by the ACSR, is the *City of London Cultural Strategy 2010 - 2014*. This was published by the City of London as a comprehensive plan for London’s arts and cultural development, and a core focus is on ensuring access through strategies that would ensure that the residents are aware and embrace London’s cultural institutions and offerings as their own. Similarly, the U.S. government has been producing research studies to show that arts participation is a factor in strengthening communities.² Since the late 2000s, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) has invested heavily in projects that increase collective access and participation.

² For instance, the National Endowment for the Arts (see <http://arts.gov>) has been producing studies on “age and arts participation,” “arts and ageing,” “art-goers and their communities: patterns of civic and social engagement” and “arts and achievement in at-risk youths.”

Beyond the Policy Hype: Community Arts as a Nebulous Site of Tension

Interestingly, despite its global currency and strong policy focus in Singapore, community arts in Singapore remains as a site of tension and profound ambivalence.

One key issue is the lack of definitional coherence of the term “community arts” itself. Despite the active role of the government and the proliferation of both top-down and bottom-up programmes, the term remains ill-defined and there is a lack of common understanding of the contours and characteristics of community arts in Singapore. This is mainly because the term “community” in “community arts” is itself a nebulous and unstable ideological concept. As Mayo (1994) states, “it is not just that the term has been used ambiguously; it has been contested, fought over, and appropriated for different uses and interests to justify different politics, policies and practices” (p. 48). According to Rose (1999), community emerged as a “valorised alternative, antidote, or even cure to the ills” that society had not been able to address (p. 175). This is because the term “community” is traditionally associated with the hope and desire of reviving the closer, warmer and more harmonious types of bonds vaguely attributed to past ages. As it is an ideal, community becomes a contested term because there is tension between what it is, and what it should be and do.

The nebulous and malleable nature of community arts can be observed in the absence of an over-arching definition or framework of community arts guiding the implementation of the ACSR. As the implementation of the ACSR is dispersed across numerous government agencies such as the NAC, PA and the National Heritage Board (NHB). Each government agency has formulated their own approach, framework and set of key performance indicators (KPIs). The nebulous nature of community arts has allowed each stakeholder agency to mobilise community arts to achieve its own broader objectives and mission.

In addition, these government agencies may not necessarily cohere to the same definition of community arts. In particular, the PA and the NAC operate on different frameworks. The PA initiatives appear to define community as grassroots activities and through constituency demarcations. Meanwhile, the NAC takes a more heterogeneous definition of community. The NAC has funded different types of ground-up community arts projects, including “Both Sides Now,” “Awaken the Dragon,” “My Queenstown Festival,” and the Migrant Workers Poetry Competition.

The different approaches undertaken by the government agencies highlight the complex and multi-layered lifeworld of policy implementation in Singapore. Each stakeholder invokes its own interests under the banner of community arts. More importantly, the different approaches highlight how it was the very ambiguity and malleability of the concept of community arts that made the field conceivable for governance, and to be taken up in a range of different political agendas. Inopportunately, the different approaches have merely contributed to the lack of understanding of the function and value of community arts in Singapore.

Yet, there is a danger in formulating a common definition of community arts, especially from a state perspective. This common definition may result in the legitimisation of selected aesthetic practices, forms and projects and the exclusion of others. The current emphasis on community

arts hence also raises questions about art and artists who fall outside the category of community arts and community artists. The ACSR's privileging of arts that serve as a platform for social cohesion and harmony may be problematic for artists, especially those seeking government funding. The needs and priorities of the government may not necessarily match those of the artists. In order to obtain government funding and support, the artist may be placed in a compromising position. Their artistic vision, their ability to take risks artistically, and their desire to be innovative and creative may be constrained. As Chong (2010) points out, cultural policies in Singapore "are not sympathetic to art for art's sake but subordinate to the ideologies, values and interests of the ruling elite" (p. 132).

This may exacerbate the difference between the type of arts supported by the government and the type of arts Singaporean artists would like to pursue. This exacerbation is a critical consideration, especially since the government has demonstrated a low tolerance for art works and productions that may not affirm their ideologies and interests. This is evident from the continued persistence of censorship of political, racial and religious issues in Singapore, which is deemed necessary to a certain extent to ensure the maintenance of the delicate balance of Singapore's multi-racial society and social cohesion. A recent example would be how the Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) assessed two shows – performance lecture *Naked Ladies* by Thea Fitz-James and interactive piece *Undressing Room* by Ming Poon as having exceeded the R18 rating under the Arts Entertainment Classification Code and hence could not be performed (Nanda, 2016). This was in reaction to anonymous online comments on how the performances were offensive and were "pornography disguised as art". Similarly, in 2014, a local filmmaker, Tan Pin Pin, received a "Not allowed for All Ratings" (NAR) classification for her documentary feature on political exiles, *To Singapore, with Love*. This classification prohibits the film from being publicly screened in Singapore. According to Yaacob Ibrahim, Minister of Information and Communications, Tan's film is a "one-sided portrayal" that "contains untruths and deception" about the history of Singapore (Xue, 2014).

These examples highlight how there are still top-down limits placed on the context and horizons of artistic expression and creative experimentation in Singapore. Therefore, there is a need for any definition of community arts, along with any assessment of the ACSR, to consider the types of art forms and artists that are included and promoted, and the cultural values attached to them. Official discourses of arts funding and patronage define and delimit what community arts can conceivably be, and any potentialities and opportunities it may therefore offer.

Another site of tension is how the ACSR also continues the government's instrumental approach towards the arts and culture. As both Kong (2000) and Chong (2010) have demonstrated, the ruling party in Singapore has long regarded the arts and culture as important ideological tools to propagate and perpetuate its agendas and interests. In this case, community arts is mobilised as a means to resolve national issues such as social cohesion and unity.

This instrumentalist approach is most evident in the programmes organised by the PA. According to Nah Juay Hng, group director of the engagement cluster for arts and culture at the PA, arts is meant to be used to "bring residents together for friendships and bonding, and for them to forge collective memories" (Tan, 2014). This utilisation of arts as a means to an end can also be observed from the types of questions asked in the feedback survey about their

annual PAssionArts Festival. Participants had to answer questions about whether “the presence of arts and culture activities made their neighbourhood a more enjoyable place to live in,” whether “attending and participating in arts and culture helped draw the community closer,” and whether “the presence of arts and culture gave a greater sense of belonging to their neighbourhood” (People’s Association, 2014). The main concern of the survey appears to be the ability of the arts to serve as a platform to engage the community, instead of the quality of the products and the skills of the artists involved.

Additionally, the focus of cultural policy making in Singapore has tended to be on quantifiable “impacts” and “outcomes.” This is most evident in how, five years after the allocation of funds, when asked about the impact of the ACSR, the government response was framed in terms of quantifiable measures of increased access and participation:

Our efforts under the ACSR are bearing fruit. More Singaporeans are attending arts events, and visiting our museums and heritage institutions. Our surveys have shown that 8 in 10 Singaporeans attended an arts event or activity in 2015. In the same year, museum visitorship also reached an all-time high of 3.75 million. More Singaporeans also believe in the value of the arts and culture. Nevertheless, more can still be done to make culture a part of everyday life and to ensure that culture is inclusive and accessible for all. We will continue to develop and support programmes that can connect with various segments of Singaporeans (Baey, 2017).

Beyond quantifiable measures of growths in access and participation, a robust evidence base demonstrating the link between community arts and its purported socio-cultural impacts remains elusive. According to the ACSR, community arts is purported as being able to achieve a hugely broad range of benefits. Beyond successful anecdotes and individual case studies, there has yet to be any sustained longitudinal studies on whether community arts does offer any socio-cultural impact. There is also a scarcity of systematic evidence that evaluates the externalities associated with social impacts generated by community arts. The scanty evidence base is not unique to Singapore. As Bishop (2012, p. 163) points out, the majority of publications on community arts tend to comprise reports and evaluations of specific projects rather than a “synthesised narrative”.

While barriers to access to, and participation in the arts are critical concerns, and are valid arguments to invest in cultural development activity targeted at under-represented groups, research on the quality of the programmes and their relevance to particular cultural groups is also important. In light of the scanty evidence base, a starting point could be shifting the focus from proving to improving outcomes. For example, what does the artist need to be equipped with to ensure engagement is meaningful? How does the artist ensure sustainability not only in terms of funding, but also in areas such as vision, leadership and motivation to ensure that the impact of the work continues?

Together, the aforementioned points of contention open up key questions concerning the value of arts and culture, and the operations of power that enable and constrain what is culturally possible. Although ACSR may be a cultural policy, it may actually be divorced from real issues affecting art-making in Singapore, and may not necessarily contribute to the quality and substance of art production in Singapore.

These points also expose the limits of community as a political agenda. According to Iris Young (1986), community is an idealistic but understandable dream. To her, community conceives of the “social subject as a relation of unity composed by identification and symmetry among individuals within a totality” (p. 7). This “impossible ideal of shared subjectivity” tends to “deflect attention from more concrete analysis of the conditions of their [referring to social relations of domination and exploitation] elimination” (p. 12). This desire to use community arts to bring multiplicity and heterogeneity into unity might be a denial of difference, and a refusal to acknowledge and address the misunderstandings, conflicts and incomplete resolutions within society.

Conclusion

This paper has critically examined the nature and implications of the current policy focus on community arts in Singapore. It has demonstrated how this focus is not an illogical discontinuity from previous cultural policies. From the “Art for Everyone” exhibitions in the 1970s to the NAC-ExxonMobil Concert in the Park series in the 1990s, state-led development of the arts has largely been justified in terms of the envisioning of the arts as resources to civilise and socialise the migrant society into a cohesive and cultivated community. Although there may have been shifts in the prioritisation, the government has never deviated from its desire to mobilise the arts and culture to achieve socio-cultural outcomes. The ACSR is hence a continuation of Singapore’s “bureaucratic imagination” (Chong, 2015, p. 20) of the arts and culture, and their efficacy to Singapore.

More importantly, this paper has also highlighted community arts as a product of inherent tension and profound ambivalence. It has shown how, the current policy focus on community arts faces more challenges than opportunities, especially in terms of arts governance and policy-making in Singapore.

In light of these challenges, this paper is but a starting point towards arguing for a new mode of analysis that will provide critical insights into the role of the arts in Singapore, and new terms for (re)thinking the relations between government, artists and society.

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