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Nurturing a culture of conviction: Developing the arts is a critical means of building S'pore's resilience

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Nurturing a culture of conviction

Developing the Arts is a Critical Means of Building S'pore's Resilience

Hoe Su Fern

Today, 3 April 2014

Singapore celebrates its 50th year of independence next year, but what it means to be Singaporean continues to be a topic of discussion and debate.

Of late, there have been passionate reactions to criticism of Singapore from those in our midst, Singaporeans and foreigners alike. To counter British writer Charlotte Ashton's labelling of Singapore as suffering from a "massive compassion deficit", bloggers and letter writers to the media cited examples of people giving up their seats to those in need on the MRT or going the extra mile to help strangers.

When Korean talent show contestant Stephanie Koh, who is Singaporean, explained why she was not proud to be Singaporean in a self-recorded YouTube video, viewers chastised her for lacking national pride. They said she was narrow-minded in her generalisation that Singaporeans were straight-laced, uncreative "homework robots" and cited examples of creative and risk-taking Singaporeans. However, others agreed with Ms Koh's views and praised her candour.

These debates are a good reflection of our cultural reality. They reveal the lack of consensus on what it means to be Singaporean, while suggesting several defining features of our shared Singaporean culture. More importantly, they elucidate how, despite differing opinions, many Singaporeans are quick to defend the nation against criticism.

This defence mechanism, although not always rational, reveals some semblance of a Singapore identity: A sense of "We". Although our understanding of what it means to be Singaporean remains fungible at best, many of us are proud to be Singaporean. As we mature as a nation, the question is: How can we continue to nurture our Singaporean identity and foster a stronger sense of belonging and commitment to the country? Can this identity be "activated" to bind us closer together in times when our nationhood is tested or questioned?

TENDING TO THE 'CULTURAL LAYER'

In 1990 — the 25th year of Singapore's independence — the late playwright Kuo Pao Kun identified cultural development as a core necessity in the next phase of Singapore's nation-building. He felt that the focus on economic development and rapid accumulation of material wealth had resulted in a continuing absence of a "cultural layer" in our national life.

For Kuo, this “cultural layer” would be Singapore’s lifeblood and would determine its survival and resilience. He said: “The most active agent in this core is the arts, because the central concern about the nation’s future rests on whether its people have retained and nurtured its source of creative energy — that dynamic, original impulse which had initiated and executed the making of a nation against all odds. After all, creativity is what the arts is all about.”

Kuo’s ideas continue to resonate today. In her speech during the recent Committee of Supply debate, Nominated Member of Parliament Janice Koh stressed that nurturing creativity in the arts and cultural sectors is a critical means of building resilience and a sense of conviction and hope in Singaporeans — values that are needed to navigate an increasingly complex and uncertain world and remain committed to a common future.

Our “cultural layer” has, in the past two decades, been well tended to. Since 1990, the Government has spared no expense in positioning Singapore as a global city for the arts and a creative industries hub. Today, a rich array of arts and cultural activities are available. In the first quarter of this year, there was Art Stage Singapore, Mosaic Music Festival, Huayi Chinese Festival of the Arts and the official opening of the National Design Centre. Local talent continues to be showcased at public flea markets such as the Made in SG Market and Public Garden. The global achievements of home-grown film-maker Anthony Chen have also been well-celebrated.

Singapore has long shed its reputation as a cultural desert. Can more be done to ensure that Singaporeans continue to gain exposure to and benefit from our cultural vibrancy?

A REPOSITORY OF OUR CREATIVE OUTPUT

Acting Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Lawrence Wong stressed in Parliament the importance of bringing the arts and culture “to everyone and everywhere”. The ministry has since done this in various neighbourhoods across the country through the PAssionArts Festival and activities such as singing, street art and photography.

However, there is currently a dearth of readily available information about the arts and culture in Singapore. For instance, if someone wanted to catch a play tonight, he would have to trawl through several websites and gather all available options. Similarly, one would have to dedicate a significant amount of time to find out the total number of activities and achievements by local creative talent for any particular time frame.

Creating a comprehensive information portal and repository for the arts and culture in Singapore would facilitate easy access to a wide variety of options, heighten awareness of the dynamic range of work produced by Singaporeans, promote our vibrant arts and cultural landscape to all, as well as encourage collaboration through identification of common interests. More information would support the current post-creative industries shift towards a more inclusive and participatory approach in arts and cultural policymaking. Finally, it will ensure that our “cultural layer” is not just a forgettable garnish or superficial coating.

As the Singapore population becomes more diverse and the needs of its citizens evolve, Kuo's thinking on Singapore's "cultural layer" is all the more relevant. As he referenced, failure to consistently cultivate and maintain our "cultural layer" could lead to acts of intolerance in personal, familial, community and national affairs.

Enabling public knowledge of our home-grown creative talent and promoting their work as platforms for exploring aspirations and anxieties are ways in which the arts and culture can help build empathy among Singaporeans and facilitate greater understanding and respect for others.

It is time to think of new and innovative ways to celebrate the arts and culture in Singapore for the opportunities they hold in bringing people together and nurturing the conviction that everyone here has a shared future. Singapore needs this, in order to look forward to the next 50 years and beyond.

Dr Hoe Su Fern is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore. This piece has also been published on IPSCCommons (<http://www.ipsccommons.sg/>).