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# Cultural Diplomacy and Co-operation in ASEAN: The Role of Arts and Culture Festivals

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## Summary

Beyond their traditional role as entertainment, form of expression and meeting spaces within local communities, arts and culture festivals can perform various functions. They can serve as showcases of artistic pride, signal openness towards cultural diversity, support the local economy, contribute to reducing political tension and provide grounds to consolidate international relationships. On occasion, such festivals function as tools to support the vision of a multilateral co-operation institution, as is the case of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Through a comprehensive review of the arts and culture festivals curated in ASEAN, this article investigates the festivals' ulterior motivations. A range of economic, political, diplomatic, and organisational logics explain the evolution of such festivals during the last fifty years. The article concludes that arts and culture festivals have remained a compelling and instrumental co-operation mechanism in ASEAN, but formats and approaches need substantial revision.

## Keywords

cultural diplomacy in ASEAN – cultural co-operation in ASEAN – arts and culture festivals – ASEAN arts and culture – international cultural relations – Southeast Asian culture

## 1 Introduction: Roles for Arts and Culture Festivals

If we think of arts and culture festivals with an encompassing, even universal lens, we can broadly define them as featuring or staging a variety of ‘time out of time’ artistic and cultural forms to the public.<sup>1</sup> The festivals take place in a designated space — in one or several venues — at a time outside the everyday routine, usually ranging from as short as an evening, a day or a weekend to a month or a season, and often taking place at regular intervals. Arts and culture festivals can embrace the widest variety of forms, including music, dance, theatre, comedy, film, photography, fine art, literature, poetry, crafts, food, fashion, among others, or provide a mixed and multi-disciplinary programme combining some of these cultural forms. In some contexts, the celebrations can include less conventional features: for instance, in the setting this article analyses, Southeast Asia, and more specifically, ASEAN, ritualistic attributes,<sup>2</sup> such as the emphasis on gastronomic celebrations, the wearing of traditional clothing, or even how participants in a meeting, from prime ministers to artists, interweave an all-encompassing handshake that originated four decades ago,<sup>3</sup> can be considered revelries of the celebratory nature described above.

Historically, rulers, nation-states and local governments have actively initiated and arranged arts and culture festivals.<sup>4</sup> At times, they have encouraged and financially supported civil societies in organising festivals. There are various reasons why governments engage in, arrange or support arts and culture festivals at the local, national and regional levels. They are frequently encouraged as ephemeral celebratory feasts and generally joyous entertainment.<sup>5</sup> They can be linked to official or state religions, religious practices or beliefs,<sup>6</sup> endorsed to promote specific social values, such as tolerance and multiculturalism,<sup>7</sup> and they can provide opportunities to share experiences and encounter novelties, and as platforms for innovation.<sup>8</sup> It is also common for policy-makers to employ arts and culture festivals to gain immediate image returns, as marketing contributors for a location, such as rebranded cities.<sup>9</sup> In this regard, notions such as the invigoration of urban economies,

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1 Falassi 1987, 7.

2 Davies 2018.

3 Htay 2014.

4 Walmsley 2014.

5 Falassi 1987; Piette 1992; Waterman 1998.

6 Lindsay 1995; Caillois 2001.

7 Buch et al. 2011; Getz 2005.

8 Schulte-Römer 2013.

9 Klacik 2009; Kong 2000; Schuster 2001; Shin 2004; Cudny 2014.

revitalisation and regeneration strategies regularly appear as reasons for policy-makers to develop or support festivals.<sup>10</sup> Arts and culture festivals are often seen as vehicles for expanding economic interests, providing income and acting as tourism generators.<sup>11</sup> When this happens, the boundaries between culture, tourism and profit-making become increasingly blurred, with festivals acting as producers of tourist experiences.<sup>12</sup> In this respect, Gotham warns that once encompassed as part of a city's tourism supply, powerful economic forces can promote arts and culture festivals in ways that undermine local traditions and decision-making.<sup>13</sup> Festivals can also foster local pride and involvement in the community,<sup>14</sup> instilling a sense of belonging and 'togetherness'.<sup>15</sup> These are aspects closely linked to the notion of identity. Enhancing identity can also be a core motivation for organising arts and culture festivals, as festivals can be seen as sources of group and place identity, as well as cultural and national identity.<sup>16</sup>

Arts and culture festivals, beyond their best-known function as entertainment, form of expression, and meeting spaces within local communities,<sup>17</sup> can be political instruments.<sup>18</sup> Sometimes, these seemingly innocuous cultural festivities can be part of distraction tactics to influence the public's views or decisions,<sup>19</sup> symbols of the 'machine's authority'.<sup>20</sup> As Zukin notes, cultural events need recognition as instrumental agents in broader political strategies.<sup>21</sup> Festivals have also played diverse roles in the political agendas of Southeast Asia, a sub-Asian region primarily represented today by a regional intergovernmental organisation, ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Created in 1967 to promote co-operation and facilitate integration among its members and other countries in Asia, today ASEAN comprises ten members: the five founding countries — Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines and Indonesia — and Brunei (joined in 1984), Vietnam (1995), Laos and Myanmar

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10 Gotham 2005; Hughes 1999; Nurse 2004; Quinn 2010; Richards and Palmer 2010; Yardimci 2007.

11 Waterman 1998; Getz 2009; Hughes 1999; MacCannell 1992.

12 Szmigin et al. 2017.

13 Gotham 2005.

14 Korza and Magie 1988.

15 Silvanto and Hellman 2005, 4.

16 Jaeger and Mykletun 2013; De Bres and Davis 2001; Matheson 2005.

17 De Greef 2008; Maughan 2009.

18 Benito 2001; Hunyadi, Inkei and Zsabó 2006; Négrier, Bonet and Guérin 2013.

19 Sharpe 2008.

20 Frank 2001, 100.

21 Zukin 1995; 2004.

(1997), and Cambodia (1999).<sup>22</sup> ASEAN is governed by a series of core principles that include mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity and the national identity of all nations; non-interference in the internal affairs of one another; and the settlement of differences or disputes in a peaceful manner. This particular way of behaving and governing is often known as the 'ASEAN Way', which refers to its distinctive informal and personal approach to solving issues that respect the countries' cultural norms.

Arts and culture festivals have been a recurrent feature in ASEAN's history: they were present shortly after its creation; their number, scop, and size increased exponentially during the 1980s and 1990s; and after several financial and political crises, they still appear today as part of the region's cultural interventions, traditions and rituals. Moreover, festivals, due to their celebratory public nature, are often publicised and documented. This makes them historically easier to track than other cultural events, such as workshops or closed-door meetings. This continuity, recurrence and visibility make them suitable study subjects for any examination of regional cultural trends and attempts to identify broader inferences in the socio-political ecosystem.<sup>23</sup>

This article traces the evolution of the regional arts and culture festivals organised by ASEAN or with ASEAN support and endorsement in the last half a century. It argues that a set of economic, political, diplomatic and organisational logics influenced this evolution. To prove this, the research for this article uses a historical data-collection methodology that includes a comprehensive desk-research review of the type, number, geographical scope, format, and orientation of the festivals. The scarcity of sources and their inconsistency, particularly in ASEAN's first three decades of life, obliges a multi-layered data collection mixed-method approach that includes examining official declarations, documentation and publications. It also traces website pages (e.g., from the ASEAN Secretariat and the ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information-COCI website, the latter now defunct),<sup>24</sup> social media posts (e.g., Facebook, Twitter and Instagram), and a variety of resources provided by national arts bodies (e.g., Singapore's National Arts Council and the Philippines' National Commission for Culture and the Arts). The article divides the historical timeframe (1967-2020) into three main periods, enabling it to

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22 Timor-Leste or East Timor, a sovereign state since 2002, is located geographically in Southeast Asia. It shares the island of Timor with Indonesia, and despite its more than a decade-long bid to become the 11th state of ASEAN, it is currently not part of the Association.

23 Crespi-Villabona and Richards 2007; Quinn 2010.

24 When in operation, the COCI website ([cultureandinformation.asean.org](http://cultureandinformation.asean.org)) contained a PDF document that listed all the cultural events organised by COCI since its inception until 2011, including arts and culture festivals.

examine the plurality of festivals' milestones and establish correlations with their contributions to further strategic aims, particularly as assets of regional cultural co-operation and diplomacy. Arts and culture festivals' links with regional and national policy agendas are examined in each period. Finally, a series of conclusions and policy considerations are drawn.

## 2 Cultural Co-operation and Diplomacy in ASEAN

Labelling past actions with modern terms is a challenging exercise. International cultural co-operation was formally introduced in international relations in the first half of the 20th century. It initially referred to a wide range of overseas cultural interventions, particularly those spearheaded by European national cultural institutes such as the Dante Alighieri Society (Italy), the Alliance Française (France), the British Council (Britain), and the German Goethe Institut,<sup>25</sup> and to other ad hoc international cultural initiatives, such as the late 1930s US programmes for external policy to counter Nazi Germany's cultural activities in Latin America.<sup>26</sup> The term was later expanded and internationalised by UNESCO in 1966 in the Declaration of Principles of International Cultural Co-operation, which framed it as international efforts that promote the transmission of knowledge, skills, arts and information across national boundaries. Today, international cultural co-operation encapsulates multiple approaches, nuances, and interpretations, possibly as many as the countries, regional and international institutions that claim to implement it. International cultural co-operation can frequently be the result of several international relations lobbies and takes place because there is a will for it to happen: funding, support and structures are put in place by governments and international institutions, often with a variety of agendas.<sup>27</sup>

Recently, the notion of international cultural co-operation has been increasingly associated with another term: cultural diplomacy. Even though the essence and practice of cultural diplomacy has existed for centuries,<sup>28</sup>

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25 Paschalidis 2009.

26 Mulcahy 1999.

27 Ocón 2015.

28 Arguably, civilisations have resorted to international cultural diplomacy tools for much longer than the last two decades. Arndt (2005) maintains that cultural diplomacy has been a common practice for nations and societies since the Bronze Age. For instance, the ancient Greeks often sent their treasured poets and philosophers as foreign ambassadors (Greenspan 2016), and in Ancient Rome the instruction of the sons of foreign nobles in the Latin language and Roman culture (Cull 2008) was a common practice. More recently, since the end of the 19th century and in the first half of the 20th century, the work of cultural institutes such as Italy's Società Dante Alighieri, Britain's British

since the start of the 21st century, the term has gained in popularity. As a sub-area of public diplomacy,<sup>29</sup> a notion coined in 1965 by Edmund Guillon (conveniently to avoid using the term 'propaganda'), and with increasingly eclectic and blurred boundaries and definitions.<sup>30</sup> Cultural diplomacy today generally expresses a largely interest-driven governmental use of culture<sup>31</sup>, which advances certain political, strategic or national interests and enables nations to obtain desired results in international relations 'through attraction rather than coercion'.<sup>32</sup> Cultural diplomacy often responds to the broader umbrella 'soft' policies set by governments (also known as soft power) that are implemented by diplomats and officials and can result in cultural co-operation activities.

Here it is relevant to mention a third, linked term: international cultural relations. Cultural relations refer to the mutual exchange of culture between peoples 'to develop long-term relationships, trust, and understanding for the purpose of generating genuine goodwill'.<sup>33</sup> If cultural diplomacy implies a top-down approach, with initiatives originated by governments, international cultural relations typically follow a bottom-up approach, as they are practised by non-state actors and driven by ideals.<sup>34</sup> That said, direct or indirect policy interventions are usually needed to enable these transnational cultural ties via diplomatic agreements (e.g., visa arrangements), strategic directives (policies) and funding (grants), which points to closer connections and overlaps than what at first sight these definitions indicate.<sup>35</sup>

These three notions intermingle today in the ASEAN context: examples of international cultural relations occur regularly, spearheaded and executed by civil society's representatives such as artists, filmmakers, performers, and arts

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Council or Germany's Goethe Institute contributed to a gradual expansion of the concept of culture (Paschalidis 2009). The French Ministry of Foreign Affairs established in 1923 the first office for cultural diplomacy in history, and from the mid-1950s to the late 1970s, the United States deployed jazz musicians such as Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong in its international cultural diplomacy efforts.

29 Mark 2009; Schneider 2005.

30 Wyzomirski, Burgess and Peila 2003; Tópic and Sciortino 2012; Ang, Isar and Mar 2015; Zamorano 2016; Bennett 2019; Ptáčková et al., 2021.

31 See Arndt 2009. Cummings (2003) sees it as necessary to nuance the unilaterality implied by this approach by including notions such as 'mutual understanding' and 'exchanges'. That sentiment was echoed by former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright when she emphasised that 'cultural diplomacy is about presenting the diversity of your own country and listening to what people are saying to you. It is not one-way' (as quoted in Aitken 2017).

32 Rawnsley, 2021; Nye 2004, 18.

33 Rivera 2015, 11.

34 Ang, Isar and Mar 2015.

35 Melissen 2005; Isar 2017.

and culture organisations. When these actors interact among themselves in an ASEAN country or context (e.g., virtually) and support each other in various ways (e.g., artistic co-creation), they engage in international cultural co-operation. Frequently, this cultural co-operation is encouraged, sponsored, or endorsed in cultural diplomacy interventions, by the ministries of culture, arts councils, ministries of foreign affairs and other governmental and intergovernmental bodies such as the Singapore International Foundation and the ASEAN Foundation, and by regional institutions such as ASEAN.

The hundreds of cultural actions, including arts and culture festivals, organised in the ASEAN context in the last half a century can be divided into three main periods (see Fig. 1). The first encompasses the cultural co-operation developed during ASEAN’s first decade of life. This co-operation did not experience excessive external interferences. Support for the organisations of cultural activities by the five founding ASEAN nations led to a self-discovery processes in the cultural field. The second period comprises ASEAN’s cultural initiatives from the early 1980s until the end of the 1990s. Most of these activities took place thanks to Japan’s diplomatic intervention: this involved considerable funding that led to the creation of the ASEAN Cultural Fund (ACF), managed by the Jakarta-based ASEAN Secretariat while a Committee on Culture and Information (COCI) implements its cultural activities. A third period started in the early 2000s, where the pivotal role of ASEAN Secretariat diminished (although it continued to organise events) and increasingly received more assistance from national bodies and embassies to implement ASEAN-endorsed events. This period also saw a mushrooming of civil society-initiated ASEAN-themed cultural events characterised by their variety and inconsistent implementation and quality. In this last period, the cultural interactions of China, Japan and South Korea in and with ASEAN became more

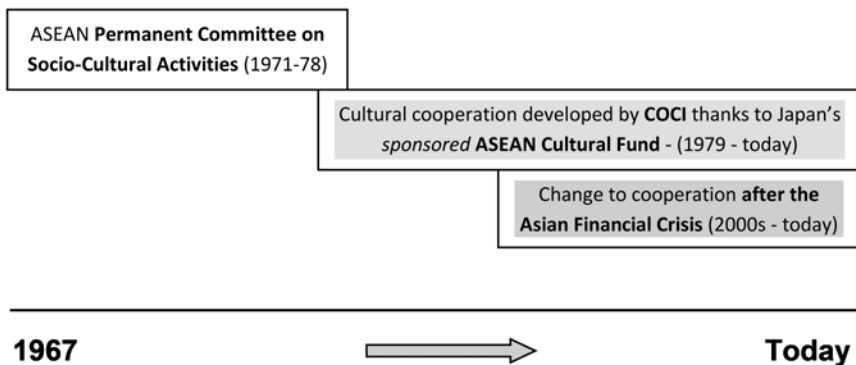


FIGURE 1 Cultural co-operation in the ASEAN context, 1967-today  
AUTHOR'S FIGURE



evident. As we progress into the third decade of the 21st century, the boundaries of cultural diplomacy and cultural relations become more blurred than ever in the region.

### 3 Arts and Culture Festivals in ASEAN's First Decade: Cultural Co-operation to Engineer a Shared Community

In the Age of Enlightenment, John Locke shared an optimistic vision of international relations, where he saw modernity and rationality as vehicles to lead humanity towards better levels of co-existence and well-being. Immanuel Kant envisioned a state of 'perpetual peace' between republics, the ultimate goal of human history, based on norms and an environment of understanding between countries leading to collaboration.<sup>36</sup> In the 20th century, particularly after the First World War, the notion of co-operation became more institutionalised. US President Thomas Woodrow Wilson promoted the idea of open and multilateral diplomacy, regulated by international law and international organisations such as the League of Nations (1920-1946), and supported by advisory bodies such as the International Committee for Intellectual Co-operation (ICIC, 1922-1946). 'Culture' as an integral part of co-operation took root with proposals such as those from Alfred Eckhard Zimmern, who championed the notion of 'cultural internationalism' with the common ground 'of a uniting and reconciling human experience' upon which to build 'confidence and even friendship'.<sup>37</sup> David Mitrany, the creator of functionalism, proposed in 1943 the first theoretical approach of international relations to analyse the positive role of co-operation in regional integration projects. To Mitrany, co-operation in a specific field of work (initially, in the technical sphere), leads to co-operation in other fields (particularly politics), since the technical, social and political areas are interdependent. From this period date many of the international organisations we are familiar with today, for instance, the United Nations and UNESCO (1945). Soon after, Ernst Bernard Haas, founder of the theory of neo-functionalism, defended the benefits of states co-operating, which would lead to new regional 'communities'. The creation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC, 1951), which ultimately led to the European Economic Community (EEC, 1957), the predecessor of the European Union (EU, 1992), followed.

36 Kant 2016 [1795].

37 Zimmern 1922.

The Southeast Asian region has had a rich history of regional co-operation, more than the region is usually credited with. Funan, Srivijaya, Majapahit, Khmer and Ayyuthaya were historical sub-regional socio-political entities (often known as empires) that displayed significant regional economic and socio-cultural co-operation traits over centuries. However, little of that regional tradition of co-operation was present in the Southeast Asia of the 1960s. Several political and economic alliances had been initiated but, facing numerous challenges, had been unable to survive long: SEATO (South-East Asia Treaty Organization, 1954-1977); ASA (Association for South-East Asia, 1961-1967); MAPHILINDO (Malaysia-Philippines-Indonesia, 1963-1966), and ASPAC (Asian and Pacific Council, 1966-1972). Rather than co-operation, uncertainty and hostility were predominant in the region.<sup>38</sup> The former Malaysian prime minister, Dato' Seri Dr Mahathir Bin Mohamad, described in 1992 the tense environment as follows:

We did not have the slightest shred of neighbourliness as Southeast Asian nation then. [...] We had little desire to even know each other better. Worse still, many of us had exchanged not only harsh words but also hard bullets. Amongst us there had not only been cold war and cold peace but also a hot confrontation.<sup>39</sup>

Primarily associated with strategic reasons (in the words of the former Singapore prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, to face a 'common enemy — the communist threat'),<sup>40</sup> symbolic reasons were also an integral part of the creation of ASEAN.

Culture can penetrate political barriers, diminish tensions, break down barriers, destroy stereotypes and build connections.<sup>41</sup> In the antagonistic context of the Southeast Asia of the 1960s, culture, and more specifically, cultural co-operation, was chosen by ASEAN's founders as a tool to navigate this challenging environment: culture was one of the six strategic fields identified in the association's founding Bangkok Declaration in August 1967. Two years later, the members signed the Agreement for the Promotion of Co-operation in Mass Media and Cultural Activities. This urged the promotion of cultural co-operation 'by exchanging artistes in the field of visual and performing arts,

38 The Indonesian-Malaysian confrontation (also known by its Indonesian/Malay name, *Konfrontasi*), had just ended in mid-1966, and one year earlier Singapore had split off from Malaysia.

39 Mahathir 1992.

40 See also Haas 1994; Leifer 1989; Simon 1982; Webber 2001.

41 Schneider and Nelson 2008.

undertaking joint research in the arts and in the literature, organizing seminars in the arts, literature, and related matters, and organizing cultural festivals'.<sup>42</sup> Likewise, member countries agreed to explore the possibility of establishing cultural institutions with a regional dimension.

The level of intra-regional cultural co-operation during ASEAN's first years was significant. Culture was seen as an asset in promoting and protecting the region's heritage, crucial to understanding each other's cultures, value systems, nuances and sensitivities.<sup>43</sup> Accordingly, a Permanent Committee on Socio-Cultural Activities was created in 1971 to stimulate co-operation in several fields, including the visual and performing arts and literature, 'to achieve the fullest development of the ASEAN people'.<sup>44</sup> Projects included: a Summer School on Archaeology; meetings of museum experts, which culminated in the creation of the ASEAN Association of Museums in 1976; training in traditional dance and music, followed by a meeting of experts in design and craftsmanship; the ASEAN Literary Award Programme, founded as a way to recognise literary production; and several art and photography exhibitions that toured some ASEAN countries.

Arts and culture festivals were at the core of the activities planned by ASEAN. The most consistent initiative was the ASEAN Film Festival, organised yearly from 1971 until 1985.<sup>45</sup> The festival took place in all the member countries on a rotational basis, generally in the member's capitals. However, some side activities and working groups took place in smaller cities such as Pattaya (Thailand, 1982) and Port Dickson (Malaysia, 1983). While ASEAN's film production was not prolific, the region's policy-makers chose cinema as an accessible way to start climbing the 'staircase of regionness' that ASEAN was initiating.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, illiteracy rates in Southeast Asia in the 1970s were still significant (in Indonesia and Malaysia, by the end of the 1970s, the literacy rate was still well below 70 per cent); hence promoting messages with images was seen as a suitable and affordable method of fostering belonging and togetherness. Due to their variety, geographical scope and regularity (particularly in cinema), festivals contributed to advancing the embryonic ASEAN project, anchoring the notion of regional community, as introduced by neo-functionalists like Haas. Franck defines a community as a 'social system of continuing interaction and

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42 ASEAN 1969.

43 ASEAN 1969; Lau 1992.

44 ASEAN Secretariat 1994.

45 According to ASEAN Annual Report 1974/75, an ASEAN International Film Festival had to be deferred 'in view of the expenses involved'. This International version of the film festival had to wait almost four decades, until 2013, to become a reality, when the 1st ASEAN International Film Festival took place in Kuching, Malaysia.

46 Hettne 2002, 35.

transaction' between a set of actors, with 'a common, conscious system of reciprocity', which includes the share of moral imperatives and values.<sup>47</sup> This distinctive 'communal' aspect was inserted in the Declaration of ASEAN Concord (1976). It emphasised creating a 'strong ASEAN community', always following a distinctive set of agreed ASEAN principles, including self-determination, national sovereignty and non-interference, and guidelines on the meaning of fair rules, dialogues and rituals in this community.

The recovery and rediscovery of Southeast Asia's traditional culture and heritage, predominantly through audio-visual means was used to promote and communicate the new region to ASEAN's political elites and civil societies.<sup>48</sup> Siddique defined this process as an active and dynamic 'cultural engineering', aimed at constructing Southeast Asia's notion, internally and internationally, shoring up the idea of belonging to a differentiated community.<sup>49</sup> The creation of this 'imagined community', borrowing Anderson's term,<sup>50</sup> had the additional challenge of its geopolitical context: several ASEAN members were newly formed modern nations still in the making. Thus, arts and culture festivals helped to bridge that gap and provided spaces for interaction, where sharing common experiences became possible.<sup>51</sup> Cultural activities were part of 'sedimented discourses',<sup>52</sup> with 'cumulative impact',<sup>53</sup> which contributed to anchoring the notion of a shared community and ultimately a shared identity,<sup>54</sup> although the latter, as we will see below, only become fundamental in the 2000s.

#### 4 Arts and Culture Festivals and the *ASEAN Cultural Fund*: Cultural Diplomacy, from Cleaning a Damaged Image to Generating Co-operation

In their book *Power and Interdependence*, Keohane and Nye introduced the international relations theory of neoliberalism,<sup>55</sup> where they underscored

47 Franck 1995.

48 See Lau 1992. Emmerson (2005) indicates that in the task of making ASEAN a true regional entity, it was not enough to concentrate efforts on making the political and governmental elites believe and feel part of the regional project, but it was also necessary to make civil societies 'imagine' the feeling of belonging to a common identity.

49 Siddique 1992.

50 Anderson 1991, 12.

51 Oba 2004; Cronin 1999.

52 Sutherland 2009, 319.

53 Acharya 2000, 2.

54 Ogoura, 2009; Nishimura 2011.

55 Keohane and Nye 1977.

the growing importance of transnational networks of interests that lead to asymmetrical and complex relations of interdependence among nations. The significance of these interdependencies became evident in ASEAN from the 1980s. ASEAN's first decade of existence had proven that it could be a 'functioning alliance'.<sup>56</sup> However, from that moment it had to prove that it could be a 'believable alliance', regionally and internationally.

As discussed earlier, cultural diplomacy refers to a largely interest-driven governmental use of culture, one of the main tools a government has to increase the attractiveness of a nation.<sup>57</sup> Ogoura affirms that cultural diplomacy's main objective is to increase the prestige and improve the image of a nation, something that can be achieved through cultural media, such as fine and scenic arts.<sup>58</sup> In the 1970s, Japan initiated a proactive rapprochement with Southeast Asia to reactivate links with the region. The Japan Foundation, created to undertake international cultural exchange and co-operation with the ultimate objective of presenting Japan 'as a peaceful, culturally-oriented nation' and eliminating 'misconceptions',<sup>59</sup> had Southeast Asia as one of its focal regions. This intensified Japanese presence in ASEAN was centred on economic interests but supported by cultural diplomacy. In the words of Japan's then prime minister, Takeo Fukuda:

Japan, as true friend of the countries of Southeast Asia will do its best for consolidating the relationship of mutual confidence and trust based on 'heart-to-heart' understanding with these countries, in wide ranging fields covering [...] also social and cultural areas [... contributing] to ASEAN's efforts to promote cultural co-operation within the region, including an appropriate amount of financial contribution.<sup>60</sup>

The creation of the ASEAN Cultural Fund (ACF) in 1978 confirmed that diplomatic approach. The ACF received a contribution of ¥5 billion from Japan (at the time around US\$25 million)

for cultural interchange among the ASEAN member countries [...and], for the promotion of cultural development in the region', as well as in recognition of cultural co-operation's role in 'preserving the cultural heritage

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56 Saihoo 1979.

57 Bukh 2014; Nakano and Zhu 2020.

58 Ogoura 2009.

59 Okatsu 1977, 102.

60 Fukuda 1977; ASEAN Secretariat 1979.

of ASEAN Member Countries, and in fostering greater cultural interaction and awareness of ASEAN cultures.<sup>61</sup>

The ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta administers the ACF through a Committee for Culture and Information (COCI), set up with the purpose of 'enhancing mutual understanding and solidarity among the peoples of ASEAN as well as in furthering regional development'.<sup>62</sup> COCI works across various cultural areas in numerous formats: conferences, seminars and cultural symposia, performances, exhibitions and related cultural activities such as performing arts and music festivals, fellowship and scholarship in fine arts, music and literature, comparative studies in folk art and indigenous architecture, as well as annual film festivals and cultural and literary awards. Although the fund is open to other contributions, only Japan's money has kept it alive over the decades. Today, the ACF remains the primary source for cultural co-operation activities in ASEAN.<sup>63</sup>

There is a documentation deficit about the cultural activities spearheaded by COCI during this period, particularly small events such as workshops and closed-door meetings. However, information about arts and culture festivals is more accessible. From 1981 to 1987, six performing arts festivals took place in all the six member countries (Brunei joined ASEAN in 1984). Furthermore, from 1981, like Europe's Eurovision contest, ASEAN Festivals of Songs started broadcasting, with a run of thirteen editions until 1997. The substantial ACF influx of money was instrumental in the inception of these festivals, typically expensive undertakings. This trend continued in the 1990s: three editions of an ASEAN Festival of Theatre from 1988 to 1995; four editions of an ASEAN Festival of Dance from 1990 to 1996; and a Traditional Media Festival in Indonesia in 1995. Judging by the number and the size of the festivals, this could be considered the 'golden era' of ASEAN-initiated festivals: from 1981 to 1997, the Association organised more than 30 official arts and culture festivals.

The Japanese 'Fukuda Doctrine' in ASEAN, based on 'heart-to-heart' politics, was a twofold cultural diplomacy undertaking: on one side, the endorsement of the ASEAN project by Japan, then the world's second-largest economy, served to legitimise the longed-for 'believable ASEAN alliance' discussed above;

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61 ASEAN Secretariat 1979, 1994.

62 COCI 2014.

63 By the end of its first year of life, the ACF had already earned more than US\$500,000 in interest. Some sources estimate in between US\$2-2.5 million the subsequent annual income derived from the ACF. By the end of 1979, the entire contribution and the time-deposit interests accrued were entrusted with two banking institutions, Malaysia's Bumiputra Merchant Bankers Berdad, and the Singapore-Japan Merchant Bank for investment management (ASEAN Secretariat 1980).

on the other hand, it helped to assert Japanese influence in the region, supporting its political and economic objectives, and cleaning up the tarnished image it had gained in the occupation period.<sup>64</sup> The immediate result was a trade boom which soon made Japan ASEAN's largest trading partner, in a privileged position to access the region's raw materials and supply its growing markets and demand for products.<sup>65</sup> A US\$25 million investment in cultural diplomacy was not a hazardous venture for Japan given the context of the colossal trading benefits it obtained from the region in this period. Thus Japan's cultural move in Southeast Asia constituted a pivotal element of its diplomatic undertakings in the region, as it enabled a new beginning in its relationships there.<sup>66</sup>

The institution of the ACF was also instrumental for the cultural field in ASEAN. Considering the number, recurrence and size of the events it prompted, particularly arts and culture festivals, it greatly impacted ASEAN's work in the cultural field.

## 5 Arts and Culture Festivals in ASEAN since the 2000s: Mutations, Asymmetries and Challenges in Identity-building

The Japanese — Southeast Asian symbiosis may have also been influential in contributing to the development of something more than cultural events and arts festivals: a modern Southeast Asian identity. Iida and Katsumata affirm that the consumption of cultural products and the impulse to new cultural relationships can cultivate a certain 'we-ness' or 'we-feeling', facilitate the construction of relatable communities and lead to the formation of shared identities,<sup>67</sup> all of which had been previously lacking in Southeast Asian.<sup>68</sup> Acharya posits that by the turn of the millennium, ASEAN had reclaimed a

64 In 1972, for instance, Japanese products were boycotted in Thailand; and in 1974, Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka, faced anti-Japanese demonstrations in Jakarta and Bangkok, known as the Tanaka Riots, protesting against Japan's economic dominance in the region.

65 Even though Japan and ASEAN only started collaborating in 1973 (resolving business disputes in the production of synthetic rubber), Japanese trade with ASEAN soon boomed: by 1980, it had reached US\$10 billion, and its share in ASEAN trade neared 25%. Shortly after, Japanese multinational enterprises developed international production networks in the ASEAN countries, functioning as production bases (Sato 2014). Thus, within a few years, Japan had become ASEAN's largest trading partner, situated in a privileged position to access its raw materials and supply ASEAN's growing markets and its increasing external demand of products (Stirling 1980; Sinha 1982; Imagawa 1991).

66 Otmazgin 2012; Akagawa 2015.

67 Iida and Katsumata 2008.

68 Wang 2008.

temporarily lost identity for Southeast Asia, whose historical foundations were disrupted by colonialism.<sup>69</sup> It is precisely at the turn of the millennium that the consolidation of neo-liberalism premises in international relations became more evident. Interdependence among nations was seen to be necessary, as earlier defined by Keohane and Nye, but also the 'harmony of interest among states',<sup>70</sup> where international institutions such as ASEAN were called to perform a key role. This 'neo-liberal institutionalism' bestowed on international co-operation a central role and inaugurated a new era for international organisations. From the 1990s, this saw expanded roles, functions and powers in the international system.<sup>71</sup> Neo-liberalists acknowledged that states act first in their own interests and are the main actors in international relations. However, common interests can also contribute to the coalescence of states' objectives.<sup>72</sup>

The late 1990s brought to Asia the most significant financial crisis in decades and destabilised its economies. As a result, Southeast Asian countries suffered profoundly and made the benefits of regional co-operation more than an attractive option: it became a necessity. With that in mind, a more ambitious emphasis on 'social construction' took place, in line with the social constructivism theories spearheaded by the American political scientist Alexander Wendt. For constructivists, states involved in regional co-operation and solidarity processes develop feelings of 'we-ness' and 'togetherness' built over a set of shared norms and behaviours.<sup>73</sup> Co-operation begets more co-operation, and the principles, values and traditions shared by the nations constitute the 'real glue' that can trigger identity-building through common interests and interaction.<sup>74</sup> For constructivists, a shared or collective identity allows countries to remain united during a prolonged period of time.

The 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis spurred this necessity to create a shared regional identity in the region and provoked a spurt of interactions.<sup>75</sup> Culture had an important role to play here, too. In 2003 ASEAN countries signed the Bali Concord II Declaration that urged countries to 'promote a common regional identity', sustained around the notion of shared community (the declaration mentions the word 'community' 34 times in barely four pages). This was also the time of the reinforcement and proliferation of some of the symbols and

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69 Acharya 2001.

70 Elias and Sutch 2007.

71 Singer 2002; Diehl 2005.

72 Keohane 1993.

73 López i Vidal 2007.

74 Rüländ 2000; Busse 1999.

75 Yi 2008. As an example, in the first three decades of ASEAN, there were seven ASEAN Summits; in the last two decades, there have been 33.



rituals typically associated with ASEAN (e.g., the ASEAN handshake or the wearing of certain traditional clothing), which contributed to popularising the distinctiveness of the 'ASEAN Way' of behaving, now known beyond the regional political elites. Culture was meant to be instrumental in this socio-cultural approach. However, the financial crisis dramatically impacted on the funds available for culture, and the community-building initiative was not matched by measures to support it. Alongside other 'expensive' endeavours such as print publications, arts and culture festivals were removed in the years that followed the crisis.<sup>76</sup> When they reappeared in 2003, they had suffered a substantial metamorphosis: they were reduced to a biennial showcase of cultural performances alongside the ASEAN Ministers of Arts and Culture (AMCA) meetings, called the ASEAN Festival of Arts. After the crisis, arts and culture celebrations transformed into restricted feasts consumed primarily by political elites and their entourages that only took place in AMCA's host country. Another transformation was the Best of Performing Arts initiative, a collection of yearly shows where one ASEAN country displayed a set of performances. The scheme, initiated by ASEAN's former Secretary-General, Surin Pitsuwan, was implemented in Indonesia from 2008 until 2015. Despite its continued support (eleven editions), this scheme was limited regarding its regional reach and impact: it was non-rotational and restricted to a selected Jakarta-based audience.<sup>77</sup> ASEAN's preference for these official ways of conducting arts and culture festivals, epitomised by the Festival of Arts and Best of Performing Arts, poses doubts regarding their reach and efficiency: these festivals are exclusive, with limited access by a reduced audience, in general composed of government officials, delegates and select and VIP guests.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, these festivals diverge from the kind of festivals previously organised by ASEAN: multi-disciplinary, rotational, engaged with the region's civil societies and often organised in secondary cities to further their reach. It is also difficult to imagine how these exclusive festivals build the ASEAN identity long sought by the over 650 million people who live in ASEAN countries.

Since 2010, ASEAN-linked national bodies, embassies and local ministries have attempted to fill this gap by organising their own arts and culture festivals. This trend intensified as ASEAN was approaching its 50th anniversary

76 Although COCI doesn't provide concrete figures, this was confirmed at an interview conducted at the ASEAN Secretariat in March 2013 with Mr Arief Maulana, responsible for cultural activities within the ASEAN Secretariat in Indonesia from 2008 to 2015.

77 The brand 'Best of Performing Arts' was somewhat revived later on to denominate ad hoc festivals that took place in Manila (2017), Singapore (2018) and Bangkok (2019), in the framework of their respective chairmanship of ASEAN.

78 Banús and Ocón 2013.

in 2017. to date many of these festivals have been short-lived or intermittent. For instance, an ASEAN Music Festival was organised in Bangkok in 2016, which since 2015 also hosts a Bangkok ASEAN Film Festival with the support of Thailand's Ministry of Culture; an ASEAN Film Festival was curated in Cambodia in 2017; an ASEAN Children Festival and an ASEAN Song, Dance and Music Festival were held in Hanoi and Vinh Phuc, Vietnam, in 2017; four editions of an ASEAN Literary Festival took place in Jakarta until 2017; from that year an ASEAN Tingin Film Festival emerged in Manila; and a biannual ASEAN International Film Festival (AIFAA) has been organised in Sarawak, East Malaysia, since 2013, reaching its 4th edition in 2019. Some other minor 'ASEAN festivals' have also been organised biannually as part of the ASEAN City of Culture initiative since 2011, often linked to marketing and image promotion aims (for instance, Cebu City, the first ASEAN City of Culture, made of tourism promotion its main focus). In addition, outside ASEAN, embassies, consulates and delegations, cultural centres and associations and overseas Southeast Asian communities are creating now ASEAN-themed festivals. In 2017 alone, there were ASEAN-related (not necessarily sanctioned) cultural festivals in more than a dozen cities worldwide, including Vancouver, Toronto, Doha, Delhi, Manchester, the United Nations Office at Geneva and Melbourne.

ASEAN countries organise more festivals when they host the Association's chairmanship. Thus, when in 2018 Singapore was chair, the country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs organised Experience ASEAN Festival to showcase the region's culture, including music, craft activities, games and fusion and street food; the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth presented Hyperplay: ASEAN Esports x Music Festival, which included both live music performances by several bands from ASEAN countries and eSport video game competitions; and the National Arts Council presented One Voice, which featured musical performances from all the ASEAN members at the country's iconic Victoria Theatre. During Thailand's chairmanship in 2019, VIVA ASEAN, a performing arts festival, took place in Bangkok and later travelled to Denmark, the Netherlands and South Korea. To celebrate Vietnam's 2020 ASEAN chairmanship, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Vietnam organised an ASEAN Film Week in several locations. However, the country had to cancel many events due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bilateral collaborations with some Northeast Asian countries are increasing in importance for ASEAN. These relationships often support or trigger the organisation of arts and culture festivals. China and ASEAN only initiated diplomatic relations in the 1990s, after a period of widespread distrust and concern from the ASEAN countries towards the Chinese presence in the region. In 2005 the two parties signed an MOU of Understanding on Cultural

Co-operation, and since then, they tend to mark diplomatic and dialogue relations milestones with arts and culture festivals. For instance, to celebrate the 2014 ASEAN-China Cultural Exchange Year, a festival of performing arts was held at Tsinghua University in Beijing with Southeast Asian artists; two Chinese performing arts festivals took place in Indonesia ('Taiji Grand Stage Show', a show of dance Kung Fu, and 'Colorful China', a festival of ethnic music and dance); a China-ASEAN Youth Cultural Exchanges Festival; and, the first China-ASEAN International Photography Festival, aimed at recording the historical sites, economic development, customs and diversified arts along the Maritime Silk Road of China and ASEAN. In 2017, an ASEAN-China Film Festival that screened almost 30 films from ASEAN and China took place in Kuala Lumpur.

Japan and ASEAN, building on a tradition of decades of cultural co-operation, continued to use arts and culture festivals to strengthen their ties. In 2003, they celebrated an Exchange Year that included a regular supply of music, performing arts and food festivals. Ten years later, to mark the 40th anniversary of establishing relations, they organised an ASEAN-Japan Music Festival and the ASEAN-Japan Drums & Voices music project and celebration. To provide a framework for these initiatives, the Japanese government reactivated the dormant Japan Foundation's Asia Center in 2014, which collaborates in the planning and start-up of travelling festivals and supports participation in established initiatives. For instance, 'Crosscut Asia' is a partnership with the Tokyo International Film Festival that proposes outreach programmes to the Asian region. In its 7th edition in 2020, it co-hosted the conversation series 'Asia Lounge'. In the case of South Korea, the ASEAN-Korea Centre has taken the lead in organising a variety of arts and culture festivals, with the ASEAN Culinary Festival, held in Seoul since 2016, as a popular example. In 2017, as part of the ASEAN-ROK Cultural Exchange Year, ASEAN-ROK Flute Festival: Celebrating Traditions Across Cultures took place in Manila, Philippines and in Busan, South Korea.

Many of the arts and culture festivals organised by a Northeast Asian country and ASEAN are ascribed to official ministerial meetings or diplomatic milestones, limiting the festivals' reach and impact. This bilateral collaboration also has the caveat of Northeast Asian countries bearing most of the festivals' costs, translating into a unidirectional control of their objectives and implementation. This ultimately has the risk of these events serving the Northeast Asian countries' interests rather than promoting genuine regional co-operation with their ASEAN neighbours. Nonetheless, these bilateral collaborations also seem more malleable than the ASEAN Secretariat-initiated festivals, resulting in a varied and alternative festival offer.

It could be argued that embassies, civil society organisations and third countries should not be paving the way for ASEAN in terms of arts and culture festival organisation. Their role should instead be to support coordinated core actions spearheaded by the ASEAN Secretariat. This could avoid the asymmetries and inconsistencies in terms of scope and continuity observed in the ASEAN-themed arts and culture festivals, as outlined in the brief account presented above. It could also minimise the discrepancies behind the reasons for organising ASEAN arts and cultural festivals in the region, ranging from celebratory feasts and entertainment for diplomatic elites to community-building initiatives and tourism promotion endeavours. However, in the absence of effective leadership from Jakarta, the actions by individual ASEAN members' governmental agencies and some of these other unofficial 'cultural attaché'-functioning organisations are commendable. They help bridge the gap left by the Secretariat, provide visibility for the region and spread the word about ASEAN. It could also be argued that they can, in line with the multi-layered approach outlined by social constructivism, contribute to supporting the declared task of fostering and promoting the vision for an ASEAN Community in 2025,<sup>79</sup> in the distinctive informal way of doing things that characterises the 'ASEAN Way'. What remains to be seen is if this casual approach can also help to attain the ambitious collective identity goals set and longed for since the turn of the millennium (see Fig. 2 and Table 1).

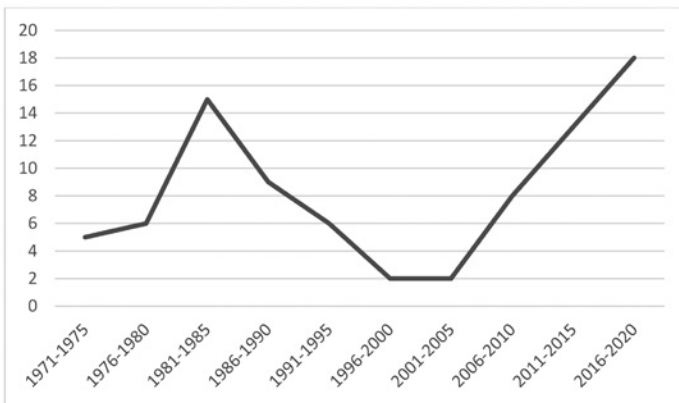


FIGURE 2 Number of arts and culture festivals initiated or supported by ASEAN/COCI, 1970-2020  
AUTHOR'S FIGURE

79 ASEAN is working towards a 'community' that is 'politically cohesive, economically integrated, and socially responsible' (ASEAN 2020).

TABLE 1 Culture in ASEAN, 1967-2020

Culture in ASEAN	Cultural Diplomacy	Cultural Relations	Cultural Cooperation
1967-1978	Moderate	Low	Moderate
1978-2000s	Japan-ASEAN: High Intra-ASEAN: Moderate	Moderate	Moderate/High
2000s-2020	Low	High	Moderate

## 6 Conclusion

In the ASEAN context, arts and culture festivals have been organised for more than half a century. During this period, they have performed various roles, often at the service of motives beyond their traditional role as entertainment, forms of expression and meeting spaces within local communities. Initially conceived as get-together spaces in the five-member ASEAN of the 1970s within a challenging political, security and socio-economic context, their roles evolved and varied throughout the decades. At times the festivals responded to shifts in the political will, at others to external circumstances, such as the Asian financial crisis of the end of the 20th century and the COVID-19 pandemic of the early 2020s, which halted them for months.

Arts and culture festivals have contributed to showcasing the region's best performances, traditions and heritage. But they have also regularly been used as marketing tools to spread the notion of ASEAN, and with it, promote the idea of an ASEAN community with a distinctive shared identity. At times, they have served as a means to alleviate historical mistrust, reduce regional tension and build trust, with further political and economic motivations. This was the case of the bilateral relationship between Japan and ASEAN since the 1980s, notably with Japan's establishment of the ASEAN Cultural Fund, and between China and ASEAN since the beginning of the 21st century, for instance, highlighting significant diplomatic milestones in their relationship. Sometimes, local policy-makers used arts and culture festivals to promote tourism, and thus, generate income, as in the case of the festivals organised in the framework of the ASEAN City of Culture scheme, particularly in its early editions.

In ASEAN, regional funds for cultural activities are not widely available, with the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta the clearest example of this. Therefore, regional countries need to look for alternatives to organise arts and culture festivals. In ASEAN, national bodies (e.g., ministries of foreign affairs or culture, and arts councils) and civil society organisations that affix the ASEAN brand or label to already-existing events (e.g., overseas associations and groups)

contribute to fixing this gap. However, this leads to a haphazard use of the brand, which ultimately can affect the public's perception of ASEAN negatively. In the last few years, China, Japan and South Korea have created organisations, specialised centres and academic departments within their universities to enable bilateral collaborations that can also take charge of organising ASEAN festivals. While the convenience of this alternative model for ASEAN is evident (typically, Northeast Asian countries take the lead and shoulder the costs), it is problematic as it can replicate historical top-down approaches.

The ASEAN context is rich in cultural and artistic outputs, with high potential to keep flourishing and expanding. For decades, arts and culture festivals have showcased these assets. In the process, such festivals were also subjected to control and manipulation by the region's political elites. This is not exclusive to this region, and it has happened to festivals throughout the world for centuries. However, in the case of the ASEAN, no scheme or approach seems to have succeeded in consolidating a sustainable stream of easily recognisable and truly regional arts and culture festivals, despite the variety of motivations laid out in this article. The successive mutations in arts and culture festivals over the decades, particularly the contemporary 'everything goes' approach, have led to confusion and misperceptions of what ASEAN stands for, rather than strategically expanding its reach, exposure and diversity.

ASEAN policy-makers should strive to consolidate clear and recognisable cultural agendas, where festivals feature consistently, with adequate visibility and financial support. Failure to do so could translate into another 50 years of patchwork in the organisation of arts and culture festivals in the region.

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