Industry paper

Artists’ Advocacy in Singapore: A Changing Drama

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Abstract
In this paper I look at how Singapore artists have recently capitalised on opportunities for advocacy in light of a changing political landscape. Since the 1980s, the arts in Singapore have offered a forum for social critique, albeit tamed by the state, and artists are part of the nascent civil society sector. I will first lay out some developments in the Singapore government’s process of ‘opening up’, and end with an account of two recent initiatives: the arts community’s election of a representative for an appointment as Nominated Member of Parliament in 2009, and the campaign by the arts community to the Censorship Review Committee in 2009–10. Such accounts from the ground up by practitioners are important for a deeper understanding of the interactions between the state, its agencies, arts practitioners and the various social and artistic interest groups that operate in the arts and cultural sector.

Biography
Audrey Wong holds an MA in English from the National University of Singapore and an MA in Arts Administration & Cultural Policy from Goldsmiths College, University of London. She was artistic co-director at The Substation from 2000 till early 2010, but has worked at The Substation in other capacities since 1996, including starting the Moving Images Film Programme in 1997. She has been teaching in the MA Arts and Cultural Management Programme at LASALLE since its inception, and was also an adjunct lecturer at the Theatre Studies Programme at the National University of Singapore from 2001 - 2003.

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Introduction - Recent Political Developments in Singapore

The citizens of Singapore often regard the state and ruling party as one and the same entity. The strong hand of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) which has been the party in power since the nation's independence in 1965, and its strategy of recruiting top Singaporean students and scholars into political office and the civil service, has meant that policies are dictated by a ruling elite which also defines the country's national interests. Individual special-group interests, including the interests of the various ethnic groups that make up the population, are subordinated to national interests. To a large extent, the so-called depoliticisation of the citizenry was largely achieved by the state through tacit agreement with the population itself, as sociologist Chua Beng Huat explains: ‘depoliticisation was largely the effect of an ideological consensus between the PAP government and the electorate because of the merging of their respective concerns during the 1960s and 1970s … ideologically, the PAP had articulated the material interests of the politically mobilised masses’ (Chua, 1998: 71). This has led to the condition of the ‘corporatist state’, which Brown defines as a state with a dominant elite governing class seeks to ‘organise the diverse interest associations in society so that their interests can be accommodated within the interdependent and organic community’ (Brown 1994: 67) In the case of Singapore, the interest groups were initially the ethnic and religious groups in the multi-racial nation, which a newly-independent state had to unite for a larger national cause.

Between 1971 and 1981 no opposition Members of Parliament existed. However, from the 1980s onwards, voting patterns of the Singapore population began to demonstrate a desire for more diverse political voices in Parliament. In 1984, the PAP’s share of the vote slipped from 75.5% to 63%, and two opposition MPs were elected to a Parliament that consists of 79 parliamentarians (The Straits Times, 1984). The 2011 elections saw the PAP winning 60% of the vote and the electorate voting 6 members of the opposition Workers Party into Parliament, a significant development as there had been just 2 elected opposition MPs in the previous Parliament.

It has become clear that younger Singaporeans wish to have more political choice, a greater say in making decisions about their future and greater influence in policy-making, and this was expressed in the May 2011 elections. Huge turnouts of more than 30,000 people at rallies by opposition parties suggested that such an outcome might have been expected; however, the vehemence of Singaporeans’ criticism of the ruling party and its new candidates appeared to have taken the PAP by surprise.

The rapid evolution of Singapore’s arts and cultural sector is intertwined with the nation’s political and economic development, not least because the government has openly declared its desire for Singapore to be a global city of the arts, for instance, in the Renaissance City policy plans of the 2000s published by the government ministry in charge of the arts; and through investment in the arts and cultural sectors as part of the nation’s long-term economic plan. The gradual opening up of political space and more opportunities for alternative views on governance and political ideology to be aired, has impacted on the forms of artistic expression being produced as well as the emergence of professionalised, articulate and politically-aware arts practitioners and administrators. Documenting, recording, narrating and tracing the journeys of the Singapore arts community as they respond to and seek to affect cultural policy, are essential if we are to have a comprehensive understanding of the arts and cultural landscape here. This author is of the view that accounts from the ground up by practitioners are important to an understanding of the interactions between the state, its agencies, and the various social and artistic interest groups that operate in the arts and cultural sector. Much writing about Singapore’s cultural politics has focused on the effects of policy documents such as the Renaissance City Plans, or on the conflicts and negotiations between arts groups/practitioners and the state’s representatives. As Chong notes with reference to Singapore theatre, ‘the theatre community is thus generally understood in reaction to major cultural policies such as national censorship reviews, the building of the Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, or major arts funding announcements’ (Chong, 2011: 8). Chong argues that there is a need to complement the existing analyses of Singapore cultural policy with more sociological and ethnographical studies of
practitioners which take into account the diversity of the theatre/arts community, its ‘intracomunal conflicts’ (Chong, 2011: 8), and their personal belief systems which motivate their behaviours and responses to policy and to the behaviours of others in the arts eco-system.

Although not a detailed ethnographical analysis by any means, this article is a ground-up account of part of the evolution of artists’ advocacy in Singapore, tracing its influence from the burgeoning of the arts in the 1990s to two recent initiatives to engage the government undertaken by artists and arts workers: the arts community’s ‘selection’ of a candidate to be considered for the post of Nominated Member of Parliament in 2009, and the advocacy campaign on censorship organised by the loose grouping of practitioners who called themselves ArtsEngage. It must be emphasised that this account is written from the perspective of a core participant in these activities, and it is possible that other participants may see the implications of these events differently. My purpose here is not to offer a definitive version of events in recent cultural history, but to provide some documentation of incidents that may be further analyzed in the future. At the same time, I am of the view that these events need to be seen in the context of the evolution of cultural politics and civil society in Singapore, as many arts practitioners in this city-state have seen themselves to be part of wider civil society for many years.

I was the candidate eventually selected as the first ‘arts’ Nominated Member of Parliament in Singapore, and served from July 2009 to May 2011. However, this article does not intend to cover my experiences in Parliament as its intention is to discuss two specific instances of group advocacy by the arts community and explain the context behind the recent rise of arts advocacy in Singapore.

**Artists as Social Activists in the Global City of the Arts**

It could even be said that the Singapore government itself has contributed to the emergence of more articulate, vocal arts practitioners. Since the 1980s, the Singapore government had identified the arts and culture, first seen as part of the expanding services sector, as playing a part in Singapore’s future economic competitiveness. Building on an earlier, national-level Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts Committee report, The Ministry of Information and the Arts’ Renaissance City Report of 2000 was effectively a roadmap for Singapore’s arts and cultural development into the new century, and helped to embed the state’s rhetoric of ‘global city of the arts’ in the national consciousness. Attention was soon turned beyond the arts and cultural sector to the wider creative industries, and state resources were accordingly deployed. A further two iterations of the Renaissance City Plan – the ‘Renaissance 2.0’ plan which was part of the national-level Economic Review Committee of 2002, and ‘RCP III’ of 2008 – made a clear turn towards viewing the creative and cultural sectors as ‘industries’. For instance, the Renaissance 2.0 document explicitly called on government agencies to ‘shift away from the ‘arts for arts sake’ mindset … to contribute to the development of the creative industries as well as our nation’s social development’ (Economic Review Committee, 2002: 14).

One could say that social (and by extension, political) critique has been a continuous thread in Singapore arts since the 1980s, spurred particularly during the burgeoning of the arts in Singapore in the 1990s. This was due in part to support by the state’s cultural agencies and the rise of new professional theatre companies like The Necessary Stage, Theatreworks and The Theatre Practice (led by Kuo Pao Kun, perhaps Singapore’s best-known dramatist and cultural worker), as well as the loose collective of visual artists called the Artists Village led by Tang Da Wu who had returned after several years abroad. As has been noted by W-L Wee (2007), the work these artists produced and inspired, were responses to the economically-driven modernisation and materialist, pragmatic ideology of the state. Wee adds that the work was also daring in terms of form: devised theatre, multi-lingual plays, performance art, conceptual art and installation were the order of the day. It has also been contended that the arts was given special dispensation from the state’s control of discourse on national issues because the public for these types of art was a niche audience, considered by the government to be more sophisticated and better able to ‘filter the
immoral and malevolent from the virtuous and the civic’ (Chong, 2011: 6). It should be noted, however, that the government retained control over what and how issues were presented, through censorship – all public performances then as now, require a permit. The supposed niche audience did not prevent the National Arts Council from cutting annual funding for theatre company *Wild Rice* in 2010 because it had staged controversial works including plays with homosexual connotations that the Council deemed to be go against the core values of Singapore.

Many artists saw a social and political role for themselves, and towards the end of the 1990s, artists and civil society groups began to establish links and collaborations. *The Substation* arts centre, founded under the artistic direction of Kuo Pao Kun in 1990, became a focal point for much of this activity. It organised a series of arts conferences in which artists, critics, academics, historians, and the public contemplated and debated issues in heritage preservation, ‘critical space’ in Singapore, the mainstream versus the alternative, censorship, and more. One ground-up project, instituted in 1999, was significant for introducing a framework for networking between artists and emergent civil society actors: *The Working Committee* (TWC). TWC was instituted as a year-long project for like-minded social interest and welfare groups to network and share experiences through discussions, open house visits, and a fair which showcased the mission and work of these organisations. *The Substation* provided space and some administrative support for the activities of TWC.

One of the active members of TWC was Alvin Tan, artistic director and founder of *The Necessary Stage*. Tan later wrote that ‘the space that TWC has opened up is constantly being tapped for future civil society initiatives’ (Tan, 2002: 145). The friendships and contacts made resulted in collaborative projects (Singam and Tan, 2002: 157-158). In the early 2000s, *The Necessary Stage* also organised forums on arts and society, and housed an independent journal called *Focas – Forum on Contemporary Art and Society*, edited by artist and researcher Lucy Davis. In 2004, Davis organised and curated an arts event called *Artists and Other Animals* at the invitation of *The Substation* as part of its annual festival *Septfest*. This event saw the participation of artists and numerous civil society groups and social welfare organisations with an interest in environmental and animal causes, and included a forum, a fair, and an exhibition.

Such initiatives can be seen as examples of an emerging civil society in Singapore. Civil society can be defined as the ‘public sphere that mediates between the State and individuals where members spontaneously and voluntarily join together to pursue independently-identified mutual interests’ (Ooi and Koh, 1998: 98). Civil society in Singapore is also called the ‘people’s sector’ and civil society groups have been divided by analysts into two distinct types: those that are set up by the government or government-linked agencies to address identified social needs, and those that are constituted independently of the government but which may receive funding or resources from state agencies (Ooi and Koh, 1998). The latter type of autonomous civil society group can be further divided into two categories: the voluntary welfare organisations which provide community or social services to disadvantaged groups in society, and those that adopt the ‘development approach’ (Ooi and Koh, 1998: 98 – 99) and play an advocacy role in society, seeking to improve society through the advancement of public awareness about a range of issues such as women’s rights, animal rights and environmental causes.

Another factor in the emergence of civil society activity in Singapore has been the emergence of websites, bloggers and Facebook accounts, which are used to disseminate critical information and mobilised the public to get involved in a variety of campaigns. These tactics and tools have also been utilised by those segments of the arts community with an interest in advocacy and in engaging with the state and its agencies for arts and culture, though arts practitioners’ advocacy efforts are still in a nascent state, and there is at present no formal association or grouping of arts practitioners to lead advocacy efforts.
Artists Advocating for the Arts

After The Working Committee, Alvin Tan was also instrumental in kickstarting a yahoogroup at the end of 1999 for arts workers and artists in Singapore as a capacity-building tool to share information, discuss issues, and network. The ‘arts community’ yahoogroup now has over 4,000 subscribers, and was the first of other arts-related e-groups. Although it serves mainly as a bulletin board for audition notices and events rather than a forum for discussion, there are occasional fiery debates, admittedly fueled by the same relative small number of contributors. At the very least, the group generated the concept of a ‘community’ of artists, that there exists a group of people with shared interests and concerns that could be mobilised to take action as a group if necessary. I should emphasise, however, that this ‘community’ is very much an image: the loose collective of people registered on the yahoogroup (and their contacts who may not be on the network) is very diverse: some have only a passing interest in the arts and some are not interested in group action at all. They hold very divergent personal beliefs and have very different lifestyles.

Representing the Arts in Parliament

Nevertheless, the image of an ‘arts community’ was sufficiently powerful for a campaign for a Nominated Member of Parliament for the arts to emerge in 2009. The Nominated Member of Parliament scheme, or NMP scheme, was instituted in 1990 by the government in order to have more alternative voices in parliamentary debates and to promote the participation of the people in political debate. Singapore citizens who fulfill certain qualifying criteria, may apply for consideration to a Parliamentary Select Committee which shortlists and interviews selected candidates before making recommendations to Parliament. In addition, Parliament appoints a few distinguished citizens or members of the civil service to act as co-ordinators and to seek candidates on behalf of six defined functional groups in society: business and industry, labour, professions, social and community service organisations, tertiary education institutions, and media, arts and sports.

When Parliament announced in April 2009 that nominations for a new cohort of NMPs were open, an email was circulated by a veteran arts practitioner and writer to a number of other practitioners who either held leadership positions in independent arts groups or were known to be advocates for the arts. It was suggested that the arts community propose a candidate for NMP to the co-ordinator of the media, arts and sports functional group. In fact, the idea to nominate a candidate from the arts community had been raised among the same core group of arts practitioners two years earlier during the previous round of selection of NMPs, but at that point, there did not appear to be sufficient interest. Perhaps in 2009, arts practitioners, like the Singaporean public, were much more interested in political participation and hence, the idea was taken more seriously.

As artistic co-director of The Substation arts centre I was part of the small group that received the initial email. This group became the core organising group for the process that followed. We quickly organised a ‘town hall’ style meeting to which everyone in the arts community, both on- and off-line, were invited. Most of the communications was conducted through email. Over 100 people attended the town hall gathering at the arts space Emily Hill on 16 April 2009, and there was overwhelming support for the idea. Facilitated by the core organising group, the meeting discussed how the arts community should proceed to select and nominate a candidate, and sought some names to propose as candidates. It was eventually decided that the nominee would be determined by a vote of the arts community. Very few practitioners came forward to be considered as candidates, both during and after the event; however, eventually four people volunteered. I was one of the four, and I had decided to take on the responsibility for a simple reason: if one believes that having a representative from the arts in the Parliament is important, then one should take responsibility and take action for one’s beliefs. Also, some other practitioners whom I felt were better qualified than I was for the position, had declined to be considered but encouraged me to stand instead.
Apart from organising the town hall meeting, the core organising group approached and talked to potential candidates, collated views from other arts practitioners, posted updates and disseminated information through the yahoogroup and email. Other arts practitioners freely posted their views online as well. A new yahoogroup, called the *ArtsNMP yahoogroup*, was set up to facilitate communications with those most interested in the process.

Recognising that speaking and representing the arts in Parliament was a daunting prospect, there was also agreement among the arts community members most active in facilitating the process that, rather than be overly prescriptive and force all potential candidates to undergo election by his/her peers, anyone with a wish to ‘serve’ as NMP was welcome to apply directly to the Parliamentary Select Committee. After all, the applications were open to any Singapore citizen who met the qualifying criteria.

Thus, the selection of the arts community’s candidate was an open process in which the pros and cons of an arts representative in Parliament were debated by the community and potential candidates declared their interest before their peers. The level of interest and engagement from diverse arts practitioners – from theatre, visual art, music, dance, and elsewhere, indicated the desire of arts practitioners to have a voice in decisions that affected their work and the future development of the arts and cultural sector. According to T. Sasitharan, a member of the core organising group, ‘there's been, for a long time, a sentiment among artists and the arts community that there’s a need for representation of some of the primary concerns of artists at the highest level in society’ (cited in Martin, 2009). A candidate for NMP who was endorsed or selected by his/her peers in the arts community would have legitimacy as a representative of the community and an advocate for its needs to government. Should the arts community's choice be selected for Parliament, the candidate would bring the needs of the community to the nation’s highest decision-making body and help to place the arts more firmly on the national agenda.

The significance of the process of selecting the ‘arts NMP’ was not only that artists decided that they wanted a more direct conduit to policy-makers, but that they were willing and able to take steps to achieve that. It was noteworthy how the arts community was mobilised quickly by a small group of arts practitioners, and how the entire process was driven through volunteer action and activism, and enabled by online communication. Such action would have been impossible without the arts community yahoogroup that had been set up 10 years prior. It might also be contended that the arts community’s ability to mobilise quickly was possible because of the prior experience and involvement of arts practitioners, particularly the core organising group, in earlier networks in Singapore’s civil society movement as well as its experience engaging with the National Arts Council and other state cultural agencies over the years.

*ArtsEngage - Many Voices for the Arts*

Shortly after the selection of the arts NMP, the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts announced the convening of the next Censorship Review Committee (CRC). The CRC is convened every 10 years to ‘review and update censorship objectives and principles to meet the long-term interests of our society’ (Media Development Authority of Singapore, 2009). The CRC considers censorship across a broad spectrum, covering films and broadcast, videos, publications, audio, the arts and new media (including computer games). The previous review took place in 2003, making the 2009 CRC a mid-term review, and it had been convened because of rapid developments in technology which had impacted on both access as well as the creation of new content.

Perhaps heartened by the response to the arts NMP process, a small number of arts practitioners, once again contacted one another by email and proposed putting up a position paper to the CRC from the perspective of the arts community. This included arts practitioners from the core group who had driven the earlier process. In fact, there...
is also a history to this development. In 2003, arts practitioners, including some of the same group, had similarly written a position paper to the previous Review Committee, arguing that censorship was not necessary as it was arbitrary and that there were already laws in Singapore to protect the young from unwholesome content as well as laws against pornography, against inciting racial and religious unrest or hatred, and sedition against the state (ArtsEngage, 2010). However, as with the arts NMP process, in 2009 and 2010, the arts practitioners took engagement with the government a further step forward.

Calling themselves ArtsEngage and setting up a separate yahoogroup for this issue, the group decided that from a strategic point of view, this campaign should be seen as a separate event from the arts NMP process. The arts NMP, having been selected into Parliament, should have the space and independence to pursue various issues in arts and society without being confined to one theme. However, as arts NMP I was also a member of ArtsEngage and took part in its activities and discussions. ArtsEngage called for meetings with artists and other concerned members of the public (in practice, it was generally the arts community and practitioners who took part in the discussions), disseminated information online, and starting writing a position paper which they would circulate to the public and call for signatures in support of it. The position paper outlined a position on censorship which was ‘no to censorship, yes to regulation’, once again arguing for an end to institutionalised censorship. At the end of the campaign period, the paper with the signatures would be sent to the CRC and the Ministry.

ArtsEngage also attempted to dialogue with members of the CRC in order to communicate their concerns about censorship in Singapore, especially as most of the committee members had not had the experience of being censored, or were not from the arts. In other words, ArtsEngage was clearly playing an advocacy role on behalf of concerned artists. This required much more commitment than the arts NMP process. Volunteers from the group had to make contact with CRC members and set up appointments to meet with them.

While the position paper was widely circulated online, there were some drawbacks to the way that ArtsEngage was conceived and how it operated. It was a loose grouping of interested members of the arts community in pursuit of a common cause, was mobilised strictly for one purpose, and there was no obvious leader of the group nor any perceivable structure. As the public could not put a ‘face’ to the campaign, it was perhaps more difficult to verify ArtsEngage’s legitimacy as an arts advocacy group to the wider public beyond the arts sector.

The situation was different online - not having a clear leader or figurehead meant that ArtsEngage could also spread itself a little more like a virus. The position paper and comments by various arts practitioners and the arts-going public were circulated via email, on discussion groups, and Facebook, which was an effective multiplier. People were galvanised to act and send messages through Facebook. A website with the ArtsEngage position paper on censorship and other resources was set up and the public and artists were directed to the site to add their signatures to the document. By the end of the signatures campaign which ran from 14 June to 30 July 2010, a total of 1,786 people had signed. The signed position paper was sent to the Censorship Review Committee, the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, and the Prime Minister’s office. While the paper and campaign did not succeed in abolishing censorship and its instruments, there was a recommendation by the CRC to loosen up some existing regulations, including recommending that relevant agencies move towards ‘co-regulation’ with arts groups and review and broaden the categories of arts performances that could be exempted from licensing. The ArtsEngage position paper, nevertheless, was included as an appended document in the final report of the Censorship Review Committee - a sign perhaps, that higher policy-making levels of government were starting to acknowledge artists’ voices. Members of ArtsEngage also had direct meetings with the top executives of the National Arts Council. They were on the radar of the government, though it had to be said that many of them were already prominent artists and theatre directors.
Another noteworthy development of the ArtsEngage process was the emergence of a few younger arts practitioners who were active as facilitators and writers for the campaign. Hence, there was some discussion after the censorship campaign was over about how best to ‘pass on’ the lessons of engaging with the state, the media, and the public, and mobilising the arts community, to a younger generation of artist-advocates. Soon after the CRC released its report, ArtsEngage became dormant. While various conversations about continuing to engage the arts policy-making agencies took place both on- and offline; eventually the core members agreed that ArtsEngage could be re-activated by any member which found a need to mobilise others in the arts around a cause that affected the wider arts community. Thus far, however, no new cause has emerged to re-ignite ArtsEngage.

Conclusion
The organised advocacy actions of these two examples could not have come about were it not for changes in the broader socio-political context, the drive by the Singapore government to promote the arts as part of its ‘global city’ agenda which led to artists taking on active roles in creating opportunities for themselves and others in the sector, and finally, collaborations between artists and civil society that emerged in the late 1990s and continue till today. It is essential to document the advocacy actions of the arts community and arts practitioners in Singapore, and analyse the conditions, motivations, and impact of these actions. Too often, the arts in Singapore has been seen in terms of its response to the state’s economic agenda for arts and culture; what is less visible are the workings of the communities of arts practitioners in Singapore – how they link, network, and work with or against the ‘system’ of state support and policy, and the impact of policy on individual groups and artists. It is these operational and problem-solving processes and links, as well as the arts community’s off-and-on debates and contestations with government and the state cultural agencies, that shape the arts sector and possibly, determines its future. As Chong (2011) has argued, it is worthwhile studying the less-visible workings of the arts community(ies) and their relationship with the wider socio-political system. I would argue that in fact, the arts community(ies) themselves would find such studies useful – lessons from the past and present could help them draw up strategies for further engagement with the state and carving out a more viable ‘social’ space for the arts.

References: