ASEAN Culture Week: Issues in the Assessment of Regional Cultural Events

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Abstract The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ASEAN, is an organization devoted to increasing cooperation and development between the member countries of the region. ASEAN’s Culture Week, launched in 2002 and held for the second time in August 2004, is a collaborative festival of performances, art displays and cultural demonstrations. The objectives for and evaluation of Culture Week will be examined based on the proposal for the 2004 event, and press statements and media coverage of the events of both 2002 and 2004. The reasons for the staging of cooperative cultural events of this scale, and the relationship between the event, the cultural practitioners, and government officials will be analysed, revealing whether a jointly organized celebration of regional cultural diversity is merely that, or whether it can be used to achieve specific goals. The various dimensions to the event purpose will be brought to light through the process of assessment.

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In August 2004 the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), held its biennial Culture Week in Hanoi, Vietnam. Organised as a programme to foster regional cooperation and as a celebration and promotion of the cultural heritage of the member countries, Culture Week 2004 is the second regional cultural festival planned by the association, following the inaugural one of 2002. This paper examines the assessment of such a cultural event based on the proposal for Culture Week 2004 as presented by its organisers, the cultural officials of the coordinating and host country of Vietnam, at a conference of ASEAN cultural ministers in October 2003. The paper draws from available material, taking into consideration stated and underlying goals, and processes of evaluation. It asks what purpose a regional cultural festival serves to its organisers and the local communities who patronize such events, and what issues factor into the evaluation of outcomes of a cultural event of diplomatic cooperation.

Festivals of culture have become an increasingly popular method of presenting the art and cultural life of a country for diplomatic purposes. The participants act as representatives of their respective countries and, when organised on an official scale, create an environment for the transmission of a particular political message or vision. These environments are set in an established time and space where they can be important stages for countries to convene in a special atmosphere of shared goodwill. The significance of the cultural displays of such events lies in their ability to “foster new understandings, promote old ones, valorize and legitimate stances by governments, peoples, or communities” (Kurin 1997, p.133). As such, festivals serve a specific purpose of national image building to a foreign audience, frequently staged in a host country more powerful economically and politically in the global arena than the country represented by that festival. The Festival of India, for example, first held in Great Britain in 1982 and then in the United States in 1985, is an early and
monumental example of this genre of diplomatic cultural event. Involving museum exhibitions, musical performances, scholarly programmes and demonstrations of folk arts, the festival later came to be adapted to a national event, refocusing the celebration of Indian culture internally for an Indian audience, transforming the message of diplomacy to one of a more nationalistic flavour (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1990).

In the case of the ASEAN Culture Week, the festival acts as a vivid symbol of Southeast Asian cooperation and cultural wealth and diversity to the local citizens of the host country, as well as to a broader Southeast Asian and international audience that presumably attend the event as visitors to the host country. Culture Week is more than a venue for the gathering of regional performers and artists: it is also a platform from which to honor the individual cultural traditions of the member countries, to foster regional relationships through the interaction between audience members and participants as well as the delegations themselves, and to legitimize and enhance the role of ASEAN in the region.

Although multiple readings of the festival may be possible, this paper focuses on the goals as stated or implied by the organisers themselves, and attempts to reveal some of the dimensions in making assessments of the success of the event. Methods of gauging the outcomes of Culture Week entail both tangible and less tangible considerations - such as media coverage and attendance figures to positive public opinion and heightened awareness of issues in cultural preservation - and different perspectives may be employed, whether economic, political, social, or cultural. This study takes an encompassing approach to include all these factors in what shall generally be described as outcome analysis (Wyszomirski 1998). While several factors will be identified and discussed, this paper is not an all-inclusive study, but raises some pertinent points which, it is hoped, contribute to further discussion in the field.

ASEAN and Culture Week: Brief history

The Committee on Culture and Information (COCI), a sub-division of ASEAN under the area of Functional Cooperation, holds the responsibility for organising Culture Week. The Committee's founding resulted from the association members' decision to raise the profile of ASEAN, a task delegated to the information agencies of the member countries as well as their respective ministries of culture or equivalent (ASEAN Culture and Information: Overview n.d.). The organisation ASEAN itself was established on August 8, 1967, with five original member countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. In 1984, Brunei became the sixth member of the association, followed by Vietnam in 1995, Myanmar in 1997, and Cambodia in 1999 (About ASEAN n.d.). With “cooperative peace and shared prosperity” as the fundamental goals of ASEAN, the aims and purposes of the association are outlined as follows:

(i) to accelerate the economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region through joint endeavors in the spirit of equality and partnership in order to strengthen the foundation for a prosperous and peaceful community of Southeast Asian nations, and

(ii) to promote regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law in the relationship among countries in the region and adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter.

(About ASEAN: Objectives, n.d., para.1)

The formation of ASEAN and its activities are attributed as a factor for the relative stability of the region and in making significant contributions to the economic development of its member countries. Acts such as the 1992 ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) were implemented to increase the region's competitive advantage as a single production unit, and most of ASEAN's activities center on economic development and increased trade and industrial cooperation between the countries. Politically, ASEAN members have adopted a principle of 'non-interference' in the respective internal affairs of each other. This is illustrated policy wise by the difficulty in making regional human
rights advancements, as such rights are considered to fall under national jurisdiction, with any outside involvement deemed a threat to sovereignty (Verma 2002).

The main thrust of ASEAN-COCI’s activities has centered on the creation of high-profile events, and it is not easy to make a clear distinction between a cultural event as a public relations activity or as a way to cultivate Southeast Asian cultural forms and traditions. Examples of cultural activities organized by COCI include the Jakarta Arts Festival, the ASEAN Young Speakers Forum, and “Realizing Rama”, a theatre and dance project highlighting the early Indian influences on Southeast Asian culture, launched in conjunction with Culture Week 2002 and scheduled to travel to Korea, China and India. These events illustrate that COCI - and ASEAN - activities are not restricted solely to ones involving only countries in Southeast Asia, but frequently include other countries in the Asia-Pacific region as partners, peers, models, and potential markets (whether for trade goods or for tourism).

The first Culture Week was held in the grounds of the temple complex, Angkor Wat, in Siem Reap, Cambodia. Seven days of performances and other displays of cultural heritage in the form of the visual arts and popular past-times commenced at the site of the ancient Khmer empire, an internationally recognisable symbol of Cambodian heritage. The event was intended to “foster the spirit of cooperation and enhance the image of ASEAN” (ASEAN Culture Week 2004 2003, p.1). The first Culture Week also partially evolved out of a desire to create publicity for the annual ASEAN summit and raise the profile of the association through a showcase of culture timed to coincide with the meeting.

The highlight of the event was the dance performances presented by each country (mostly by national dance troupes). Featured also were exhibitions of contemporary art and traditional costumes and crafts, documentary screenings on Southeast Asian traditions and culture, and demonstrations of kite-flying (a traditional game/art form shared by many of the countries). In addition to the performances and presentations, visual artists were commissioned to create artworks inspired by the temples of Angkor, which they produced in situ, enabling visitors to view the artists at work.

The second Culture Week was launched on August 6, 2004 in Vietnam. Its festivities took place in two locations, the city of Hanoi and Ha Long Bay, and were touted as being the “biggest” cultural activity to be held in Vietnam (Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2004). Almost 150 artists representing the ten ASEAN countries were to have taken part in the event, performing dances and displaying traditional costumes, art work and food.

The 2004 Vietnam proposal adhered closely to the original structure of the week-long event, with minor changes such as the substitution of the kite-flying demonstration with a “Traditional Food Festival”. Incidentally, the organising bodies’ distinction between contemporary and traditional art forms is itself of interest. The theme of Culture Week 2004, though not decided upon at the time the proposal was presented, was “ASEAN Arts: Tradition and Modernity”. A separate study might analyse the types of messages conveyed about the culture of each country through these art forms: the images intended and state-endorsed, and those received by the audiences; the notion of reinforced stereotypes of Southeast Asian culture and people; and how the distinctions are made between ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’.

Assessing the Objectives of Culture Week

It was the “success” of the first ASEAN Culture Week that had initially prompted COCI to declare that the event be held every year hence (ASEAN Culture and Information n. d., para. 18). For reasons undisclosed, however, this did not prove feasible and Culture Week has thus become a biennial event. Vietnam’s proposal for Culture Week 2004 describes the festival purpose as “to promote and celebrate the richness and diversity of the culture of the region” and to “showcase a variety of the arts of the region and raise the cohesion and profile of ASEAN” (ASEAN Cultural Week 2004 - Viet Nam...
2003, p.1). The latter statement seems particularly significant to the authors of the proposal as the fostering of regional ASEAN identity is mentioned again in the subsequent paragraph, as well as the need to “enhance the image of ASEAN”.

Exactly what is the image of an ASEAN identity is unclear and the Culture Week proposal does not offer any insights to this. This suggests that there is an assumption that it is understood by all present at the conference. A press release from the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in August 2004 describes the aim of Culture Week as being to introduce regional cultures and traditional values, and describes the goal of ASEAN cultural cooperation as being “to highlight the unity among regional cultures, their role in each country’s relationship and the respect of cultural diversity” (Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2004, para. 3).

In the execution of any cultural programme, particularly one undertaken under the aegis of governments in an act of cultural diplomacy, the importance of establishing clear goals and strategies for accomplishing them, and the recognition of constraints, must be underlined (Tanen 1991). In the process of defining goals certain questions arise: what is being spoken of by “culture”? How does a cultural activity reflect a people’s “values” and what are these “values”? Who decides the definitions and how is “consensus” achieved? This paper will not present the answers to such questions, but raises them here to illustrate some of the fundamental considerations and potential constraints involved in the planning of such a program.

The concept of a collective regional identity seems to be one based on geography and the idea of shared “Asian values” and certain aspects of cultural heritage. This notion of shared values is an interesting one that arises frequently in ASEAN rhetoric. According to ASEAN Secretary-General Ong Keng Yong, there are: behavioural inclinations that cut across societies of Southeast Asia that have been shaped through the centuries by common geography, climate and shared historical experiences with each other and with countries outside the region. …. Generally speaking, an ASEAN citizen is family-oriented, tradition-minded, respectful of authority, consensus-seeking and tolerant…we have a culture of caring and sharing. Helping each other, sharing responsibilities, sharing benefits. (Ong 2003, para. 4-5)

There are definite common traits in the histories and cultural practices within the region. Most of the countries, for example, have a Hindu-Buddhist past; Buddhism prevails in the continental regions, while Malaysia and Indonesia are predominantly Muslim today. Geographic proximity resulted in centuries of cross-cultural encounters, the result being the development of customs and traditions that are varied and distinct, yet familiar across the region. Given that the Culture Week 2004 proposal was delivered at a conference of ASEAN cultural ministers, the assumption of consensus amongst the different countries may not have been unreasonable. Once again according to Secretary-General Ong, (political) decisions are made “the ‘ASEAN way’”, which is, in his words, “achieving harmonious results based on consensus” (para. 14).

The definitions of such concepts as ‘culture’, ‘values’ and ‘consensus’ can be especially contentious, and in the absence of any definitions as presented by the organisers of Culture Week, it becomes exceedingly difficult to identify objectives. Nevertheless, ASEAN’s Declaration of Cultural Heritage, signed in Bangkok in July 2000 might be viewed as the basic frame of reference for ASEAN cultural definitions. The ASEAN interpretation of culture as outlined in this document is, in fact, a broad one, encompassing the traditional arts, built heritage, popular culture, oral culture, folklife and more. Nevertheless, still ambiguous despite its primary importance to the association, however, is Section (a), “significant cultural values and concepts”, with no further elaboration on the meanings or nature of these values (Definition of Culture and Cultural Heritage, ASEAN Declaration on Cultural Heritage n.d.).

A concept paper on Cultural Policy presented by the Vietnamese delegation (during the same conference of cultural ministers where the proposal for Vietnam Culture Week 2004 was presented), indicate further efforts being undertaken in the direction of
cultural research and analysis. Amongst other things, justifications were set forth in this paper for the studying of cultural policy and its subsequent creation (for countries that did not already possess such a document); the importance of national cultural policies was stressed in line with national development and national identity; and logistical proposals were made on how to embark on the proposed study (ASEAN Cultural Policy 2003). The argument formulated in the concept paper for the development of cultural policy was based on recommendations made in a United Nations Action Plan on Cultural Policy from 1988: “to promote creativity and participation in cultural life; to safeguard and enhance the cultural heritage, tangible and intangible, moveable and immovable and to promote cultural industry; to promote cultural and linguistic diversity and to make more human and financial resources for cultural development (ASEAN Cultural Policy 2003, p.2). There are always multiple factors for consideration in any cultural debate, and in a region like Southeast Asia, these include, at the very least, the indigenous traditions of the country, the effects of colonial rule, and the many customs becoming commonplace in local culture which may have western origins and cause debates of identity crisis that pit globalization and internationalism against cultural colonialism.

Significantly, in developing countries, culture is frequently viewed as a commodity to contribute to the national economy. While this view of the practical use of cultural products is not limited to only the less economically advanced countries, it is also adopted by those with strong economies - as illustrated by the current Singaporean government investments in cultural institutions - it may be fair to say that the gains through commercial exploitation of cultural resources and the revenue generated from tourist dollars, are more starkly obvious in countries with less diversified economies.

The paper presented by the Malaysian delegate during the 2003 conference of cultural ministers sees further evidence of official government standpoints on the functionality of culture in the context of national economies. Entitled “The Development of Small and Medium-size Culture Enterprise and Industry”, examples of “cultural industries” were outlined in the paper, implying a shared agreement of culture as an industry and presenting a business proposal for the development of “cultural activity as a basic building block for the economic development within the ASEAN region” (The Development of Small and Medium-size Culture Enterprise and Industry 2003, p.2). The increased interest paid to culture as an industry is spurred on by the recognition of the great tourism potential of the region. Also in Malaysia, for example, the merging of the Ministry of Culture and Arts with the Tourism Board in 1987 brought about larger budgetary allocations to the development of culture and the rise in the staging of cultural festivals and other such extravaganzas (Adi Hj. Taha n.d.).

The perceived economic benefits of cultural programmes and events by the ASEAN cultural ministries - and in many other examples around the world - are thus, unmistakable. The connection between economy and culture is also illustrated by the interest shown in Culture Week by informational agencies such as the Vietnam Business Forum and Vietnam Trade Promotion Agency, both of which ran stories on Culture Week 2004. Interestingly, however, neither cited potential economic benefits in the reports, instead referring to the promotion of cultural traditions and the boosting of regional solidarity and cooperation (Vietnam Business Forum, 2004; Vietnam Trade Promotion Agency, 2004).

The purpose of cultural events with monetary goals can lead to possibly conflicting definitions between the governing officials and the producers or presenters of arts and culture. An event such as Culture Week is an example of how culture becomes commodified - packaged and reassembled for audience consumption - serving to promote specific ideals and either used as a means to an end, or possibly reduced to a collective symbol of ASEAN cooperation and little else.

As a step in the direction of evaluation, the 2004 proposal included an outline of “Success Criteria”, in which the organisers state that the event would be considered “generally” to have been “professionally presented” if:
These five points provide a basis for evaluation. Based on the available information, it is not known whether similar criteria were employed in assessing the 2002 event, or whether any form of evaluation was in fact carried out. The 2004 proposal does not allude to any findings that might have risen from an appraisal, suggesting that one was most likely not conducted. Section 2 of the document, “Background, Problem Analysis and Justification”, states that the first Culture Week “had contributed to the creation of greater awareness, understanding and appreciation of the cultures of ASEAN among its peoples…reached a wide public locally, and internationally throughout the media that covered the event”, but does not refer to any additional report to substantiate this finding (ASEAN Cultural Week 2004 - Viet Nam 2003, p.1).

This statement above seems typical of the sort of rhetoric commonly delivered by state organizations in justifying large-scale events or projects with abstract goals and not easily quantifiable results. Thus, we arrive at the question of how to assess such an event. Drawing from the Culture Week 2004 proposal document, news reports and press statements of the event, three areas of focus are identified for the purpose of this paper:

1. the act of fostering closer cooperation and diplomatic relations between countries of the region
2. the “promotion and celebration” of the cultural and art forms of each ASEAN nation, and
3. the enhancement of the image of ASEAN as an organisation and the increase of its visibility.

Outcome Analysis

Beginning with the first area of fostering closer inter-regional relations, it must be noted that culture is frequently utilised by governments as a - theoretically - politically neutral forum for exchange and interaction, and often in relation to wider goals. Distinguishing informational diplomacy as propaganda, Kevin Mulcahy considers the one as having “an explicit, immediate political content”, while “cultural diplomacy does not: its methods are indirect and its goals are long-range” (cited in Feigenbaum 2001, p.30). When this indirect and long-range nature is recognised by a state, the sponsorship of such cultural programmes is often designed to support a larger objective. In this case, the outcome of ASEAN cultural exchanges and events is the cultivation of a regional environment more receptive to trade negotiations, developmental programmes and, hopefully, more amicable political dialogue, when the need arises. The same can be said of most state-sponsored cross-border cultural programmes. This is not to say that having such objectives is inherently bad. What needs to be recognized, however, is that while culture –be this in the form of performances and exhibitions, artist exchanges and residencies, forums and symposia - can be utilised for diplomatic purposes, it does not function in a cause and effect manner and cannot be used as a means to an end.

If this is understood, then the fostering of closer relations ceases to be a defined objective, but instead may be considered a consequence of a programme of cultural cooperation. It becomes an outcome, the assessment of which is only possible through long-term observation of relations between the involved nations. This is still highly subjective, as there are many factors that may influence international relations. Therefore, an assessment would need to take this into account, and recognize the fact
that further scrutiny is not an objective process. It is argued here that it might be more beneficial to focus processes of evaluation on strategic goals which attempt to achieve more direct results.

This brings the discussion to the second area of assessment: the promotion of ASEAN arts and culture. As an immediate response, one might say that active participation from the member countries through the sponsoring of their respective arts groups and artists, and the engagement of these groups with each other and the audiences at the event, affirms the first step of promotion and celebration. The Vietnamese proposal’s “criteria for success” support this evaluation process through the collection of feedback from participants - both those attending and those presenting. The methods of eliciting feedback, however, are complex and can be extremely costly. Although evaluation was included in the work plan of the Culture Week 2004 proposal, the accompanying budget did not take this additional expense into consideration. Once again, this suggests that a defined system of evaluation was not given priority in the planning of the event.

Such evaluation can be broken down into several components. The distribution of audience feedback forms, though not the most reliable, is a popular method of review and the forms can easily be made available at the performance venues themselves. The demographics of the audience would need to be factored in, as one ASEAN report on 2002’s event stated, “throng of spectators from nearby provinces…trekked the Angkor grounds every night” (ASEAN Culture and Information n.d., para.14). An understanding of telecommunications capabilities of these societies would be necessary to enable the planning of follow-up evaluations, if so desired. At almost every event in cities like New York, for example, audience members are encouraged to register on mailing lists, with e-mail increasingly used as the method for further contact; electronic forms are also now a quick and easy way to solicit feedback. In rural areas of Cambodia or Vietnam, this would be highly improbable, where not only technological limitations but also even the literacy levels of a non-urban populace might prove obstacles to the collection of audience feedback. Research on audience demographics would, therefore, be imperative in the designing of effective data collection methods.

Event “post-mortems” are common ways to make internal assessments on a more logistical level. These can be conducted by each delegation, back in their home countries, and may be done on a face-to-face level that highly increases the probability of response, as well as the reliability of the information. This process, however, focuses on working details of the event, and not on the more delicate matter of assessing quality, which was one of the criteria identified in the 2004 proposal. The matter of quality may be raised in the questionnaires to the members of the public, and should also be addressed to the presenters, artists and country delegates. This is very much linked to and dependent upon the initial planning and selection process for the cultural forms that were presented or performed. Many questions may arise here with regard to the individual images of national culture that were being promoted by the member countries and why choices were made for one art form or artist over another. Due to the highly variegated nature of “art” and “culture”, it must be remembered that the promotion of the arts as occurs in such events or festivals merely presents a select few fragments of the vast cultural resources of each country and is, ultimately, a spectacle for enjoyment. Thus, any assessment of quality would require clarity on what the intended representations were.

For example, in the first Culture Week, two representatives were Ballet Philippines, and Dance Ensemble Singapore. The Philippines’ decision to send their national dance company of a classical dance form that originated in the Western world - albeit fused with local cultural elements to create what is called “distinctively Filipino contemporary expressions” (Ballet Philippines n.d.) - could be interpreted in different ways: for instance, as an acknowledgement of the European influences in their cultural heritage, as a show of their ability and skill in an internationally recognized dance form, or even because ballet might have a more significant place in today’s Filipino performing arts field than traditional dance forms. The dance company from Singapore, by contrast, regards itself as a primarily Chinese dance troupe though with modern influences from
other dance forms (Dance Ensemble Singapore n.d.). Like the Philippines, Singapore has active ballet companies - Singapore Dance Theatre for example - and many art groups that fuse western and eastern forms and the traditional with the contemporary. The decision for Dance Ensemble to represent Singapore, therefore, hints at the image that the organisers are attempting to convey of Singaporean culture, which can be contrasted against that of the Filipino organisers, and of other countries represented by groups performing the traditional dances of their respective cultures.

Furthermore, the presentation of national dance troupes and artists in events such as this project the impression that the art and cultural life of these countries is valued, nurtured and thriving. If one were to examine the arts institutions of each individual country and the overall systems of support and cultivation, one would obtain a better sense of how the states serve the arts in their own countries. One might learn that an art form endorsed by the state no longer has any significant meaning in the contemporary lives of its people, but attempts are being made to revitalize it as a part of a nostalgic national plan of heritage and identity construction. This is not an uncommon occurrence - certainly not exclusive to Southeast Asia - and is further indication of the difficulty in making assessments on the promotion of culture. Though not directly linked to the success of an event like Culture Week, a more critical awareness of the various nations’ cultural infrastructure might reveal that Culture Week performances serve as a smokescreen to detract from the actual goings-on in the respective countries’ cultural and art fields.

Continuing the subject of assessing the promotion of culture, for something to be promoted, there must be a recipient; thus, attendance figures and media coverage allow another way for evaluation. The same method applies to assessing the third objective of raising ASEAN’s visibility and the enhancement of its image. As has already been mentioned, the precise nature of this image is rather ambiguous. Nevertheless, the desire for a favorable vision of ASEAN in the minds of the regions citizens to support the underlying purpose of the organization of regional cooperation is understandable and affects many different sectors. Whose impression of ASEAN is being cultivated is called into question here. If it is the general public, the inhabitants of Southeast Asia, cultural events held in changing locations in different countries permit localized and direct contact with people at the grassroots level, while media coverage calls wider attention to the organization.

Once the target audience has been identified, a limited measure of impact is possible. Both attendance and media response, for example, can be gauged in quantifiable terms. Well-attended events clearly support an argument for the continuation of such initiatives. Exact details of public relations activities and marketing expenses were not available for either Culture Week 2002 or 2004; though the 2004 Proposal does list a publicity budget of US$10,000 (ASEAN Culture Week 2004 2003). The coordinating country, in this case, Vietnam, was also listed as being responsible for handling event publicity. Despite the existing budget, media coverage appears to have been minimal. ASEAN’s official website itself offers scant information of the event. This is in contrast to the availability of numerous conference proceedings, speeches, articles, press reports and more, in the areas of economy, urban and social development, environment, and generally, all areas but culture. It is particularly curious that the more recent 2004 event was allocated less space in the ASEAN website than 2002’s. Even the COCI calendar of events for 2004 does not include Culture Week in its August listing.

According to a report posted on the ASEAN-COCI website earlier this year, the 2002 event received television media coverage on the French channel TV 5 and Japan’s NHK, while TVK of Cambodia provided live coverage of the week (ASEAN Culture and Information n.d.). It bears mention that an (electronic-based) investigation of news coverage produced very few articles. Print news articles of the 2002 event appeared in the Brunei-based Borneo Bulletin and the Philippine Daily Inquirer; a number of Vietnamese sources reported the 2004 event, but little mention was found in other regional sources. The reliability of electronic news sources is, of course, debatable and
this is not, therefore, a decisive indicator of media coverage. This also refers solely to print media in the form of major newspapers and journals. The above reports were obtained through the Lexis-Nexis electronic database and the World Wide Web, and no estimate can be made here of the amount of domestic press coverage in the respective national languages of each country. Nevertheless, because of the regional and thus, international, nature of the event, it would be expected that media interest might have been generated from regional publications which are often published in English, as well as the English-language dailies of the member countries. “International” media coverage of the first event was, in fact, a claim made in Vietnam’s 2004 proposal (p.1).

While attendance figures and amount of media coverage might indicate the reach of a campaign of awareness-raising, they do not account for impact and the impressions of the organization as a result of its staging of such events. Such qualitative information, once again, may be solicited through questionnaires and similar efforts to obtain audience feedback. Publicizing the event in official organisational reports will help achieve increasing visibility to peer institutions. Whatever promotional methods are used, the final assessment of the simple act of increasing visibility of ASEAN and its activities may be a positive one.

Conclusion

As has been explained thus, there are numerous factors that require consideration in assessing the ASEAN Culture Week, and although both qualitative and quantitative evaluation methods may be employed, it is impossible to say in definitive terms whether the programme was a success. As a week-long series of performances and arts events, if well attended, smoothly executed and popularly received, it might be considered successful. If viewed as a collaborative programme to foster further cooperation between the ASEAN nations, it is certainly that and it is not unreasonable to expect similar programmes to occur again; it might, therefore, be considered relatively successful in the goal of furthering cooperation. When we move to the question of promotion of art and culture, as discussed, there are several layers to this upon which an assessment would depend. Thus, a useful assessment of success or failure may be undertaken only in light of understanding the limitations and complexities of assessing tangible goals and less tangible outcomes.

Stating this in the economic terms that would translate more easily to government officials concerned with seeing tangible benefits to their countries’ economies and citizens through the field of culture, the inherent nature of culture with its mainly unquantifiable returns makes it an extremely high-risk investment. If the anticipated returns are deemed significant in the long-run, and these are recognised as occurring, often, as indirect consequences as argued in this paper, the investment in cultural capital becomes worthwhile. If not seen in this light, an event like Culture Week is in danger of being either reduced to an expensive spectacle or manipulated to become - using Mulcahy’s terms - informational diplomacy rather than cultural diplomacy. A wider recognition of this could affect possible change in the terms of evaluation for assessing the success or failure of ASEAN’s Culture Week and any other such cultural programme, hopefully for the better, through the evolution of governments’ expectations of state cultural programming.

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