

Terence Chong (Ed). *The State and the Arts in Singapore: Policies and Institutions*. World Scientific Publishing, Singapore, 2018. xxxix + 524 pp. ISBN: 9813236884.

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What is the relationship between cultural policies and the state of the arts in Singapore? *The State and the Arts in Singapore: Policies and Institutions*, a volume of essays edited by Terence Chong, answers this question through contributions from scholars, theorists, art administrators, critics, practitioners and journalists familiar with the cultural and arts sectors of Singapore. Organized into six periodical milestones in the cultural landscape of Singapore since 1945, the twenty-one essays collected here trace the genealogy of the arts and its historical development through a focus on and examination of state bureaucracy, instrumental in providing funding, setting up art institutions, launching cultural policies, and sculpting the trajectory of media sectors and processes. Individually, the essays in the volume demonstrate what Janadas Devan describes in the Foreword as “a tension between the arts and the state” (xiv), a tension that is not so much combative as it is quintessential to the local arts climate that we experience today in Singapore.

The collection opens with Koh Tai Ann’s “Malayan Culture, Multiracialism, the British Colonial Project and Heritage: 1945-1965,” which foregrounds the transnational and global influences that affect what cultural identity means, both in and to Singapore. Koh makes clear that “Multiracialism as a concept at the heart of cultural policy did not, therefore, contrary to common belief, originate from the PAP government, but was inherited, like much else from the British” (22). Be it out of the pragmatic need for self-sustainability as a new colonial nation, or the need to distinguish Singapore in the light of globalization in the post-colonial era, Koh details the complexity of Singapore’s multiracial cultural politics, which requires a careful consideration of various socioeconomic, historical, and geopolitical contexts as well as the ideological contestations that reframe Singapore continuously. Importantly, she argues that the notion of multiculturalism sprung out of a “desire to create a sense of place, home, belonging, community, and thus identity, expressed long before the PAP government articulated it” (16). If multiculturalism is inadvertently intertwined with the project of nation-building and identity formation and protection in and of Singapore, then it follows that the tension between the arts and the state lies in the negotiation between what “multiculturalism” means in terms of state-mandated forms of art and how art may be expressed without political agenda. The big challenge that the state faces revolves around how best to ensure art policies remain faithful in supporting the production of self-expressing art forms and practices that are not only

aligned to Singapore's distinctive identity of being "multiracial" and "multicultural", but also capable of performing its role as a product that is tangible and recognizable within the global market.

This theme of balancing public appeal and autonomous identity beyond an imagined state-run machine permeates the other sections. In Chapter 3, Joan Henderson argues that culture may be manufactured through the combination of urban planning, heritage and tourism, while Venka Purushothaman emphasizes the importance of Art Festivals and Festival Film Week as cultural sites that circulate art produced outside and within Singapore. Audrey Wong reiterates the success of such festival circuits in financing, promoting, and growing specific sectors of the arts in "The Singapore Writers Festival and the Promotion of Literary Culture", where events held during the Singapore Writers Festival promote "dialogue, debate, and critique" through literary writing and reading (142). As seen in Audrey Yue's chapter on "Film and Television in Singapore", "a planned media economy" of Singapore and strict censorship reviews enabled innovations and experimentations in film and television, through "new formats and genres to new markets" (423).

Limitations, and restraints that are often associated with cultural policies in Singapore are hence crucial to creative ways of making art. For those more interested in the cultural importance of art institutions and spaces in helping to cultivate productive art practices, Weng-Choy Lee writes in Chapter 10, "The Substation: Artistic Practice and Cultural Policy", that public venues for performances and exhibitions such as "The Substation" become infrastructural cornerstones for the "development of local and regional art" (212), even if these potentialities emerge through the "messy assemblage of stories that individuals tell in public spaces" rather than through structured policy planning. Other essays like Shaun Oon's "Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and LASALLE College of the Arts" and "The School of the Arts" foreground the importance of establishing formal art education institutions that offer arts and design programmes.

Jumping ahead to the closing chapter of the volume, Hoe Su Fern's "The Arts and Cultural Strategic Review Report" highlights the trajectory of cultural development in Singapore through the Arts and Culture Strategic Review (ACSR), an initiative established between 2010 and 2016. This period of time saw Singapore facing challenges such as "a more heterogeneous society, an ageing population, rising inequality and slower economic growth" and when the arts was assumed to function as a tool for "social cohesion and citizens' sense of belonging" (469). Through detailed analysis of the processes behind policy formation, policy implementation, and policy impacts, Hoe proposes that the return to sociocultural forms of art and the promotion of "community arts" was not a deviation from the historical trajectory of the other cultural policies leading up to it (447). Hoe's study of why the focus on "community arts" reveals more challenges than opportunities for Singapore further

affirms the multicultural and heterogeneous forms of arts that have been produced through—or despite—earlier cultural policies in Singapore.

As Chong reiterates in the conclusion of the edited volume, “No critique of that role [of the government] can, or should diminish the value that the state has brought to the arts in Singapore” (473). This is not to say that the arts in Singapore is the way it is today solely because of public funding and governmental support. Rather, the dialogue between policies and art practitioners, scholars, and patrons does not, and should not, end on the supposition that the state’s imposing power and control over cultural production dictate the trajectory of arts production in Singapore through top-down policies. The state’s involvement, intervention, and investment in art communities reveal the participatory and irrevocably symbiotic nature between the arts and the state, where the arts have always been understood as valuable to the project of nation building.

Art practitioners, scholars, educators, patrons, and advocates may find relief after engaging with the lively and nuanced accounts and surveys of art policies that suggest that the infrastructure created by state-run policies is not so much prescriptive of the types of art that can be or has been produced in Singapore. Rather, the role played by cultural policies in scaffolding the development of the arts over the years underscores the government’s preemptive stance to organize rather than delimit the far-reaching potential of art practices and cultural production. As seen through the historical attempts to benefit from the currency afforded through artistic and other cultural practices, state production of the arts in Singapore, fortunately, requires the heterogeneous, fundamentally collaborative and collective efforts of all involved beyond the framework set out by these policies. The message that the arts in Singapore has thrived and flourished through and beyond the State’s unwavering support is a clear one. Yet, the essays do even better to remind readers that the state of the arts in Singapore is anything but the State’s.