

CABINET D STUDY GUIDE - SOCIETY

Topic 1: Should more government policies be implemented to further strengthen social cohesion?

Introduction

Social cohesion refers to the extent of connectedness and solidarity among groups in society (Michalos, 2014). In Singapore, social cohesion is further defined as an enduring sense of trust and community (Global-Is-Asian Staff, 2022). The presence of social cohesion on a wider scale ensures that amongst members in a society, there is social stability and mutual trust that remains strong.

Singapore is a melting pot of cultures (George Washington University, 2024) and a cosmopolitan society (Britannica, n.d.). As such, many different groups of people live in Singapore, be it different races, religions, socio-economic status (SES) classes or new and old Singaporeans. Singapore has also long prided herself on a stable political climate suitable for business (Gov.UK, 2023) as she aims to be a wealth management hub. As such, for the continued survival of Singapore, social cohesion is paramount. More recently, income inequality has proved a major threat to her social cohesion with the Gini Coefficient having risen 22.9 % from 2008 to hit 70 in 2023 (Tan, 2024). Singapore has historically ensured social cohesion through the pragmatic adoption of state-managed multiculturalism. This stands in stark contrast with the adoption of assimilation.

Historical Overview

Pre-independent Singapore

Under British rule, different communities were physically separated: the Chinese downtown, the Malays in Kampong Glam and the Indians in Serangoon. This segregation inhibited the development of mutual trust and understanding between the communities, resulting in a divided society (Dhanabalan, 1989). Markets, workplaces, and public spaces such as hawker centres and wet markets, served as points of contact where people of different ethnicities engaged in trade and daily interactions. Additionally, certain

schools and social organisations, though greatly limited, provided avenues for cross-cultural exchanges, fostering a level of interethnic relationships. Cohesion however was not at the forefront, leading to systemic issues that followed on.

Racial riots in 1964 and 1969 caused widespread damage to property, leaving many injured or dead. This only further exacerbated growing ethnic tensions, showing how easily social disharmony can plunge the nation into turmoil. Race and religions were issues that needed to be addressed for the country to progress, a fact that the early leaders of Singapore recognised. Consequently, a deliberate choice was made to move away from racial politics and race- based policies (Fu, 2019).

Post-independence Singapore

Singapore had split from Malaysia due to fundamental differences in racial and religious tensions, largely stemming from a want for a more Malaysian Malaysia, and culminating in the 1964 Racial Riots. As such, the most pressing issue for the government of the day was resolving racial and religious tension.

Singapore, in her early years, attempted to do this through a variety of methods, some of which continue on to this day. By being founded on the core values of Meritocracy and Multiculturalism (Moore, 2000), the government hoped to nurture the growth of a Singaporean national identity among the population in order to counter the chauvinistic and particularistic pulls of ethnic identities (Quah, 1977). This aim further manifested itself in the form of the recognition of 4 official languages (Lee, 2024), with Malay as the national tongue, and the promotion of bilingualism (Sim, n.d) with English as the common lingua franca to ensure no group had an unfair advantage over one another in communication. Originally a concession to more chauvinistic portions of the different races (Chan, 2016), vernacular-language schools were all but phased out in the 1980s. Instead, Singapore formed a common curriculum for all Singaporean children (Biblioasia, 2009), regardless of background.

Singapore also committed herself to the protection of minority rights (SG101, n.d), especially the Malays, who's special position has been enshrined in the Constitution (Singapore Statutes Online, n.d). Concessions have been made to the Malay group, such as having the national anthem, *Majulah*

Singapura, in Malay and having a Malay head-of-state initially, or the *Yang-di Pertuan Negara* Yusuf Bin Ishak. Malay students were also given free education and offered special bursaries. Beyond this, special modifications to the Westminster system of government that Singapore had inherited were also made to accommodate minorities, such as through the GRC system, where a group of people, consisting at least 1 minority, ran for office together. Self-help groups such as the *Yayasan MENDAKI* and SINDA were set up to bring about greater inter-racial equity.

In a similar vein, the Singapore government had also kept a keen eye on the socio-economic stratification of society even early on. Other than the self-help groups mentioned above, the government implemented a comprehensive public housing scheme regarded as one of the best in the world. The Housing and Development Board (HDB) success in solving the housing problem is well known as it has built a total of 833,814 housing units for 86% of the population from 1960 to 1997 at relatively inexpensive prices.

In more recent times, Singapore has seen a rise in new citizens. As of June 2019, there were 3.5 million Singapore citizens, an increase of 0.8 per cent from the previous year. There were 22,550 new citizens in 2018, up from 22,076 the year before. (SG101, n.d.). This has also come with a rise in anti-immigrant sentiments, where from an IPS survey in 2019, more than six in 10 said immigrants are not doing enough to integrate into Singapore. This was due to limiting beliefs and perceptions about new immigrants due to stereotypes, as well as a trust deficit. This has been heightened with conflicts between migrants and old Singaporeans, such as the 'Curry Dispute,' where the outpouring of vitriol against foreigners was said to belie an underlying resentment among some locals towards people from a different culture who had settled here. (Teng, n.d.)

Case Studies

Finland

Finland has been considered the happiest country in the world. (Fernandez, 2024). This has been attributed to high levels of trust due to low levels of income inequality (Bello, 2024). More specifically, Finland boasts the 5th lowest income inequality (Henley, 2018).

Finland, as part of the Nordic region, is famous for what economists call the Nordic Model, or the unique combination of free-market capitalism and social benefits that have given rise to a society that enjoys a host of top-quality services, including free education and healthcare and generous, guaranteed pension payments for retirees (Andersen et al., 2007). Finland is famous for her large welfare state and public services, such as free education and healthcare of high quality, along with public pension plans (Andersen et al., 2007). In fact, 31% of the country's GDP is spent on her welfare state – the second largest proportion in the OECD (Henley, 2018). This ensures that all citizens of the Nordic countries get to enjoy a high standard of living, regardless of their income classification.

By merging traditional capitalism with a generous welfare system funded by a redistributive tax system with high taxation, it theoretically decreases the level of inequality in the country. The result is a system that treats all citizens equally and encourages workforce participation, reducing inequality and the tension arising from it (Boyle, 2023). Hence, it is of little surprise that Finland has consistently been ranked the happiest in the world, and their inequality of happiness is virtually non-existent (Bello, 2024). However, recent scandals, including Interior Minister Mari Rantanen and Acting Interior Minister Lulu Ranne allegedly directing officials to exclude quota refugees from Muslim-majority countries and increase the quota for those from Christian-majority nations, and other racist remarks made by different ministers (Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, 2024), have brought to light the extent of racial discrimination in the country. In response, the government has launched the Action, Not Only Words campaign to address racism, with the title underscoring the importance of having concrete actions to eliminate racism (European Commission, 2024). As part of the campaign, the government has created an umbrella commitment through the Sitoumus2050, an online website where organisations, companies and individuals can make operational commitments for sustainable development (European Commission, 2024). The campaign's umbrella commitment proposes concrete measures such as ways to develop organisational culture and to increase awareness of racism and combat racism, which participating actors can utilise, and further build on (Government Communications Department, 2024).

Current Policies

Education

While the abolition of the vernacular school system reduced racial and religious divisions, socio-economic disparities persist. The government's slogan, "every school, a good school," is criticised as idealistic (Pandemonium, 2024), with wealthier schools receiving greater investment (The Kopi, n.d.). To address this, the government has implemented measures to encourage social mixing, such as relocating ACS (Primary) to Tengah, a more heartland location (Ang, 2023). This move aims to provide greater accessibility to students from different backgrounds, promoting diversity within elite schools.

Another policy targeting educational disparities is the increase in reserved spaces for non-affiliated students in the Phase 2C Balloting Exercise (Oo, n.d.). By raising the allocation from 20 to 40 spaces, the government seeks to give more children an opportunity to attend prestigious schools. However, critics argue that this does not fully address the issue, as many of these schools remain located in affluent areas, making them less accessible to lower-income families (Oo, n.d.). Additionally, backlash from ACS (Primary) alumni over the school's relocation demonstrates resistance to social integration within certain elite school communities (Tseng, 2023).

Laws

The Ethnic Integration Policy enforces racial quotas in public housing to promote social interactions among different racial groups (Wong, 2024; Gov.sg, 2020). This policy has been largely successful in preventing racial enclaves and fostering social cohesion. However, as Singapore's demographics evolve, the influx of foreign residents has raised concerns over the policy's effectiveness. Many foreign families do not fit into the traditional CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others) racial classification model, complicating housing allocations (Ong, 2021; Zalizan, 2024).

Furthermore, the policy has economic implications, particularly for ethnic minorities who often face disadvantages when selling their flats due to restrictions on buyer eligibility (Ong, 2021). This financial burden can contribute to socio-economic disparities, potentially counteracting the policy's aim of social integration. While the government has acknowledged these challenges, the long-term sustainability of the policy remains in question.

The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act is another key legislative measure that ensures religious tolerance and prevents extremism. It grants the government power to issue restraining orders against individuals or groups that incite religious discord (Singapore Statutes Online, 1992). While it has played a role in preserving social harmony, some critics question whether it remains adequate in addressing contemporary threats to cohesion, such as the rise of online radicalization and foreign influence (Chin, 2022).

Organisations

Harmony Circles and OnePeople.sg promote racial and religious harmony through grassroots initiatives, including interfaith dialogues and cultural celebrations (MCCY, n.d.; OnePeople.sg, n.d.). These efforts aim to foster greater understanding between different communities and strengthen national unity. However, the effectiveness of these organisations has been called into question due to perceived political affiliations. Some critics argue that their close ties to the ruling party create a sense of bias, potentially alienating those who hold differing political views (Lim et al., 2023).

Similarly, the Community Self-Help Groups (SHGs) offer race-based aid to low-income households within different ethnic communities (Central Provident Fund Board, 2024; Chelvan, 2022). By addressing specific needs within each racial group, SHGs provide targeted assistance, including educational support, financial aid, and skills development programs. However, while these efforts help bridge socio-economic gaps, some argue that race-based assistance contradicts Singapore's broader goal of multiracial integration.

The People's Association (PA) is another key organisation that fosters community engagement and grassroots participation (Ministry for Culture, Community and Youth, 2024). Through events and initiatives, PA encourages interaction among Singaporeans of different backgrounds. However, like OnePeople.sg, PA has faced criticism over its perceived political bias, which some believe undermines its ability to serve as an impartial platform for community bonding (Lim et al., 2023).

Schemes

ComLink+ supports lower-income families through financial aid, mentorship programs, and social mobility initiatives (Ministry of Social and Family Development, n.d., 2023). The scheme provides families

with dedicated caseworkers and structured support to help them achieve long-term stability. However, some critics argue that it does not tackle the root causes of poverty, such as long-term debt and intergenerational financial struggles (Quek, 2023).

Despite its aims, ComLink+ has struggled with implementation challenges. Reports indicate that only 26% of families benefiting from the program's Progress Packages regularly send their children to preschool, highlighting gaps in engagement and accessibility (Tan, 2024). Factors such as health issues, marital problems, and mental health struggles often hinder participation, underscoring the need for a more comprehensive approach to support these families (Tan, 2024).

HDB's revised housing classification system aims to prevent socio-economic enclaves by replacing the Mature/Non-Mature classification with the new Standard/Plus/Prime categories (Ong, 2023). This change seeks to make public housing more equitable by preventing price disparities between older and newer estates. Additionally, HDB provides subsidies for Plus and Prime flats to ensure affordability, allowing families to choose housing based on preference rather than financial constraints (Housing Development Board, 2024).

To further promote integration, HDB has also begun co-locating rental and sold units within new Build-To-Order (BTO) projects. About 20 such blocks have been built to encourage social mixing between lower-income and middle-class families (Ong, 2023). This initiative challenges stereotypes and fosters greater empathy among residents, contributing to stronger community bonds.

The National Integration Council's Singapore Citizenship Journey helps new citizens assimilate through interactive online modules, experiential learning programs, and community sharing sessions (SG101, n.d.). By exposing immigrants to Singapore's history, culture, and shared values, the program seeks to deepen their sense of belonging and promote national unity. While the initiative has been instrumental in facilitating integration, it remains a work in progress. Some new citizens struggle with language and cultural adaptation, and there is ongoing debate over whether such programs sufficiently address barriers to social cohesion. Nevertheless, the Singapore Citizenship Journey represents an important step toward fostering inclusivity in an increasingly diverse society.

Case for More Policies

Threat to Social Cohesion in Future

Singapore has a relatively high Gini coefficient compared to its regional peers (Tan, 2024) and ranks among the bottom 10 countries in addressing inequality, according to Oxfam International. It has the third highest Gini coefficient globally, behind the United States and the United Kingdom (Raghavan, 2018).

Income inequality is a key indicator of socio-economic disparity, and without stronger wealth redistribution policies, rising social tensions and discontent may emerge. A rigid and stratified social system could lead to heightened political divisions and undermine social cohesion (Raghavan, 2018). This issue is especially relevant as Singapore positions itself as a global wealth management hub (Monetary Authority of Singapore, n.d.). The influx of ultra-high-net-worth individuals has raised concerns among working- and middle-class citizens about integration into society (Ong, 2023) and whether policies will be introduced to address growing income disparities, even as national wealth increases (Yip & Chee, 2024). To maintain social cohesion, Singapore may need to adopt measures that reduce the Gini coefficient and ensure meaningful interaction across income groups.

Shifting Narrative of Social Cohesion from Social Media

The rise of social media and internet connectivity has increased exposure to extremist content, heightening the risk of self-radicalization in Singapore (Williams Etumnu & Williams Etumnu, 2023). This remains the primary terrorism threat, especially with global conflicts such as the Russia-Ukraine war and tensions in the Middle East, which may encourage state and non-state actors to adopt terrorist tactics (Internal Security Department, 2023). A recent case involved a 17-year-old Singaporean who was arrested just weeks before a planned attack in Tampines after being influenced by foreign extremist teachings, highlighting the severity of the threat (Devaraj, 2024). Additionally, past cases, such as a youth arrested under the ISA for plotting attacks against Muslims after being inspired by the Christchurch shootings, demonstrate the broad reach of radicalization (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2021).

Religious and racial harmony, fundamental to Singapore's stability since its separation from Malaysia, would be severely impacted by such attacks (Chin, 2023). The 1964 Race Riots serve as a reminder of the dangers of division, reinforcing the need for strong cohesion policies (Abdul Rahim et al., 2024). To

counter radicalization, Singapore may need to strengthen existing initiatives and explore new measures that account for its multiracial and multireligious landscape, potentially drawing insights from international best practices (Berner & Bertrand, 2023).

Case Against More Policies

The Libertarian Argument and Possibility of Government Failure

Some argue that the government's extensive role in fostering social cohesion risks infringing on personal freedoms, particularly in a soft authoritarian state like Singapore. The Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) was introduced to safeguard social harmony (Yong, 2019), yet five years on, public opinion remains divided. While some see it as necessary, others view it as a restriction on free speech (Ng, 2024). Past initiatives also sought to enhance social cohesion through public engagement, such as the Our Singapore Conversation (OSC) and the Forward SG Exercise. However, concerns persist about the representativeness and effectiveness of these efforts. Critics argue that the OSC's framing of questions skewed responses in favour of government policies, and that the selected participants did not accurately reflect the socio-economic diversity of Singapore (Chan, 2013). Consequently, the initiative failed to convey genuine public sentiment, potentially leading to ineffective policy decisions. Moving forward, the government may benefit from refining its data collection methods and engagement strategies to develop more impactful and inclusive policies.

Adequacy of Singapore's Current State of Social Cohesion

Since 1965, Singapore has made significant progress in fostering social cohesion among its diverse population. Today, it is recognized as one of the most socially cohesive societies globally and the most cohesive in Southeast Asia (Hussain, 2022). This success is largely attributed to long-term government policies and responsiveness to grassroots sentiments.

Key indicators reflect this progress. The Gini coefficient has continued to decline (Yeoh, 2024), and societal perceptions of disadvantaged groups, such as rental flat residents, have improved (Ong, 2023). These trends suggest that current policies remain effective, reducing the urgency for additional interventions. Furthermore, Singapore's model of social cohesion has gained international recognition,

influencing policies in Western countries like the United States and the United Kingdom (Hussain, 2022; Hart, 2024).

Future Projections

We project that the Singapore government will continue to push out policies to encourage social cohesion, especially in a Singapore which is now less defined by race and religion but by class and SES (Paulo, 2018). However, the efficacy of such policies will continue to be called into question. This is because more and more Singaporeans are wanting political change, and no longer supporting the PAP as much (Lau & Lim, 2024), and hence, any future policies implemented by the government will be scrutinised heavily and questioned greatly. This is a great challenge facing the government in choosing to implement more policies to encourage social cohesion.

Conclusion

As the world today becomes more radicalised and divided, it is imperative that Singapore continues to remain socially cohesive, especially since she is a melting pot of cultures (George Washington University, 2024) and a cosmopolitan society (Britannica, n.d.). Singapore had left Malaysia in the wake of ugly social tensions resulting in riots (National Library Board, n.d.), but we must not leave the lessons learnt to posterity. Delegates should consider carefully the most pressing threats to Singapore's social cohesion today, and how best to resolve said threats.

Questions a Resolution Must Answer:

1. Are current measures enough to encourage social cohesion?
2. What is/are the largest threat(s) to social cohesion in Singapore now?
3. What should the role of the government be in enhancing social cohesion?
4. How will priorities for social cohesion in Singapore shift accordingly, given demographic changes and future developments?

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Topic 2: How can Singapore grow her arts scene organically?

Introduction

Arts and culture foster creativity, imagination, and emotional connection (National Arts Council, 2012). While organic growth typically refers to expansion based on internal capacity (CFI Team, n.d.), its meaning in Singapore's arts scene remains ambiguous. Many interpret it as increasing community engagement with local artists rather than foreign talent, while others emphasize a bottom-up rather than government-led approach (Sidhu & Kane, 2019). However, the government continues to drive macro-level policies such as the Our SG Arts Plan (National Arts Council, 2023), indicating a preference for top-down development.

Although interest in the arts has grown from 29% in 2020 to 34% in 2022 (Lok et al., 2023), much of this increase stems from government-led initiatives like the Our SG Arts Plan (2018–2022) (Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, 2018). While these policies have benefited emerging artists (Sidhu & Kane, 2019), true organic growth—where the arts scene develops independently of state intervention—remains an unmet milestone for Singapore.

Historical Overview

Singapore's early art scene was shaped by diverse cultural influences, with British schools emphasizing watercolour and Chinese schools focusing on ink painting. This led to a dominant style incorporating traditional Chinese paintings, Nanyang techniques, and British watercolour (Artpodium, n.d.). However, as urbanization disrupted communities, young artists began experimenting with conceptual and performance art. A pivotal moment came when Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) students challenged traditional forms, ushering in a new era of contemporary art (biblioasia, 2019). Influential artists like Teo Eng Seng and Choy Weng Yang introduced modern artistic concepts from abroad (Teo, n.d.), further expanding the creative landscape.

Beyond visual arts, Singapore's theatre scene evolved significantly. While Chinese opera dominated pre-war, local playwrights such as Lim Chor Pee and Goh Poh Seng laid the foundation for English-language theatre. By the 1990s, productions like Kuo Pao Kun's *The Coffin is Too Big for the Hole* (1985) demonstrated the growing sophistication of local theatre, allowing amateur groups to turn professional (Wong, 2017).

Despite this progress, traditional art forms are fading. Chinese opera troupes like Nam Hwa Opera struggle due to declining dialect proficiency, a trend linked to the Speak Mandarin Campaign (Mok, 2023). Meanwhile, Western influences, stemming from British colonialism, continue to shape local art. This is evident in works like Kevin Tan's *Clarke Quay* (Gallery 1819, n.d.) and the rising popularity of contemporary dance (National Arts Council, n.d.).

Long-held stereotypes portray local artists as impractical or inferior to foreign talent (Tai, 2020). The government reinforced this perception by introducing the Foreign Artistic Talent Scheme (ForArts) in 1991, granting PR status to foreign artists (National Arts Council, 2021). While its direct impact on local artists is limited, it underscores the emphasis on foreign validation, a sentiment echoed by many Singaporeans (Hijanah, 2019).

Current Problems

Political Conservatism and Censorship

Local artists in Singapore have found it challenging to utilise art as a medium of expression in a conservative society like Singapore characterised by stringent media regulation (Tandoc Jr & Chew, 2024). This has made it difficult for local artists to engage in artistic expressions that may be politically driven or incorporating elements that may be deemed to besmirch the country. For instance, the government's stringent control can be seen in how a mural of a Samsui Woman with a cigarette in hand was initially called to be amended after having been interpreted as a promotion of vices (Tan, 2024). This illustrates how despite living in a pluralistic society, local artists may struggle to express their

thoughts and emotions through the arts due to censorship, self-censorship or otherwise (Chong, 2012, 7).

Lack of Showcase Platforms

Unlike many other countries with an established arts scene, local artists in Singapore lack access to opportunities to showcase or hone their artistic capabilities. For instance, Singapore does not host the famous singing reality competition “The Voice”, which could provide an international platform for local artistes such as Nathan Hartono, who became more famous after doing well in Sing!China (Teng, 2020) and Joanna Dong to gain recognition both locally and at home , especially since Singaporeans only seem to recognise our local artistes after they become famous overseas, such as Regina Song of TikTok fame (Chua, 2024). For example, JJ Lin came to musical prominence only after pursuing his music career in Taiwan, pointing to a lack of popular platforms for local artists.

Lack of Public Interest in Local Arts

Singapore's arts practitioners often face societal stigma, with many perceiving them as academically inferior (Walton, 2018). In a highly competitive, grade-focused society (Koh-Chua, 2023), the arts are undervalued. The local music scene, in particular, suffers from cultural cringe—the belief that Singaporean culture is inferior to foreign influences (Ignite Media, 2021). Factors such as authenticity, accent, and perceived lack of skill contribute to this sentiment (Mattar, 2009). Many Singaporeans also struggle to accept music sung with a local accent, despite contemporary artists largely moving away from Singlish in their work (Ignite Media, 2021). As a result, local music remains associated with nostalgic nationalistic songs like Dick Lee’s Home (Ling, 2021).

Foreign productions dominate Singapore’s arts landscape, overshadowing local talent and limiting opportunities for growth. Musicals like Hamilton and Phantom of the Opera attract larger audiences and media attention (Ang, 2024), creating an imbalance where local productions struggle to compete for resources. Even premier venues like the Esplanade prioritize international acts, pushing local artists to less prominent time slots and spaces.

Singapore's arts scene reflects an international identity shaped by Western influences, often sidelining traditional and minority art forms. While this global outlook strengthens Singapore's position as an arts hub, it weakens the representation of its diverse cultural heritage. Western classical music and ballet dominate over traditional art forms, forcing local artists to balance cultural authenticity with international appeal. This tension results in works that are neither distinctly Singaporean nor fully global, diluting the arts' potential in shaping national identity (BBC, 2023).

Current Solutions

Grassroots Initiatives

A mix of 'international' influenced and traditional arts organisations, established and funded at the grassroots levels, help to maintain support and visibility for the Arts. Grassroots initiatives have been largely centred around promoting arts appreciation such as Art Outreach, a non-profit arts intermediary, promotes art appreciation and strengthens local networks (Art Outreach, n.d.). It engages youth through educational programs in schools, fostering organic growth in the arts scene. To support practitioners, it hosts initiatives like the Art Outreach Summit during Singapore Art Week 2025, offering artists access to expert mentorship and networks (Art Outreach, 2024). In promoting theatrical art, famous theatre groups such as Wild Rice create productions with a distinctly local flavour, providing relatable experiences for Singaporean audiences (Wild Rice, n.d.). Other theatre groups, such as The Necessary Stage (TNS), a non-profit theatre company, is known for producing innovative and thought-provoking works. Led by Cultural Medallion recipients Alvin Tan and Haresh Sharma, TNS also organizes the M1 Singapore Fringe Festival, further shaping Singapore's theatre scene (The Necessary Stage, n.d.).

Initiatives like The Vocal Consort (TVC) also help promote art forms like singing. TVC was founded in 2001 by award-winning choral conductor Professor Nelson Kwei, serving as a leading community choir that fosters a love for singing and promotes social bonding (The Vocal Consort, n.d.).

Moreover, traditional arts such as the opera have institutions like Nam Hwa Opera (NHO) that help preserve and modernise Teochew Opera in Singapore. To engage younger audiences, it reimagines traditional performances using new formats and technologies and presents shorter excerpts (Roots, n.d.). NHO also promotes Singapore's Teochew Opera internationally through cultural exchanges and

performances in countries such as South Korea, Cambodia, Malaysia, and Germany. Its recognition by both local and overseas institutions helps boost its prestige and attract wider interest (Nam Hwa Opera, n.d.).

Hence, the arts scene in Singapore is largely reflective of both her multi-racial and cosmopolitan identities. However, it also continues to suffer from fragmentism and disunity, especially since many such organisations are representative of their art form rather than working on the big picture of the overall arts scene, resulting in many small and disparate organisations that do not always have consensus objectives (Lim, 2018).

Governmental Policies

The Singapore Arts Plan

Singapore's arts policies focus on fostering a connected society, a distinctive city, and a creative economy, as outlined in the Singapore Arts Plan (2023–2027). This initiative emphasizes inter-organizational collaboration, exemplified by the Lively Places Programme, which integrates the arts into heartland communities (Tan & Narayanan, 2024). Moreover, the plan seeks to leverage technology to shorten the gap between people and the Art. Under the Singapore Art Plan, a digital platform, Catch.sg, serves as a guide for Singaporeans to explore various Art events such as musicals, festivals, and exhibitions (Ong, 2024). Additionally, the National Arts Council and SMRT Trains Ltd. signed a three-year Memorandum of Understanding to enliven spaces of commute through Singaporeans music, poetry and busking to widen avenues of exposure to Singapore's art in public spaces. This collaboration is anchored by the launch of the I Play SG Music campaign, led by NAC, which brings homegrown music closer to commuters across 125 MRT, LRT stations and bus interchanges (SMRT Corporation, 2023).

Skills Framework for the Arts

The Skills Framework for the Arts, a SkillsFuture initiative, supports lifelong learning and skills development, easing entry into the arts industry. Its collaboration with arts organizations encourages organic growth and nurtures a local pool of artists. One component of the Skills Framework for Arts is the Skills Maps that outlines 40 distinct occupations, each accompanied by critical work functions, key

tasks, and the necessary skills and competencies in relation to the Arts Education and Technical Theatre and Production sectors. This serves as a roadmap for career progression and development of potential artists (*Skills Framework for Arts*, 2023).

Arts Education in Singapore

Arts education in Singapore offers alternative pathways, including the School of the Arts (SOTA) and the University of the Arts Singapore (UAS), which provides the only dedicated tertiary arts education (School of the Arts, n.d.; University of the Arts Singapore, n.d.). Beyond schools catered to the Arts, Art is also a mandatory subject in Primary and lower secondary levels in Singapore while Music being mandatory in Primary School. This provides students with exposure to the Arts at a young age and plays a role in fostering their interest. Additionally, some Junior Colleges such as Anglo-Chinese Junior College, Tampines Meridian Junior College, and Victoria Junior College offer the Drama Elective Programme. However, arts careers face persistent stereotypes of instability, with Singapore's emphasis on secure employment posing a challenge to the sector's perception (Davie, 2021; Chor & Cheow, 2024).

Platforms for Artistic Recognition

Prominent platforms, such as the Cultural Medallion, recognize artistic excellence and provide funding of up to \$80,000 for recipients to advance their work and engage the community (National Arts Council, n.d.). While the Medallion celebrates both traditional and Western arts, it has faced criticism over its perceived lack of prestige and governmental support. Issues persist, as seen in the case of playwright Haresh Sharma, whose appointment at the National University of Singapore was unexpectedly revoked despite his Medallion status (Singapore Unbound, 2024; Tan, n.d.). Furthermore, the Singapore Online Arts Repository (SOAR) is another platform recognises artists excellence by collating their artworks and ensuring materials are digitally available for future generations of Singaporeans. The collection encompasses Singapore's performing arts, visual arts and literary arts and even feature Singapore's leading artists such as Young Artist Award recipients, and long-standing arts groups. (NLB, n.d.), recognising artists' excellence.

International Exposure

Internationally, initiatives like Singapore: Inside Out, a travelling showcase commissioned for SG50, have provided exposure for Singaporean artists in major art hubs, earning critical recognition and reinforcing the value of foreign validation in Singapore's arts scene (Zarch, 2015; Chee, 2015; Hijanah, 2019). Other initiatives include participating in Biennale Arte, the most established international contemporary art event and widely regarded as the most significant. The Singapore Pavilion, located in a complex of buildings called the Sale d'Armi, a key site in Venice, has also featured artists such as Shubigi Rao (2022) and Song-Ming Ang (2019) (Singapore Arts Museum, n.d.).

Local Arts Institutions and Public Engagement

Local institutions such as the National Gallery Singapore and the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) have expanded outreach through multi-sensory exhibitions and public engagement campaigns (Tan & Narayanan, 2024; National Gallery Singapore, 2020; Singapore Art Museum, 2021). However, these platforms also attract international artists, raising concerns about whether they truly nurture local talent, as seen with the Esplanade hosting major touring shows (Halpern, n.d.). Besides this, the National Arts Council has also implemented 20 Nodes, from public libraries, community centres, to integrated community and lifestyle hubs like Our Tampines Hub and even educational institutions such as Republic Polytechnic. (National Arts Council, n.d.). Through these Nodes, Singaporeans are exposed to a wider range of quality art programmes presented by established artists and arts groups, hence resulting in higher public engagement.

Overall, the government employs a multifaceted approach and multi-pronged strategy to encourage organic growth of the arts scene. From encouraging arts education, to providing spaces for artist talent to flourish and be showcased, and to nominally recognising the achievements of the arts scene, there is no shortage of government intervention in the arts scene. However, as good as the government's initiatives are, they are sometimes hampered by divergences in opinions with arts scene practitioners, and funding being tied largely to government support leading to potential self-censorship (Fahira, 2021).

Case Studies

China

China's art scene blends tradition and modernity, with calligraphy, ink painting, ceramics, and folk arts like paper cutting preserving cultural heritage (Williams College Museum of Art, n.d.). Simultaneously, contemporary arts thrive, particularly in the music industry, where Mandopop has gained international recognition (Cheng, 2021). Renowned artists such as Jay Chou, GEM, Silence Wang, and A-mei play a significant role in shaping the industry's global influence (Lier, 2020).

China faces significant challenges in fostering artistic vibrancy due to strict government censorship (Wenzel-Vollenbroich, 2024), which limits artistic freedom East End Arts & Humanities Council, particularly in politically sensitive areas. Commercial interests also dominate the industry (Mei, 2024), prioritizing mainstream, highly profitable art forms over experimental and independent works. This focus restricts creative diversity and limits opportunities for emerging artists, potentially stifling innovation (Kanter, 2006).

To strengthen its arts sector, China has invested in cultural infrastructure (Jiang & Dai, 2024), establishing prominent art hubs like Beijing's 798 Art Zone (Sawyer, 2024) and Shanghai's M50 (Wang, 2018). These spaces provide platforms for artistic exposure and creative exchange. Art education has also been expanded, with universities and specialized schools nurturing the next generation of artists (Lin, 2024). Additionally, international cultural festivals and government-backed art exchange programs, such as the Confucius Institutes (Jiang & Bi, 2024) have facilitated global collaborations, enhancing China's presence on the world stage (Fiveable, 2024). Independent art collectives further contribute by creating alternative spaces for experimental art (Julie, 2016), enriching the cultural landscape and expanding creative expression.

Case For Grassroots Initiatives

Empowering Organic Growth

Organic growth in the arts is most effective when driven by grassroots initiatives, allowing the community to shape and sustain artistic engagement. In Singapore, where state influence is strong, a bottom-up

approach fosters a more authentic and diverse arts scene. When artists and arts groups take the lead, they can create work that resonates with local communities, encouraging deeper and more meaningful participation (Lizeray, 2023).

Encouraging Artistic Freedom

A grassroots-driven arts scene reduces dependence on state oversight, allowing for greater creative freedom. Government involvement often brings restrictions, as seen in the censorship of a mural depicting a Samsui Woman smoking, which was removed for allegedly promoting smoking (Tan, 2024). By contrast, when artists and communities spearhead their own projects, they can explore a broader range of themes and ideas without external limitations, leading to richer artistic expression and innovation.

Strengthening Community Ownership

When arts organisations lead initiatives, they cultivate a sense of ownership among artists and audiences alike. Unlike government-led efforts, which may prioritize policy objectives, grassroots projects are deeply rooted in the values and interests of the community. For example, while the Art-In-Transit project aimed to integrate art into daily life, some in the arts community felt it was overshadowed by its association with MRT infrastructure, reducing its impact (Lee, 2016). By contrast, community-led projects ensure that art remains the focal point and retains its significance.

Building Sustainable Artistic Ecosystems

Grassroots initiatives foster long-term sustainability by cultivating local talent and audiences. Without relying solely on government funding, independent arts groups can develop resilient ecosystems through collaborations, sponsorships, and audience engagement. This self-sufficiency prevents over-reliance on state resources and mitigates risks associated with policy shifts. As Nominated Member of Parliament Calvin Cheng suggested, government funding of the arts can be problematic due to the subjective nature of artistic value (Ho & Said, 2017). A thriving grassroots movement ensures that the arts scene continues to grow, regardless of external policy changes.

Case For Governmental Policies

Government-Driven Arts Development

The Singaporean government, representing the entire population, is well-positioned to shape the arts scene in ways that appeal to the broader public. Unlike individual arts groups, which cater primarily to niche communities, the government can leverage its influence and reach to identify what resonates with Singaporeans. Through policy initiatives, it can create programs that attract and sustain public interest in the arts, fostering greater participation and appreciation (Chong, 2018).

Unifying a Fragmented Arts Community

Singapore's arts community is highly fragmented, with various groups struggling to align on common goals for growth (Lim, 2018). Government intervention can bridge these gaps by fostering collaborations and pooling resources effectively. Through initiatives like Our SG Arts Plan (National Arts Council, 2023), the government encourages cross-industry partnerships, bringing together disparate arts groups that may not have otherwise worked in unison. This structured approach ensures a more cohesive and sustainable arts ecosystem.

Overcoming Negative Stereotypes

Arts practitioners in Singapore often face stereotypes of being impractical or disconnected from mainstream society. Common misconceptions include the belief that artists lack academic ability or contribute little to the economy (Foo, 2016). The government plays a crucial role in shifting these perceptions by integrating art into daily life and public spaces (National Arts Council, 2023). Such efforts not only normalize artistic expression but also highlight the value of the arts in national development, something grassroots initiatives alone may struggle to achieve at scale.

While government policies provide structure and resources, organic growth remains essential for artistic authenticity. Representatives should explore how both top-down and bottom-up approaches can complement each other. A balanced strategy—where government support empowers grassroots initiatives—may be the key to a thriving, inclusive arts scene in Singapore.

Future Projections

Singapore's arts scene is expected to expand as the nation develops and becomes more liberal (Woon, 2017). Growth will be driven by youth-focused policies and initiatives (Chen, 2019), with both community and government efforts playing a key role. Visual arts, in particular, are poised for significant growth as Singapore aims to establish itself as a global art hub, exemplified by ART SG 2025. The country's share of global art exports increased from 1% in 2019 to 5% in 2023, reflecting this strategic focus (Movius, 2025). Additionally, the establishment of the University of the Arts further reinforces the emphasis on visual arts education (Times Higher Education, 2024).

Performance art, especially dance, is also expected to gain traction due to the growing influence of social media platforms like TikTok, which have fuelled interest in social dancing (Bagley, 2021; National Arts Council & Black Box, 2011). In contrast, traditional arts face a decline, as they struggle with both general stereotypes about the arts and perceptions of being outdated, making them less appealing to younger generations (Fang, 2016).

For sustainable growth, the arts sector requires strong collaboration between community-led initiatives and government support. Art Outreach, for instance, conducts learning journeys to Art-In-Transit exhibitions in MRT stations, a program enabled by government initiatives. Likewise, the success of government strategies such as the SG Arts Plan depends on partnerships with arts organizations to maximize impact.

Conclusion

The 2012 Arts and Culture Strategic Review set ambitious targets for arts engagement, aiming for 80% of Singaporeans to attend at least one arts event annually and 50% to actively participate by 2025 (National Arts Council, 2012). While attendance reached 79% by 2023, participation remained significantly lower at 28%, far from the intended goal (National Arts Council, n.d.). This indicates that while awareness has increased, active involvement in the arts remains limited, suggesting minimal organic growth despite government initiatives.

Interest in the arts has stagnated, with only 34% of Singaporeans expressing interest in 2023, a figure unchanged since 2006 (National Arts Council, n.d.). Additionally, engagement with local art is minimal, with only 3 in 10 arts attendees interacting with Singaporean works. Comparatively, Singapore's artistic

contributions have yet to reach the prominence of Western or regional counterparts (Yusof, 2025). Even at ART SG 2025, Singapore's premier art fair, international art remains the primary attraction (ART SG, n.d.), highlighting the struggle of local art to capture public interest.

These trends suggest that current policies have not effectively fostered meaningful growth in the arts sector. To position Singapore as a global arts hub, it is crucial to explore underlying causes for low participation and limited recognition of local artists. Further investigation and strategic adjustments are needed to ensure sustainable development and broader engagement in the arts (Hoe, 2018).

Questions a Resolution Must Answer

1. What falls under the umbrella of being part of the arts scene?
2. What is the government's role in promoting growth in the arts scene?
3. To what extent can Singapore grow organically in its arts scene? Is there a size limit?

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