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### **Soft authoritarianism, political pragmatism and cultural policies: Singapore as a City for the Arts**

*By Can-Seng Ooi*



Copenhagen  
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## **Soft authoritarianism, political pragmatism and cultural policies: Singapore as a City for the Arts**

Can-Seng OOI, Ph.D.

*Associate Professor*

*imagine.. Creative Industries Research Centre*

*Copenhagen Business School, Denmark*

Porcelænshaven 24

DK-2000 Frederiksberg

Denmark

Email: ooi@cbs.dk

**ABSTRACT:** Can the arts and cultural prosper under a less than democratic political regime? This paper looks at the soft authoritarian Singaporean government and the making of Singapore into a “City for the Arts”. Many scholars advocate that a culturally vibrant and creative city must also celebrate diversity, tolerance and experimentation. This implies that a democratic space is needed for creative energies to flow. Singapore is not known for its democracy. But Singapore has become relatively successful in being the cultural hub in the region. A more liberal approach to diversity and criticism of the authorities can now be observed but there are still many strong-handed social and political controls in the city-state. This paper shows that the Singapore authorities weigh the economic, political and social costs while they liberalize the environment to promote Singapore as a City for the Arts.

**Keywords:** city for the arts, soft authoritarian government, freedom of expression

## *Introduction*

There is often a taken-for-granted assumption about a culturally vibrant country or city – it is also democratic. Democratic spaces and cultural vibrancy go hand-in-hand (e.g. see Bayliss 2007; Florida 2003; Healey 2004; Hospers 2003; Hutton 2003; Scott 2006; Tallon & Bromley 2004; Trueman, Cook, & Cornelius 2008). A creative and culturally exciting country or city is underpinned by spaces of experimentation and innovation. The mess, quirks, spunkiness and unexpected enrich the creative scene, whether it is for the arts, advertising, film making or other creative activities. In such an environment, artists and creative individuals are free to make choices and try new things. Artistic expressions challenge establishments and proven ideas. Ideas are pushed and boundaries redefined. These are traits of a tolerant democratic environment. Unlike a totalitarian regime, a democratic society allows people the room to experiment, to disagree with the status quo and to express their thoughts freely. For example, Florida (2003) finds San Francisco to be an attractive place for the cultivation of creativity and innovation because of the city's open-minded and tolerant heterogeneous populations. The exciting cultural scene in San Francisco also offers stimulating experiences. As a result, creative individuals move to places like San Francisco that allow them the space to think, absorb, express and create. Similarly, Healey (2004) highlights the diversity and heterogeneity of the urban milieu. The multitude of interests of stakeholders, the flow of contrasting ideas and the clashes of energies must be harnessed democratically to mobilize exciting collective efforts; a rich cultural life and creative scene will then expand (Healey 2004).

Governments in countries like South Korea, China and the United Arab Emirates are not known as democratic but they are also pushing forward a set of cultural policies to spruce up their cities, attract foreign skilled workers and draw in tourists. But without the democratic spaces, can their cultural and creative economies grow? Keane (2004) observes that the Chinese creative

economy will remain limited because of its over-regulated cultural sector. Innovative and creative energies in the country are being taunted. In South Korea, the government has embarked on a “cities of culture” programme. The city of Gwangju, as Lee (2007b) discovers, has many exciting visions and plans but the policy is top-down and without active local participation. The project is in effect largely hollow.

Countries and cities that pursue the creative economy are also celebrating diversity, tolerance and civil society (e.g. Center for an Urban Future 2005; Held et al. 2005). Regulations and policies may have to be changed to unleash the creative energies. For instance in Singapore, the authorities acknowledge the necessity for social and political liberalization. Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong made the point in an interview with the German newspapers, *Der Spiegel* (Lee 2007a)

Creative people need a sense that they can do what they want to do, and that non-conformism has a place, not everybody has to be exactly the same. At the same time, it’s not clear that you can make people creative. I mean, some people are naturally creative, others have those tendencies. The environment helps some, but basically, you’re looking for the right material to develop. We have to have the right environment in Singapore, which is open, cosmopolitan, tolerant and connected to the world. You can’t be closed off by yourself and then frozen and unchanged when the world is changing.

From the above points, does it mean that less democratic places will not be able to compete in the cultural and creative economies? If they choose to, does it mean that the authoritarian regimes need to change the way they govern?

Concentrating on the arts and culture, this paper examines Singapore. The soft-authoritarian regime in Singapore is reluctant to liberalize socially and politically. But the authorities see the necessity for the city-state to pursue the cultural and creative economies. The interaction between the government and various societal stakeholders is constantly negotiated, as the country builds up

a more vibrant cultural scene while maintaining a restricted democratic environment. The emerging cultural strategy is multifaceted, nuanced and complex; selected democratic spaces are opened up while others kept shut. The next section of this paper explains why Singapore is still considered a soft authoritarian state. Following which the cultural policies of Singapore are presented and how the restrictions on public creative expressions are maintained. The Singaporean approach to the promotion of the cultural and creative industries is then evaluated in the “Discussion” section. The concluding paragraphs accentuate and summarize the main arguments and revisit the assumption that democracy is necessary for the creation of a vibrant cultural city.

### *A Soft-Authoritarian State and Political Pragmatism*

In the early 1990s, when East Asia was experiencing phenomenal economic success, Francis Fukuyama argues that Singapore’s brand of governance offers an alternative to Western liberal democracy (Fukuyama 1992). As an economically prosperous but “soft authoritarianism” state, Singapore (together with Asian countries like Japan and South Korea) shows that “capitalism has become far more universal than democracy, and countries there have found a way to reconcile market economics with a kind of paternalistic authoritarianism that persuades rather than coerces” (Fukuyama 1992). With the focus on economic growth and maintaining social control, a soft authoritarian country like Singapore can easily engineer a “thoroughly modern, technologically based society by promoting a highly disciplined and educated workforce” (Fukuyama 1992). Unlike earlier communist dictatorships (e.g. former USSR, pre-reform China and Vietnam), citizens living in soft authoritarian regimes are not assigned to fixed jobs, given limited consumer choices and fed with revolutionary communist propaganda, instead they compete for jobs they like, live in dynamic economic environments and taught to put society before self.

Despite controls on the mass media, heavy policing and regulations on aspects of one's private life, citizens in soft authoritarian states get to participate in elections.

In Singapore, the People's Action Party (PAP) has been in power since 1959, when the then-colony was given self-governance by the British. Singapore's soft authoritarian model has underpinned the PAP approach to governance for over half a century. With the emphasis on communitarian ideals, economic progress and strong political control, scholars have characterised the PAP's ideological position as "political pragmatism" (Chua 1995; King 2006; Mauzy & Milne 2002). Political pragmatism can be described in various ways.

After China's paramount leader Deng Xiaoping held up Singapore as a model to help in China's transition to an open market economy in 1992, the then-Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew was immediately interviewed by Xinhua News Agency. Lee Kuan Yew is widely recognised as the founding father of modern Singapore and was prime minister from 1959 to 1991. In that interview, he highlighted the importance of learning from Western science and technology because it offers a rational approach to problem-solving (*The Straits Times* 1992). "It means that you have to keep an open mind, and do not allow ideology or religion or social or cultural prejudice from excluding any explanation of a problem and the solution to it" (*The Straits Times* 1992).

Based on this approach, the PAP government has made Singapore into a stable legal, political, economic, technological and social environment that is attractive to businesses. Meritocratic competition is fierce in the education system and job market. Industrial relations are however controlled (Koh & Ooi 2000; Mauzy & Milne 2002). Enforcing tough punishments for seemingly minor uncivil behaviour – e.g. jay-walking, spitting and not flushing public toilets after use – indicate the authorities' tendencies to micro-manage Singaporeans' everyday life. With the ruling party controlling 82 of the 84 parliamentary seats, and a mass media pliant towards the government, political freedom is restricted (Chua 1995; Gomez 2006; Lydgate 2003).

The political system has nonetheless changed over the years. Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong (prime minister from 1991 to 2004) acknowledged that the political system in Singapore must liberalize but three “core principles” must be kept (Au Yong 2008):

One, any changes must be fair to all parties and give them an equal chance to contest and win [principle of meritocracy]; two, they must not lead to democratic chaos and politics of division; and three, they must not put Singapore's unity and harmony, growth and prosperity and long-term interests at risk.'

In an interview with Fareed Zakaria, editor of Newsweek International on CNN, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew did not deny that he and his government exercise tight control in the country over the last half century, leading to “too domineering and coercive a state” (Li 2008). He replied that Singaporeans still choose the government through clean elections. Nonetheless, Lee “hopes Singapore will follow America's lead in areas such as inventiveness and creativity, but not its inability to control either drug or gun problems” (Li 2008). In other words, the Singaporean government wants to cultivate the cultural and creative industries but maintain strong control.

In sum, the main traits of political pragmatism in Singapore are: 1) governance should not be tainted by established political ideology; 2) the focus of government should be on maintaining economic growth and social political stability; and 3) personal freedoms may be sacrificed and unpopular measures implemented to achieve economic and social goals. Can such a pragmatic approach hinder Singapore from becoming a “City for the Arts” (Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts or MICA 2008)?

## *A City for the Arts?*

Singapore is an island city-state with a population of only 4.8 million. It has no natural resources, and is only 700 square kilometres in size. Since its independence in 1965, the Singaporean government has taken an active role in transforming and ensuring the health of the economy (Low & Johnston 2001; Neo & Chen 2007). Although the Singaporean economy is robust and is the wealthiest in the region, the government is steering the economy away from its manufacturing and electronic bases and towards the financial services, telecommunications, life sciences, tourism and the creative industries. The Singaporean government set up the Economic Review Committee (ERC) in 2001, consisting of seven subcommittees, with the aim of developing strategies to ensure the continuous economic prosperity of the country.

The ERC Sub Committee Workgroup on Creative Industries (ERC-CI) recommended that Singapore moves away from an industrial economy into an innovation-fuelled economy, seeking ways to “fuse arts, business and technology” (ERC 2002, p. iii). The city-state must “harness the multi-dimensional creativity of [its] people” for its “new competitive advantage” (ERC, p. iii).

The first cultural-turn in Singapore was actually taken with the release of the 1989 *Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts*. Consequently, among other things, the National Arts Council (NAC) was formed in 1991, more support was given to art groups, and schools started offering arts programmes. To further develop the 1989 recommendations, the Singapore Tourism Board (STB, formerly Singapore Tourist Promotion Board or STPB) and the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts (MICA, formerly Ministry of Information and the Arts or MITA), took the initiative to make Singapore into a “Global City for the Arts” in 1995 (Chang 2000; MITA & STPB 1995). In that plan, among other things, Singapore will develop its arts trading sector, get world famous artists to perform and establish the Asian Civilizations Museum,

the Singapore Art Museum and the National Museum of Singapore. The aim then, and still is, to make Singapore into the art and cultural capital of Southeast Asia (Ooi 2007).

In 2000, MICA pushed the 1995 initiatives further and envisaged Singapore as a “Renaissance City” (MITA 2000). The authorities see the arts and culture as necessary to: “enrich us as persons”; “enhance our quality of life”; “help us in nation-building”; and “contribute to the tourist and entertainment sectors” (MITA 2000, p. 30). In 2002, the ERC-CI released *Renaissance City 2.0* (ERC-CI 2002). The 2002 ERC-CI report was even more ambitious and comprehensive, shifting the emphasis from the cultural industries to the creative economy. Besides the arts and culture, it also includes explicit and specific plans to develop the media and design sectors. Borrowing from the UK, the Singaporean authorities define the creative cluster as “those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property” (ERC-CI, 2002, p. iii; MTI 2003, p. 51).

Effectively, the arts and culture are subsumed into the creative economy (Tan 2008). At the end of 2008, MICA released the *Renaissance City Plan III* (MICA 2008; NAC 2008). The idea is to make Singapore into a “vibrant magnet for international talent” and a Singapore that is home to an “inclusive and cohesive population, appreciative and knowledgeable about its diversity, and proud of its national identity” (MICA 2008, p. 17). *Renaissance City Plan III* identified three areas to develop: 1) to produce distinctive art and cultural contents; 2) to produce a dynamic art and culture ecosystem (ecosystem defined as “the sum total of all parties that play a role in delivering content to the audience” (MICA 2008, p. 22) and 3) cultivate an engaged community as part of the nation building process. With this series of creative economy and cultural policy initiatives, what has Singapore now to show?

## *A Singapore Committed to the Arts*

The commitment to making Singapore into a City for the Arts is clearly demonstrated. The government spent S\$10 million (US\$ 6.7 million) per year between 2000 and 2003 for the first Renaissance City plan. The amount was increased to S\$12 million annually between 2004 and 2006. For the Renaissance City III plan, the government assigned S\$23 million a year, and for 2009, the government allocated an extra S\$8 million into the project (*Singapore Parliament Hansard* 2009).

Much of the resources were spent on building cultural infrastructure and institutions. For example, the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music was set up at the National University of Singapore in 2001, local art schools – the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and the LASALLE College of the Arts – have been expanded and profiles increased. The School of the Arts, a dedicated pre-tertiary arts school, opened in 2008. As mentioned earlier, in the mid-1990s, the Singapore Art Museum, Asian Civilisations Museum and the National Museum of Singapore opened. The National Art Gallery will open in 2013. Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, which opened in 2002 has become an icon of Singapore; its spiky roofs make the dome-shaped buildings look like a pair of durians, is now considered a quintessential sight of Singapore.

A number of cultural festivals, including the Singapore Biennale, Singapore Arts Festival, Singapore Writers Festival and Singapore Film Festival, were established over the years. Arts festivals and performances have not only become more abundant but have become more accessible; for instance, the Esplanade offers hundreds of free concerts annually. Just as important, cultural events are tie in with big meetings in Singapore. For example, the first Singapore Biennale was showily launched with the 2006 International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank annual meetings held in Singapore. The first Youth Olympics, which will be hosted by Singapore in 2010, will also have an accompanying art programme.

Singapore has also become the regional hub for the global media industry in Southeast Asia; MTV, Discovery Channel, HBO and BBC, among others, have already made Singapore their regional headquarters. Besides endorsing Singapore as a creative economy centre, the authorities hope that Singapore-centred contents will be promoted in the international media, and Singapore will then be portrayed as having an exciting cultural life and in a positive light. There are also a number of cultural diplomacy outreach programmes. These programmes include the Singapore Season in London in 2005 and in Shanghai in 2007. According to the Minister in charge of MICA, Lee Boon Yang, the showcasing of Singaporean art and artists outside Singapore aims “to promote cultural relations and also reinforce awareness of the arts and creativity in Singapore” (*Singapore Parliament Hansard* 2007). The image is just as important as what is actually happening.

While a large part of Asia, including China, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia, is not known for the protection of intellectual property (IP), Singapore stands out in the crowd. Singapore wants to be seen as taking the creative economy seriously and respecting the protection of IP rights. The authorities constantly take the opportunity to mention that the Political and Economic Risk Consultancy found Singapore to be the “most IP-protective country in Asia” (Economic and Development Board 2005; Lee 2005).

Companies can file for global IP protection from Singapore because the city-state is a signatory of major IP conventions and treaties, such as the Patent Cooperation Treaty, Paris Convention, Berne Convention and the Madrid Protocol. IP protection is particularly important for the art trading and marketing businesses. In line with the grand plans, the NAC and other government agencies will be giving grants to nurture a “pool of leading arts companies”, help promote the arts markets and reviewing tax and regulatory policies that influence arts businesses and markets in Singapore (NAC 2008, pp. 22-23).

The Senior Minister of State for Information, Communications and the Arts, Mr Lui Tuck Yew highlighted in Parliament that over the ten-year period running up to 2008, the number of arts activities has increased four times to more than 27 000 events a year in Singapore. Ticketed attendances doubled to 1.5 million and ticket sales for arts performances reached S\$46 million in 2008. Visits to museums have increased 7 folds to 2.5 million (MICA 2008; *Singapore Parliament Hansard* 2009). The Senior Minister of State also boasted that *Forbes* recognizes Singapore as a world's cultural capital in its 15 January 2009 issue: "While many perceive Singapore as a sterile business centre, its cultural presence in the East is now undeniable." (Sherman 2009). Earlier credos to Singapore as culturally vibrant include the 2007 *New York Times* observation: "Singapore may be clean, efficient and manicured, but the prosperous island-state knows how to get down and dirty, too" (Kurlantzick 2007). In 1999, *Time* magazine wrote a cover story on the city-state: "Singapore lightens up: Nanny state? Hardly. Once notorious for tight government control, the city-state is getting competitive, creative, even funky" (McCarthy & Ellis 1999).

### ***Authoritarian Streaks Remain***

There are obvious signs that Singapore is becoming more culturally vibrant. But Singapore is still governed by a soft-authoritarian regime. The balance between the interests of promoting the arts and culture and the interests of maintaining the social political status quo is sometimes difficult for the Singaporean government. With a prospering cultural scene, does it mean that the political spaces have already opened up and the government loosen its grip? The answer is not a clear "yes" or "no".

#### *Creativity Limit I: Restrictions on Local Socio-Political Issues*

Often in Singapore, someone will be arrested for behaviour that is considered threats to the ethnic and religious stability of the country. For example in recent

years, people were reprimanded, even jailed, for posting racist comments on their blogs. Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports, Vivian Balakrishnan, maintained that the government is willing to listen to different views from “responsible people” but the government will have to “maintain the integrity and security of the State” (Chua 2008). The Singapore government is “hypersensitive to any threats against our racial and religious harmony” (Chua 2008).

This hypersensitivity extends into creative expressions in the arts. While it is expected that artists will make social and political references, the government is wary of such expressions. For instance, as reported in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, the authorities banned the play *Talaq* in 2002 by P. Elangovan (see also Tan 2007b). The play dealt with rape within an Indian Muslim marriage. The ban came about after some members of the local Indian community protested. P. Elangovan lamented, “It makes a mockery of Singapore’s aim to be a Renaissance City” (Webb 2002).

Restrictions are also placed on artists challenging the political leadership of Singapore. Martyn See, a young local artist and film maker, has his film *Singapore Rebel* banned in 2006 because it is considered to be “political”; the 30-minute documentary is on Chee Soon Juan, leader of the opposition Singapore Democratic Party. See’s next documentary – *Zahari’s Seventeen Years* – faced a similar fate in 2007. Zahari, who was a political prisoner of 17 years and was never charged or faced trial, is blatantly critical of the government in the documentary and that could be construed as defaming by leaders of the ruling party. Despite the ban, See’s films are readily found on the Internet. After frequent sniping grumbles and grunting by residents, in early 2009, the Singaporean government decided to relax the rules on the distribution of political films; the films must however be “factual and objective, and do not dramatise and/or present a distorted picture” (Oon 2009). This so-called openness does not exclude the possibility of government leaders suing film makers and distributors for defamation. Dissidents, opposition members and

international newspapers have been sued before, and many individuals were bankrupted (Gomez 2006). As a consequent, many creative workers exercise self-censorship (Gomez 2002). In fact, Human Rights Watch criticised the Singaporean government for “using defamation suits to stifle political opposition” and the PAP government responded by saying that nobody should have the right to spread lies and defame (*The Straits Times* 2008).

One of Singapore’s internationally celebrated theatre directors, Ong Keng Sen – artistic director of TheatreWorks – explained why he spends most of his time living outside Singapore: “The soil is still not viable enough to encourage an artistic and creative sensibility” (Martin 2008).

#### *Creativity Limit II: Restrictions on Civil Society*

Civil society and the arts community are often intertwined. Since some social and political commentaries are disallowed in Singapore, activist art is also curtailed. For example, Think Centre, a political activist group in Singapore wanted to display an art installation to mark Children’s Day in October 2002. The work consisted of 20 dolls, highlighting the stress and pressures faced by children in Singapore. The work was to be displayed in a grass patch at Raffles Place, a busy area in the middle of the financial district. The site is important for the installation because of the high traffic volume, which also epitomizes the pressure cooker environment of Singapore. The authorities rejected the art installation application for “law and order concerns” and suggested that the installation be held indoors or at Speakers’ Corner (*The Straits Times* 2002). Speakers’ Corner is modelled after London’s Speakers’ Corner at Hyde Park. Speakers in Singapore however must register with the Police ahead of time and do not broach on multiracial and religious issues. Besides that, few people visit this field. With the late application rejection for their Children’s Day installation, Think Centre made the refusal into a media issue. A few months later, the Think Centre applied to install 200 dolls in Speakers’ Corner to mark the position of women in society for International Women’s Day 2003; they

received permission to do so (*The Straits Times* 2003b). Encouraged with the success, the Think Centre applied to put up another Children's Day installation in October 2003, again at Raffles Place; their request was again rejected. They reluctantly moved their installation to the quiet Speakers' Corner (*The Straits Times* 2003a). Regardless, the Think Centre has negotiated with the authorities – and succeeded to a limited extent – on making activist statements through public art.

In another example, while Singapore hosted the September 2006 IMF and World Bank annual meetings, the Singapore Biennale was launched. The Singaporean authorities however tried to suppress protests during the meetings (Arnold 2006; Burton 2006; Elms 2006). Opposition party leader Chee Soon Juan and six supporters attempted to stage a march, protesting against the curbs on the freedom of expression and assembly in Singapore. They were duly stopped by the police at the starting point in Speakers' Corner. The *Financial Times* reported that the “stand-off attracted a small crowd of supporters and a larger group of journalists who were filmed by plainclothes members of Singapore's Internal Security Department” (Burton & Bhattarai 2006). The Singaporean government responded in the *International Herald Tribune* through the Minister of State (Finance and Transport) Lim Hwee Hua. She argued that maintaining the security of the event was of paramount importance. Singapore has always banned outdoor demonstrations and the authorities had no intention to change the rules just for the meetings (Lim 2006). The bad press was a distraction to the IMF and World Bank meetings and the inaugural Singapore Biennale. The credibility of contemporary art in Singapore was subsequently questioned when such strict limits are imposed on public expression.

As a result in September 2008, the authorities started allowing Singaporeans to gather and protest within Speakers' Corner (Li 2008a). Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong said that “There will be some demonstrations here and there, but with a fair and transparent government, it won't get out of hand”. And he admitted that political openness is a necessity in Singapore: “We can control

you, oppress you. But we'd lose you - you'll move elsewhere. So we have to move with the times" (Li 2008a). Protesting against the current multicultural and religious status quo remain taboo, the use of lewd and violent visuals are also prohibited. Persons can still be sued for defamation and be arrested for unruly behaviour (Chia 2008; Zakir 2008). Registration to demonstrate is still needed but with the National Parks Board, instead of with the Police. With almost daily demonstrations - to the surprise of almost everyone in Singapore - the mass media barely report on any (Ee 2008). Regardless, Speakers' Corner has become a ready site for protest art in Singapore.

### *Creativity Limit III: Restrictions on Gay Contents*

Gay plays and films are now available in Singapore (Tan 2007a). Gay-themed books are also sold. Many openly gay artists are famous. But homosexual contents in the arts sit uncomfortably in Singapore. In September 2007, Parliament debated on proposed changes to the Penal Code (Soh 2007). One of the least controversial changes to the Penal Code was to de-criminalize "unnatural" sexual acts - oral and anal - for heterosexual persons. The most controversial was the non-change; gay men's sexual activities remain criminal under Section 377A. There is no reference to sexual acts between gay women in the Penal Code. The government promised that Section 377A will not be enforced actively. The resulting protests from those who want to repeal the discriminating Section 377A were enthused. There were also very strong reactions from those who want to keep Section 377A. Earlier in 2003, the then-Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, made a shock revelation in *Time* magazine (Elegant 2003). He said that the Singaporean civil service has started employing professed homosexuals, even to sensitive positions. That seemed to be a turning point for gay rights in Singapore. The announcement was made as part of the effort by the government to attract talent and nurture the creative economy. The change in policy was one way of not excluding talented foreigners who are gay,

and was implemented without fanfare, so as not to draw flak from more conservative Singaporeans (Elegant 2003; Nirmala 2003a; 2003b).

Nonetheless, gay rights and contents, even in the arts, are still considered sensitive and must be controlled. So for instance, the gay Christian duo, Jason and DeMarco was not permitted to perform in Singapore in 2005. They were allowed in 2007 for an AIDS benefit concert because the concert was restricted to only those 18 years and older; the audiences also belong to high-risk groups (*The Straits Times* 2007). In the 2009 Academy Awards ceremony, local broadcaster, MediaCorp blanked out sections of the acceptance speeches of Oscar winners Dustin Lance Black and Sean Penn, when they voiced support for same-sex marriage in the repeat telecast of the ceremony. The broadcaster claimed to be merely following the Media Development Authority Programme Code on homosexual themes and issues. The code forbids “content that sympathises with, promotes or normalises such a lifestyle from being broadcast” (Christie 2009).

The authorities want to communicate that Singapore is now a tolerant city and homosexual skilled workers are welcome. But the laws and regulations remain intolerant. The tolerant Singapore message is for global audiences and the conservative actions supposedly pleased the conservative sections of society.

### ***Discussion***

In a regime that allows only limited freedom of expression, can Singapore be a City for the Arts? To many scholars and commentators, the Singaporean approach to arts promotion is unsatisfactory. With the emphasis on economic gains, Terence Lee (2004) argues that the Singaporean government goals are to extract creative energies in its pursuit of profitability in the creative economy. Art practices and businesses are aiming towards economic independence and they have become sites for even more control and management.

Kenneth Paul Tan also takes a dim view of the Singaporean authorities and argues that the creative and cultural strategies have enabled the PAP to fashion a new political project (Tan 2007c). By using the classic divide-and-rule strategy, the PAP government divides the populace into two ideological camps. The first group is the “heartlanders”; members are those who have become comfortable with the economic development brought about by the PAP, and want the social and political status quo maintained. The second group is the “cosmopolitans”; they are the group of affluent, socially liberal, and economically mobile Singaporeans, who ride the waves of change in the global economic, social and political arena. The cosmopolitans want Singapore to open up politically and socially. They are also likely to want to repeal Section 377A. While the Singaporean government tackle new economic realities by mobilizing the population towards the creative economy, the concomitant social political changes expected did not materialize on the ground of the socially conservative heartlanders. To the PAP, the heartlanders are not ready for the changes. As constructs, the heartlanders and cosmopolitans have enabled the Singaporean government to push forward changes in some cases and hold back in others by exploiting the supposed conflicting needs and demands of these two segments of society (Tan 2007c). With strong government control and set of red herring excuses, the development of Singaporean cultural and creative economy would be secondary to political expediency.

Regardless, the creative environment is dynamic. Yue (2006) contends that cultural policies in Singapore have generated new identities and subjectivities, from which citizens are transformed into consumers. Policies and ideas are being internalised and appropriated, as Singaporean society transforms itself towards a cultural city. Such processes however cannot be easily translated into more creative individuals (Ooi 2005). Ooi examines how the arts and heritage – through STB and the national museums – become part of the social engineering blueprint (Ooi 2003; 2005). Cutting through the diverse interests of society, the Singaporean authorities engineers consensus in society; they also attempt to

shape, sanction and demolish selected crystallizing identities. To the PAP government, there is a trade-off between maintaining a stable social political environment and promoting diversity and chaos to promote a vibrant creative milieu. The balance is still largely determined by the Singapore government itself.

A culturally more vibrant but still soft authoritarian Singapore challenge some of the arguments propagated by scholars like Florida (2003), Healey (2004) and Scott (2006), who hold the view that creativity can only prosper in a tolerant and democratic environment. The Singaporean authorities do not see a need for complete freedom of expression and total acceptance of diversity in nurturing the arts and culture. There are at least four lessons to be learned from the Singapore case.

One, a distinction can be made between the creative process and the contents that come out of creative processes. The Singaporean authorities encourage creative thinking but want the people to steer away from publicizing certain views. Most activities in the arts and culture do not generate contents in the out-of-bounds areas. The authorities ensure that ethnic and religious conflicts are not stirred up. The authorities are also particular that their leadership is not undermined. Arguably, all countries have laws that limit some form of expressions, for example, on pornography and hate-crimes. To the authorities in Singapore, lacking the freedom of expression in certain quarters does not mean that a city cannot become a City for the Arts. The arts and culture can still grow without having delving into prohibited areas.

Two, the Singaporean authorities also make a tacit distinction between economically valuable and economically insignificant creativity. Policies are more likely to change if they lead to high economic costs. According to the Reporters without Borders's *Worldwide Press Freedom Index 2008*, Singapore was ranked "144" out of 173, one notch better than Rwanda but one notch worse than Tunisia (Reporters without Borders 2008). In the 2009 Freedom House report on political freedom, Singapore was found to be "partially free". Scoring

between “1” and “7”, with “1” for the most free, Singapore scored “5” for political rights and “4” for civil liberty, same as Uganda and Lebanon. The status of the media in Singapore was rated as “not free” (Freedom House 2009). Singapore did not fare better with the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Index of Democracy; Singapore was ranked “82” out of 167 countries (*The Economist* 2008). But to the Singaporean authorities, these rankings mean little because it does not affect the economy of the country; Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong tellingly mentioned that he is not worried that Singapore is ranked lowly by Reporters without Borders because Singapore does well in economic ratings. To him and the PAP government: “It has not been proven that having more press freedom would result in a clean and efficient government or economic freedom and prosperity” (*The Straits Times* 2005).

Three, the Singaporean authorities take the view that although chaos and experiments are only expected in a creative environment, the environment must also be stable and orderly enough to drive the creative industries in the desired direction. Governmental guidance and intervention is seen to be the foundation of the Singaporean economic miracle (King 2006; Low & Johnston 2001; Neo & Chen 2007). For instance, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew recently reiterated that the China model has challenged the Western view of development, which concentrated on open economies, minimal state intervention and the superiority of democratic politics (Li 2008b). The Chinese model, built from the Singaporean model, has shown that “order, certainty, consistency, hard work, market-friendly policies, savings and investments, trade, education and training” (Li 2008b) are central for economic development. The Singaporean authorities see that even for creative activities, some strict form of regulation is required.

Four, the Singaporean authorities have accepted that creative spaces will sprout despite attempts at control. The Think Centre and their art installations is an example. Singapore residents have access to the international media and Singapore is one of the most wired countries in the world. People in Singapore

complain and the government does not clamp down on most dissent. Creative individuals can circumvent regulations and most of their actions are not publicised (see (Tan 2007a; Woo & Goh 2007). Deviant personal expressions are tolerated as long as they are not attracting widespread attention and not threatening public peace. Possibility of clamp-downs has given rise to self censorship and self restraint. This is an effective form of policing. As a result, active control is not necessary.

### *Conclusion*

Singapore is a soft authoritarian state. Singapore is also promoting itself as a City for the Arts. Is Singapore a contradiction? There are limits to the freedom of expression in Singapore and yet the cultural vibrancy in the city seems to be growing.

The Singaporean authorities are reactive and calculative in their attempt at nurturing Singapore's creative economy. They adjust the limits of openness, trying to prevent some contents from entering public spaces. They also determine which creative activities are preferred and which are not, based largely on their economic and political values. A stable environment is still considered desirable for the arts. Despite all the controls, the authorities acknowledge that they cannot have total command. Instead they react to the situation as people negotiate and challenge the status quo. In taking a politically pragmatic approach, the Singaporean authorities have now come to realize that creative individuals do not need total social and political freedom. Many will try to circumvent regulations but most will stay within the boundaries. Spaces will be opened up to defray significant economic and social costs. The global media reports on the lack of protests in Singapore were distractions from the Singapore Biennale and the World Bank and IMF meetings in 2006. Subsequently, Singaporeans are now allowed to demonstrate in one allocated

space. Effectively, this development gives the image of Singapore as becoming more tolerant.

All said, democracy and the creative environment do go hand-in-hand. In the case of Singapore, the fit is being fine-tuned. The pursuit of the cultural and creative industries has forced the authorities to open up more social political spaces for creative individuals to work and express. Is the extent of openness enough? It is good enough for commentators in *Time*, *New York Times* and *Forbes* to identify Singapore as a cultural city.

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