

# We Can Change Our Predicament Only by Taking Actions

Author / Xiaoyi LIU

Editor's Notes/Yumin AO: Spring has returned as if the harsh winter had never come. At the beginning of 2023, artists breathed a sigh of relief and again entered a state of relaxation where "the crisis has passed. The alarm goes off." Most artists theoretically seem to have a strong sense of individuality, wanting to maintain the maximum initiative and to work in a state of freedom and independence. The reality is that the arts rely so heavily on subsidies and donations. It is not hypocrisy but a helpless fact that artists must face. "Freedom and independence" and "passivity and dependence" generate a paradox, revealing the artists' innate vulnerability and powerlessness that can occur anywhere and anytime.

Previously, when there was no artist in the aesthetic sense, there were craftsmen who lived by their craft, just as in the past, when houses were repaired by "*shuimu zuo*" (literarily, a craftsman excels at building a house made out of cement and wood) without being labeled as an architect. Even the masters of the Renaissance rated themselves among the artisan, but later in modern society, the artists no longer thought of themselves as artisans. But the artists were more exposed to the demands of capital, and competed with audiences, art dealers, collectors, and museums for dominance. Pierre Bourdieu argues that the position of the agents in the field of art powerfully determines what they can do or even what they can think they want to do.

How is the position of the artist in the art field defined today? The pandemic multiplied the innate vulnerability of artists. State institutions, such as the Arts Council, intervened to provide them with short-term financial support. Do artists think it is time to practice cynicism in the post-pandemic era? Or do they consider getting rid of the identity of a recipient and accept amateurism? I am afraid that a diversified field of art will reduce to empty talk. In the early spring of 2023, Xiaoyi LIU, the artistic director of the independent theater group Emergency Stairs, started a column in *The Journal of Ying Ming Theater—Contemplation and Reflection*. His first article will analyze the awkward situation faced by the development of culture and arts in Singapore and discuss how the arts community can take more initiative to change the predicament.

Like most sectors across Singapore, the arts and cultural scene has been adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and has to cancel or postpone most of its activities. To provide relief to the sector, the Singapore government quickly announced the “Arts and Cultural Resilience Package” on March 27, 2020 with 55 million dollars allocated to provide relief and support to the sector through a series of schemes and grants. Grace Fu, the Minister for Culture, Community and the Youth also announced the launch of the Digitalisation Fund, creating immediate incentives for the sector to produce digital contents. National Arts Council will provide up to \$20,000 for every project it supports. The key areas of support during the pandemic are (1) the digitalisation of arts contents and (2) the support for the continuous development of the workforce through the “Digitalisation Presentation Grant” and the “Capability Development Scheme for the Arts” respectively.

These efforts provide some relief but the predicament of the sector remains precarious.

In the face of scarcity – “too many monks and not enough porridge to go around”, many arts practitioners, particularly the freelancers and small arts groups would not get the support they need. Though state funding is available for the hosting of training programmes, few groups and individuals have the capability and resources to take these on. Though arts practitioners are able to tap into free or heavily subsidised courses and even enjoy incentives while on course, these measures cannot effectively address their most pressing financial needs. When performance venues are suddenly shuttered, putting content not designed for viewing online is destined to be a short-term solution. After all, the creation of digital arts content is still at its nascent stage of development here. Unprepared, many practitioners started to put together and put up lessons, performances, exhibitions and other activities online in order to vie for a share of the online audience market.

In March 2020, the arts community came together online multiple times to talk about their challenges and difficulties. Before the pandemic, many freelancers had been heavily dependent on live performances and teaching to make a living. With the cessation of these activities and teaching assignments, their sources of income also dry up. The certainty of not knowing when arts and cultural activities can resume in the foreseeable future is a severe blow to their morale, adding to their financial woes. The short-term financial support from the state is inadequate to address the underlying anxiety and precarity that has always existed in the sector.

Which is to say, the pandemic simply brings to surface the myriad of problems that have already existed in the sector.

The uneven allocation of resources is one such problem.

Formal arts groups, such as the ones supported under the Major Grant Scheme are better placed to respond to crisis than the smaller groups and freelancers. These creative workers, who contribute significantly to the Singapore’s creative economy work independently from assignment to assignment is often characterised as precarious as they work outside the protection offered by traditional employment set-ups. [1] After the SARS outbreak in 2003, an exodus of practitioners left the sector.

Even companies on Major Grant funding receive only partial support from NAC to run their programmes and operations, and are heavily dependent on other sources of income to sustain their operations- for example Emergency Stairs receives \$100,000 in Seed Grant funding which is less than half of what it needs to operate on a very small scale. Also, to the chagrin of many arts practitioners, a disproportionate amount of the total arts funding is not spent on the companies and the people making and producing art but on NAC

staffing. According to the NAC Annual Report 2018/2019, almost 22 million dollars alone was spent on NAC staff salary. In the face of the pandemic, the inherent inequality of resource allocation would only be more deeply felt.

To add fuel to fire, some major arts groups would be losing their designated arts spaces due to changes in policy focus and direction. To put it bluntly, there are no permanent arts spaces for arts practitioners here, but various schemes supported by the council that offer renewable but non-guaranteed short-term leases that makes it challenging for our arts groups to plan for the long haul since a company's artistic development and strategic growth are contingent on its space.

The second problem is the practitioners' own lack of autonomy.

According to the NAC Arts and Culture Employment Study (ACES) in 2016, almost half of the respondents are freelancers and lack long-term financial planning for themselves. For the past decades, the sector appears to go through industrialisation, not unlike any other industries in Singapore. But the reality is, the sector is a "pseudo-industry" and the arts groups and practitioners are highly dependent on the state for funding; they also have limited successes diversifying their income sources. As a city state, Singapore has a small population of 5.7 million (2019), corresponding to a small market size for the arts, and there are underlying economic limitations tied to arts programmes- it is difficult to replicate, it is labour-intensive, it is challenging to depend on box office as a sustainable source of income etc. Even if the freelancers are to look for other job opportunities in the education sector in order to diversify their sources of income, they are still dependent on state funding, albeit from other agencies. As a result, they are merely diversifying their income across different state agencies or ministries, vying for the same pool of funding. When a crisis strikes, such as the COVID-19, with the shutting down of public performances and indefinite postponement of extra-curriculum classes and courses (the two main pillars of income for freelancers), they suddenly realise that they cannot survive.

Singapore is a nation where economic development is prioritised, so it should surprise no one that the arts is perhaps the most undervalued sector. In a recent article published by The Sunday Times [2] , in the heat of the nation-wide lock-down, the artist is deemed the most "non-essential job" according to respondents. The result throws the already vulnerable group of practitioners into a frenzy, causing an uproar in the arts community. But this is not new. In the 2017 Population Survey on the Arts, only 37% of the respondents expressed an interest in the arts. Compared to bread-and-butter issues like job security and education policy, the arts takes a backseat. Generally speaking, Singaporeans are not too willing to pay for arts and cultural activities and there are few private donors willing to support the arts in a significant way, or they mistakenly believe that the arts is already adequately funded by the state, resulting in a funding conundrum for the sector. Perhaps the most pressing issue the sector needs to learn very quickly is to learn how to communicate their most intrinsic value with their stakeholders and the society (without having to instrumentalise or justify the value of their practice through certain practices, such as community arts; I will argue that we need to support all our artists and creative individuals and not just the forms that yield the most tangible benefits to society.)

So, how do we change the survival dilemma of the sector?

Arts practitioners can no longer rest on their laurel and passively depend on the system and the larger environment to change. Instead they need to take a more proactive stance: the sector should engage more actively with their stakeholders and the general public to establish mutual understanding; practitioners

should also actively address the lack of autonomy in their practice, in order to sustain their own practices. Most importantly, we need more cultural leaders to initiate and engage the various government agencies on policy matters, far beyond basic programming and funding needs. If we are able to move between frameworks, if we can dialogue and negotiate more effectively between frameworks and sectors, then we would be in a better position to drive our own art-making. (End)

#### Notes

[1] Source: 'From precarious labor to precarious economy? Planning for precarity in Singapore's creative economy' by Lily Kong, 2011

[2] "8 in 10 Singaporeans willing to pay more for essential services: Survey" (The Sunday Times, 14 June 2020)

The Original Chinese version available from *Hong Kong Economic Journal* (July 29, 2020 issue)

**Xiaoyi LIU** is the Artistic Director of the Singapore art group Emergency Stairs. A committed practitioner with a desire to push artistic boundaries, he is regarded as a promising figure at the forefront of the experimental theatre scene in Asia. Xiaoyi received the Young Artist Award awarded by the National Arts Council of Singapore in 2016. A multi-talented artist, Xiaoyi was involved in over 70 theatre productions as a director, playwright, and actor over the past two decades. As a director, the cornerstones of Xiaoyi's oft-lauded but controversial work are unsurprisingly experimentation, introspection, and poetry. Between 2017 and 2019, he created three new works under his Postdramatic Series that challenged the often-sacred theatre traditions here by introducing a new exploratory theatre format to the discomfort of his audiences. Xiaoyi has also been actively promoting dialogues and creation across cultural and geographical lines for many years, particularly the exchange between traditional and contemporary art forms. As the Artistic Director, Xiaoyi has curated the Southernmost Project, an annual, first-of-its-kind "arts festival for the future" in Singapore since 2017. The inter-cultural festival has regularly brought prominent artists across the region to Singapore for exchange. An educator at heart, Xiaoyi has started and helmed several talent development platforms- the Practice Lab, Emergency Shelter, and most recently, the Emergency Academy. He also founded the first Chinese theatre review platform, the Re-Viewers, in a response to the dearth of critical writing in Singapore.