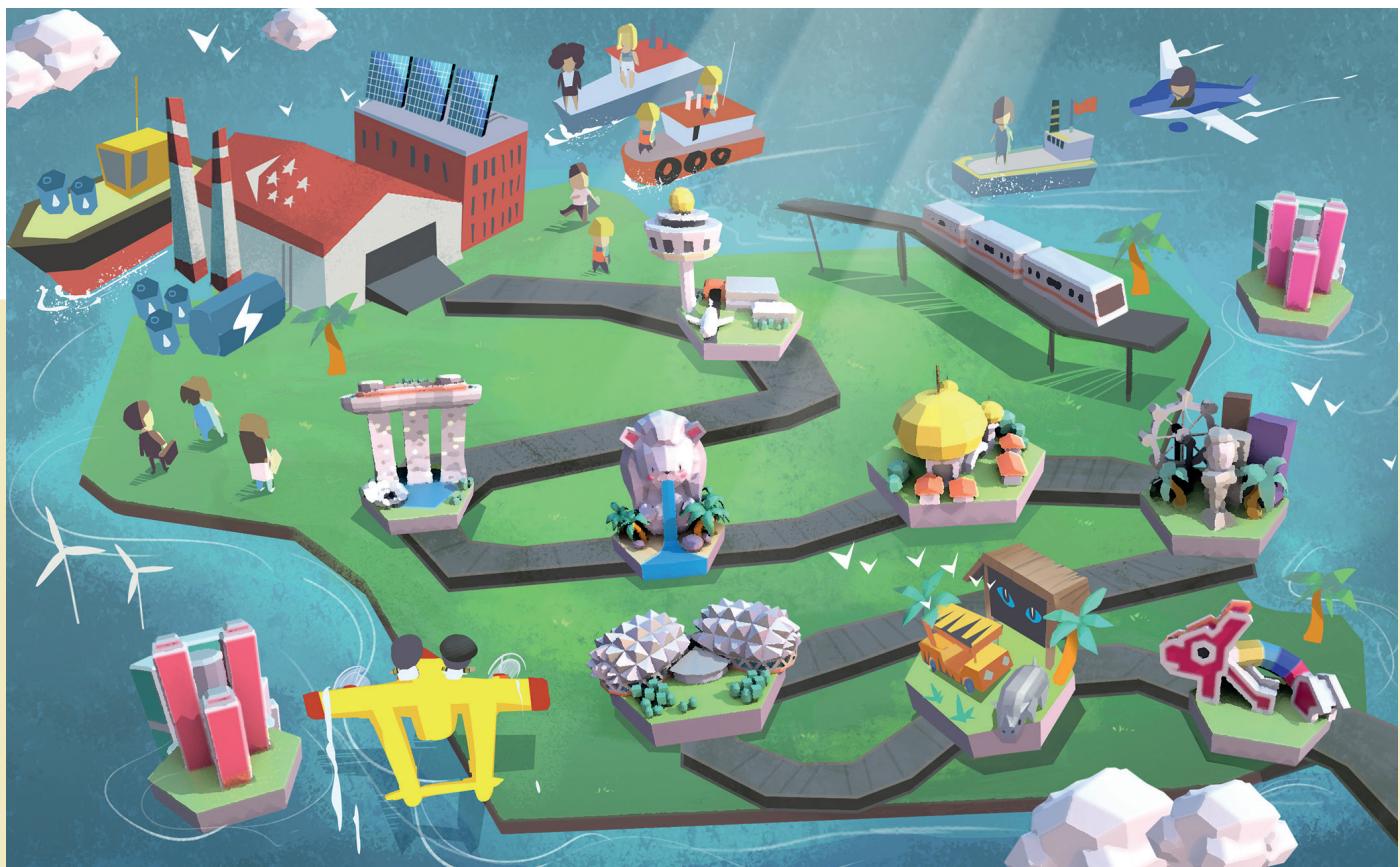


Singapore

— A Cultural Metropolis

by Tan Eng Khoon



In this infographic, the artist presents his vision of how an input-light model generating culturally-rich services can augment the vibrancy and resiliency of Singapore's economy.

Input-wise, cultural sectors are less reliant on imported raw materials (especially energy) compared to other manufacturing industries such as electronics and petrochemicals. For example, 2019 estimates by the Energy Market Authority show that industrial activities account for 42.5% of electricity consumption and 89.1% of natural gas consumption, while other sectors (including cultural attractions) account for a mere 0.5% (electricity consumption) and 0.3% (natural

gas consumption) respectively. This helps to improve the resiliency of the Singapore economy against external supply shocks, especially disruptions to oil supply due to regional unrest.

Nonetheless, Singapore's cultural sector cannot exist in isolation. Neither can it be a self-sustaining ecosystem. To maintain the vibrancy of this sector, inputs in the form of talent and ideas are necessary. For example, Singapore has a Foreign Artistic Talent Scheme (ForArts) which considers individuals' professional experience and achievements and their ability to advance the arts and cultural scene in Singapore in their PR application. Other than foreign

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talent, migrant workers have also demonstrated their ability to add on to the dynamism of Singapore's cultural scene. For example, Filipino domestic helper Angela Barotia won the Best Actress Certificate of Outstanding Achievement at the 2016 Brooklyn Film Festival for her lead role in a local feature film Remittance about her experience of working as a maid in Singapore. Construction worker S. Rahman Liton's use of the nucleus poem (a Bengali form of writing) was also adopted as a prompt in the Singapore Poetry Writing Month in 2017.

In output-terms, the value of Singapore's cultural industry can be traced to a few sources. With annual tourism receipts exceeding \$20 billion in recent years, tourist arrivals in Singapore have been on the climb. Other than the growth of the Chinese market, the rise in visitor arrival and spending can be traced to the enduring draw of local attractions such as the Night Safari and Singapore's iconic statue at the Merlion Park. The sweeping views from the Merlion Park across Marina Bay also give tourists an overall perspective of Singapore's impression skyline. They are punctuated by landmarks such as Marina Bay Sands (MBS) and the Esplanade, which have gone beyond being architectural icons to taking up stewardship of Singapore's cultural scene. Other than being home to the performing arts in Singapore, larger venues like MBS serve as popular MICE (meetings, incentives, conventions and exhibitions) destinations, which helps to provide the constant stream of visitors — an important source of sustenance for Singapore's arts scene.

Beyond iconic cultural sites, Singapore's intangible cultural heritage clearly appeals to visitors. For example, our hawker culture which serves as a melting pot of local and regional cuisines have remained a top draw among tourists. While impressive religious buildings like Sultan Mosque is a key destination for tourists visiting the historic Kampong Glam district, more importantly, the religious freedom, diversity and harmony existing in Singapore remains an invisible but important draw for tourists and expats who feel safe practising their religion in Singapore. At a more indigenous level, Singapore's cultural heritage, including the traditional dragon playground preserves a sense of nostalgia and belonging amidst a fast-changing globalised world. With a sense of rootedness and a distinct Singapore identity, Singaporeans are more likely to stand together to strive for the betterment of their common future, especially in the face of global headwinds such as the rise of populism in other geographies.

Finally, Changi Airport, which serves as a gateway connecting Singapore and the rest of the world, has incorporated arts and cultural elements into its architecture and exhibits. From hand-drawn wall murals depicting snippets of life in olden time Singapore to kinetic art installations in arrival and departure halls, these showcases help to define Singapore and leave a lasting impression on visitors or departing Singaporeans, who would no doubt be keen to return for more sensorial experiences.

Eng Khoon is a freelance artist who previously worked in the industry as a concept designer and a visual development artist. He was also the co-founder of a game company. Eng Khoon has a passion for designing and creating story-based content, and a desire to see more locally created content to gain commercial success as well as international recognition.



Photo credit: Courtesy of Giraffe Pictures

Filmmaking in the New Economy

An Interview with Anthony Chen

The new economy presents challenges and opportunities for industries in Singapore. Filmmaking is no exception. To understand what lies ahead for filmmaking, *Economics & Society* interviewed **Anthony Chen**, an award-winning Singaporean film director, screenwriter and producer.

An alumnus of The Chinese High School (now Hwa Chong Institution), Ngee Ann Polytechnic's School of Film and Media Studies and the prestigious National Film and Television School in the UK, Anthony Chen is a highly accomplished film director. In 2013, Anthony made history by becoming the first Singaporean to win the coveted Camera d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival, then Best Feature Film, Best New Director and Best Original Screenplay at the 50th Golden Horse Awards. His films have received multiple awards and accolades from some of the most distinguished film festivals and events internationally.

Anthony is no stranger to economists. His wife Rachel Yan, holds a MSc in Economics and PhD in Statistics from the London School of Economics and Political Science. *Economics & Society* caught up with him.

What do you think is the value of filmmaking to the society?

Filmmaking is about storytelling. And storytelling is one of our most basic human instincts that we have passed down through the ages; from cave paintings to oral tradition, from Greek drama to television. This is the first and foremost way we express ourselves as a civilisation, through stories. Filmmaking like other forms of art and humanities helps us communicate and form connections with one another. No man is an island and societies exist through communication and connectivity. I cannot imagine a world without any stories. That will be very tragic. It is therefore so vital that we defend the humanities — cinema, literature, all of it.

Cinema is very much a reflection of life and our human condition. It can be like a mirror, forcing us to look at the best and worst of ourselves as we discover our shared human existence. Sometimes, films help us find common ground with one another, the same reason why we can all be moved to tears at the same moment watching a certain scene on the big screen, in a dark room amongst strangers. It was a surprise for me when my first feature film *Ilo Ilo* was received so well internationally. Despite it being a very Singaporean story, the themes in the film of migration, family, class, growing up and economic crisis, seem to break down all borders, striking a huge chord with audiences as far as China, India, France and even Mongolia. Our society isn't one made up of just economic transactions, but also emotional ones. And cinema is a medium that helps join those dots.

How do you think automation and big data in the new economy will disrupt filmmaking?

Automation will not replace filmmaking. Every film has its own unique personality and identity, crafted by filmmakers through their own authorship and voice. Each story is different. While automation can help in the technical aspects, it can never replace the human touch, an individual's creative mind.

Nonetheless, big data is a danger for the Arts if gatekeepers and commissioners look at data to decide what should get made. It would mean the works, stories and

aesthetics will become more repetitive and more homogenous. There will be little room for creativity. Suppose there is a new idea that is a genius in the making, so amazing that it will break new ground and take the world by storm, but because it has never been done before, it will probably be rejected by the so-called algorithms of big data,

Indeed, my worry is that there will

be less choice and diversity of content even though the platforms keep selling the idea of more diversity and that consumer becomes king. If everything is decided through mining data, this could be great for certain sectors in the world, but it will be devastating for film and arts. The Arts is about auteurs and their unique ideas. It is about surprise and subversion.

Already not too long ago, we have seen the market leader of platforms, Netflix, loses a significant amount of subscribers in its recent reporting, causing a huge dip in its share price. This might serve as a due warning to both commissioners and creators, that audiences do not just want rehashed, generic and mediocre content.

I think both the traditional Hollywood studios and platforms have a considerable responsibility to be tastemakers, elevating and cultivating audience taste and sensibilities. I might be an idealist, but I always try to be cautiously optimistic.

What are the key challenges for the film industry in the new economy?

Platforms have disrupted the film industry in the past decade and still continue to do so. Companies such as Netflix, Amazon, Disney Plus and Apple TV have changed the entire model of how things are being done in the industry. Firstly, they use a different pricing strategy, selling subscriptions instead of individual shows.

The objective is to make sure that one is hooked on their offerings, so that one continues to pay the subscription fees. In addition, they provide great convenience such that people will rather stay at home, rather than go out to the cinemas.

The other challenge is the proliferation of short content on platforms such as TikTok and YouTube that is taking time away from the younger generation. The traditional long-form 120-minute feature film now has to compete with 60 two- to three-minute long gag videos. This has been especially felt during the pandemic when everyone has turned to their devices while confined in their homes as cinemas stayed shut. However, recent box office numbers across the world have shown the return of audience numbers to the cinemas. That is very encouraging for the industry. I personally still strongly believe in the power and magic of the big screen.

As global platforms gain prominence, they will cater to the needs of the biggest populations in the world. Netflix, for example, has made key strategic investments in Korea and Latin America, but scarcely in smaller countries such as Singapore. It is hence imperative for both the government and public at large of smaller populations such as Singapore to continue supporting and investing in local talent and content. Singapore films help capture our unique cultural identity and shared experience. If we don't tell Singapore stories, no one else will tell it for us.

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Talking about Singapore, how has the art scene changed in Singapore?

What is interesting is that the landscape has changed. There is less stigma as compared to 10 years ago. Parents are more supportive of their children pursuing the Arts. There is a more vibrant arts scene and more consumption in the Arts. At some point, when society has come of age economically, what it needs is more cerebral. That's great news.

Worldwide studies have shown a direct correlation between education levels and literacy of the Arts. Nonetheless, despite Singapore's high level of education, I believe that it has not quite translated across the broader spectrum of society. We still have long way to go in terms of cultural literacy.

In my field of cinema, it has been an amazing decade for Singapore cinema and I cannot be prouder to be part of a generation of new wave Singapore filmmakers. Together with Boo Junfeng, Kirsten Tan, K. Rajagopal, Yeo Siew Hua and others, I

think this current generation of filmmakers is putting Singapore on the world map through their cinema. Collectively, the films have screened at the world's top film festivals such as Cannes, Sundance, Locarno and the thoughtfulness and quality of the filmmaking has grown from strength to strength. Fuelled by their burning desires to explore the world through the lens of filmmaking, this generation of artists has been telling compelling stories and asking provocative questions about important societal issues through their craft.

Thank you for sharing your thoughts with us. Do you have anything else to tell our readers?

Yes. Support local films! A lot of people feel that growing the film industry in Singapore and Singapore cinema is the responsibility of the film community and industry. But this is not true. Everyone should realise that we are a small country, and it takes an entire nation to build a national cinema together.

When I mean support, it does not just refer to being an audience. That ultimately is important to make filmmaking sustainable (And I do mean buying a ticket to films beyond just Jack Neo films, take a chance and perhaps you might inform your perspective in varying ways). But there are many other ways. Investing in Singapore films through the private sector, facilitating film production and shoots



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when assistance is required. For instance, not turning your back and closing the door on us when we seek locations for filming. Filming in Singapore can be terribly bureaucratic and challenging to manage, and most independent films do not have the physical and financial resources to deal with that.

There is so much talent on our little island and we should all do more to support Singapore film. With the right support, Singapore cinema will continue to break new ground and soar to greater heights.

One reason why South Korea's film industry is booming (look at the success of Oscar-winning *Parasite*) is very much due to the strong support by the Korean people. It takes so many years of support from the ground up to get to where they are today. Their success is not due to just talented actors and funding; it is very much due to the nation's concerted effort to export their culture through such mediums. In other words, it takes the will of a nation to achieve what the South Koreans have achieved internationally.

If there is no support for us filmmakers, there will be no more Singapore films. And this is a pity. We need to change our perspective of cinema and see it not merely as entertainment, but as a means of showcasing our nation and its unique culture to the world.