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Freedom of Expression in a Soft Authoritarian Regime

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The Creative Industries in Singapore: Freedom of Expression in a Soft Authoritarian Regime

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Singapore is one of the most active in pursuing the creative industries in Asia (Yusuf & Nabeshima, 2005). With more than 4 million people living on an island of only 680 square kilometers, Singapore is densely populated with a limited labour pool. The island-state is however a thriving financial and trading centre. It has the second highest per capita in the Asia Pacific, after Japan. In trying to stay ahead of the competition, the creative economy has been singled out by the Singaporean government to be an engine of economic growth for the country.

Singapore is not alone in pursuing the creative industries. Countries and cities around the world are developing their own creative economies to spur growth and attract investments. The creative economy also promises opportunities to rejuvenate the physical environments and spice up the cultural vibrancy of the various places (e.g. see Center for an Urban Future, 2005; Crewe & Beaverstock, 1998; Dahms, 1995; Held, Kruse, Söndermann, & Weckerle, 2005; Hutton, 2003; Jayne, 2004; Roodhouse & Mokre, 2004; Tallon & Bromley, 2004). And with the growth of the creative industries, these places will also become sites of cultural consumption (Crewe et al., 1998; Hughes, 1998; Leslie, 2005). The Singaporean authorities want to realize these advantages, and the cultivation of the creative economy is even considered necessary for the island-state's economic survival.

This city-state has been consistently ranked as one of the most competitive economies in the world; it was ranked third in 2006 (also in 2005) in the often-cited IMD World Competitiveness Report (IMD, 2006). Essentially, Singapore has created a stable legal, political, economic, technological and social environment that is attractive to businesses. Industrial relations are well controlled and harmonious (see Koh & Ooi, 2000; Mauzy & Milne, 2002). Singapore is also known for its highly regulated social and political environment. Tough punishments for seemingly minor uncivil behaviours – e.g. jay-walking, spitting in public places and not flushing toilets after use – indicate the authorities' tendencies to micro-manage Singaporeans' everyday life. The ruling party controls 82 of the 84 parliamentary seats and the mass media are supportive of the government – political freedom is undeniably limited (Chua, 1995; George, 2000; Lydgate, 2003; Ooi, 1998). The Singaporean political regime is often labeled as “soft authoritarian” (Chua 1995).

On the other hand, the government has acknowledged that Singaporean society is changing and the populace is demanding for more social and political freedom. In January 2004, the then-Deputy Prime Minister, and current Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong gave two reasons why Singaporean society will inevitably open up (“I have no doubt our society must open up further”):

Firstly, our world has become more uncertain. Technology is advancing relentlessly, markets are changing unpredictably, and we can no longer take our prosperity and security for granted. The Government has no monopoly of knowledge and ideas. To understand and tackle our challenges fully and vigorously, we need to draw on the expertise and resources of all our people.

Secondly, Singaporeans are now better educated and more informed. Their desire to be involved is much stronger. The younger generation would like more 'space' and a culture which encourages them to express themselves freely, make mistakes, voice diverse views and experiment.

Policy announcements during the last few years suggest that the government is going to tolerate a more open and chaotic Singapore. In wanting to create a blueprint to make Singapore into a more entrepreneurial, exciting and creative place, a Remaking Singapore Committee was set up in 2003. Most of the committee's recommendations have already been accepted (Remaking Singapore Committee, 2003). Some of the accepted recommendations include encouraging academic research on public policy, removing the requirement for prior vetting of play scripts and allowing more flexibility for schools and universities to manage themselves (Singapore Government, 2004). These steps are considered essential for Singapore to be a significant player in the global creative economy.

Freedom of expressions is assumed to be a condition necessary for creativity to blossom. If this is the case, can one expect louder critical social voices, a proliferation of diverse political views and even the staging of social disobedience from now on in Singapore? As this paper will show, the Singaporean government is not letting go of all controls; it still wants to prevent any social and political mayhem. One may find topless ladies dancing in the Crazy Horse Revue and openly gay persons working in the civil service but strong views challenging the establishment and the existing ethnic policies are stamped out. Would such controls dampen Singapore's quest to be a hub for the global creative economy?

The Creative Economy in Singapore

The Singaporean government takes an active role in transforming and ensuring the health of the national economy (Low & Johnston, 2001). Since Singapore's independence in 1965, its economy has grown and faced many challenges. Today, its economy is moving away from its traditional manufacturing and electronic bases to the financial services, telecommunications,

life sciences, tourism and the creative industries. The future shape of the Singaporean economy will look like this (Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA), 2000: 31)¹:

In the knowledge age, our success will depend on our ability to absorb, process and synthesize knowledge through constant value innovation. Creativity will move into the centre of our economic life because it is a critical component of a nation's ability to remain competitive. Economic prosperity for advanced, developed nations will depend not so much on the ability to make things, but more on the ability to generate ideas that can then be sold to the world. This means that originality and entrepreneurship will be increasingly prized.

Singapore has no natural resources. It does not even have enough water for its own use. The wealth of this tiny island-state is generated primarily through labour power and by functioning within the global economic system. The creative economy depends less on natural resources and more on labour, services and brain power. Making money from music, films, concerts, fashion, computer games, advertising services and other creative products is highly attractive for natural resource-scarce Singapore. In 2001, the Singapore government set up the Economic Review Committee (ERC), 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) expectedly suggests that Singapore should move away from an industrial economy into an innovation-fuelled economy, seeking ways to “fuse arts, business and technology” (ERC-CI, 2002: iii). The city-state must “harness the multi-dimensional creativity of [its] people” for its “new competitive advantage”(ERC-CI, 2002: iii). The recommendations are not surprising because the Singaporean government has been pushing for the creative turn for some years.

The first creative initiative was taken after 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 art programmes. The government then started paying more attention to the arts and culture (Chang & Lee, 2003). To further develop the 1989 recommendations, the Singapore Tourism Board (STB)² and the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts (MICA), took the initiative in 1995 to make Singapore into a “Global City for the Arts”

¹ The Ministry for Information and the Arts (MITA) became the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts (MICA) in 2003. Except for publication references, the ministry is referred to as MICA throughout this paper.

² In 1997, the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board (STPB) became the Singapore Tourism Board (STB). Except in publication references, STB is used in this paper.

(MITA & STPB 1995; Chang, 2000; Ooi, 2001). In that plan, among other things, Singapore will develop its arts trading sector, get world famous artists to perform and the Asian Civilizations Museum, the Singapore Art Museum and the Singapore History Museum are founded. The aim then, and still is, to make Singapore into the cultural centre of Southeast Asia.

In 2000, the MICA pushed the 1995 initiatives further and envisaged Singapore as a “Renaissance City” (MITA, 2000). Building and expanding on the 2000 Renaissance City report, the already mentioned 2002 ERC-CI report produces the most ambitious and comprehensive blueprint yet on the creative economy, which 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: iii, Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI), 2003: 51). Singapore is concentrating on three broadly defined creative sectors (ERC-CI, 2002: iii):

Arts and Culture: performing arts, visual arts, literary arts, photography, crafts, libraries, museums, galleries, archives, auctions, impresarios, heritage sites, performing arts sites, festivals and arts supporting enterprises

Design: advertising, architecture, web and software, graphics industrial product, fashion, communications, interior and environmental.

Media: broadcast (including radio television and cable), digital media (including software and computer services), film and video, recorded music and publishing

The authorities use a comprehensive three-prong approach to make Singapore into a creative hub. The first prong involves marketing Singapore as a creative hub and generating the appropriate public images. Singapore is to be perceived as a vibrant, creative and efficient place, where creative businesses can function effectively and profitably. It is also to be seen as a city where people lead comfortable and exciting lifestyles. The second prong entails formulating and implementing business-friendly policies. Singapore ensures a politically, economically, socially, technologically and legally stable environment that creative businesses find attractive to function within. The third prong entails socially engineering the population: the authorities build consensus towards the advent of the creative economy, cultivate a creative consumer base, train a workforce suitable for the creative economy and

eventually hope for a place that oozes of creativity. Let me elaborate on these three inter-related strategies.

Prong 1: Convincing the World

The authorities acknowledge that Singapore is inadequate in offering cultural activities that can draw highly skilled foreign workers to work in the city-state (Yusuf et al., 2005: 114; "Singapore paints rosy employment picture"). The Economist Intelligence Unit found that Singapore ranks behind Tokyo and Hong Kong as a sought-after place for expatriates because of its dearth of cultural activities ("Singapore stages a cultural renaissance"). Singapore is working hard to move away from its sterile image as a "cultural desert" (Kawasaki, 2004: 22). To address this particular concern, among other strategies, the iconic Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay has opened, the seed of Singapore's parliamentary democracy has been transformed into The Arts House @ the Old Parliament. And in the latest move, two mega complexes housing casinos, conference and entertainment facilities will be built by 2009. As mentioned earlier and will be discussed later, funds are made available to art groups and art events. Increasingly, Singapore boasts of many art and cultural activities. Such possibilities are aggressively promoted by the tourism authorities and other agencies to present a happening image for Singapore (Ooi, 2004).

To further establish the image of Singapore as an exciting and vibrant city, the STB actively seeks out international conferences, exhibitions and events in various industries to be hosted in the Lion City. For instance, Singapore will host the International Federation of Interior Architects/Designers Congress in 2009. The design industry is still fledging in Singapore, and such an event will help inch Singapore into the global limelight. Catherine McNabb, STB Director (Strategic Clusters I) said (personal communication):

We want to secure as many strategic events as possible, events that will reinforce our strategic goals. For instance, we want Singapore to be seen as the design hub of Asia, Singapore as a biomedical hub, we want to strengthen our banking and financial image. We aim to enhance Singapore's brand equity in the key clusters.

Such activities will put the focus of Singapore in the specific industries. Singapore wants to present itself to the general global audiences too. The then-Director of Creative Industries Singapore, Baey Yam Keng³ elaborated (personal communication):

³ Baey Yam Keng resigned from this position in April 2006 to become a Member of Parliament. He is expected to champion the creative economy, especially in the arts and culture, in Parliament.

Recently [2005], we hosted the International Olympic Council meeting. Such events, by themselves, are not profit generating. For example, security is costly. But there are other benefits, not just hotel stays and shopping but also the international branding of Singapore. Such high profile events highlight the Esplanade and the Singapore River; these help to sell Singapore. That is why we have not only to look at dollars and cents but also at the more intangible benefits to Singapore.

These strategies are aimed at marketing Singapore and presenting Singapore in a positive light to the world. Needless to say, such strategies will also offer income, employment opportunities and technological transfer for the country.

Besides the hosting of high profile events and activities, various state agencies actively seek out opportunities to make Singapore into the hub of global and regional organizations, including those in the media, design, telecommunication, pharmaceuticals and financial sectors. For example, Singapore is fast becoming a regional hub for the global media industry; MTV, Discovery Channel, HBO and BBC have already made Singapore their regional headquarters. It is hoped that Singapore-centered and Singapore-slanted contents will be promoted in the international media when Singapore is the regional headquarters.

Prong 2: Creating a friendly environment for the creative industries

Before global businesses choose to set up regional headquarters in Singapore, there must be enticements. For the media industry, Singapore offers a highly developed communication and information technology infrastructure. The government constantly offers incentives to attract these businesses. For instance, the Minister for Community Development, Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, announced ambitious plans for the media industry. He envisaged that the digital media sector will contribute a value add of S\$10 billion per year by 2018, creating 6000 new jobs and another 24 000 jobs through economic spin-offs (Balakrishnan, 2005). He announced that the Economic and Development Board (EDB) has allocated S\$500 million to develop the digital media industry for the period between 2006 and 2010. Subsequently, another S\$500 million is intended to be made available for the next five year period. After much lobbying, hugely successful media production companies, such as Lucasfilm Animation (makers of Star Wars) and Electronic Arts (makers of the computer game The Sims) have already set up studios in Singapore. Companies are offered tax incentives, resources to set up shop, generous schemes to train local workers and freedom to hire foreign professional workers. For example, the STB has a Film-in-Singapore scheme for foreign film makers. Under the Film-in-Singapore scheme, STB will pay for half the costs for film production in the city-state. The STB will also offer advice on where to shoot and will coordinate with other authorities (e.g.

police, National Park Board and attraction operators) to ensure the smooth shooting of scenes in Singapore.

The authorities are also busy ensuring the protection of intellectual property (IP). The Minister for Information, Communication and Arts, Lee Boon Yang, boasted that Singapore is ranked the “most IP-protective country in Asia” by the Political and Economic Risk Consultancy (Lee, 2005). The EDB assures businesses that IP protection is strong in Singapore (EDB, 2005):

The Singapore government has provided grants and tax incentives to encourage companies to undertake research activities and new product creations. To complement this pro-innovation environment, Singapore has taken steps to strengthen its IP regime and awareness over the last 20 years, with numerous support programmes and incentive packages launched to protect and educate IP users. As a result, the country has become a safe base to conduct IP-sensitive work, particularly in such fields as biomedical sciences and the creative and research industries. Companies can file for protection for their IP globally from Singapore as it is a signatory to major IP conventions and treaties, such as the Patent Cooperation Treaty, Paris Convention, Berne Convention and the Madrid Protocol.

Prong 3: Social Engineering

Just as important as promoting the right image for Singapore and providing a formal legal structure conducive for businesses, the garnering of local support is essential for developing the creative economy. Local residents must be supportive of the creative economy, and workers must be trained for the creative industries. Furthermore, consumers are needed for locally-produced creative products.

In wanting to make Singapore into a Renaissance City, 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: 30). The 2000 Renaissance City report acknowledges that “the 1989 Report had put in place much ‘hardware’ for culture and the arts and that what is necessary now is to give more focus on the ‘software’ or ‘heartware’”. It is argued that “instilling in [the] people a sense of the aesthetics and an interest in [heritage] should be the next step in [the] nation’s development” (MITA, 2000: 13).

Moving away from just building infrastructure, the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music was set up at the National University of Singapore. Art schools in Singapore – the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and the LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts – have been expanded and their profile increased. Arts festivals and performances have not only become more abundant but have also become more accessible; for instance, the Esplanade offers hundreds of free concerts annually, and besides the Singapore Arts Festival and Singapore Film Festival, there are now also individual festivals for Chinese, Malay and Indian arts and cultures. Singapore is becoming more culturally exciting for Singaporeans, expatriates and tourists. Local residents are edged towards becoming more sophisticated consumers of creative products.

The authorities also see close linkages between the arts and culture, design and media sectors. The arts and cultural sector is considered the artistic core of the creative economy, and is essential to ensuring the overall economic performance of the various creative industries. The arts and cultural sector is to provide the learning tools and experimentation space for creative individuals, interacting with the media and design sectors (ERC-CI, 2002: 10). More people should be involved in such experimentation, so that they will not only become potential workers in the creative economy but also consumers. Chief Executive Officer of the NAC, Lee Suan Hiang said (personal communication):

The government's role is to address market failure. In business and industry, we have R&D [research and development]. R&D is often funded by government because R&D is a cost centre, not a profit centre. In the arts, we also need experimentation. In experimental art, in new art, artists use a new language that the public is not familiar with. Because these are new products and unknown, they are more difficult to market. They need time to gestate and be accepted. So, there is market failure which the government needs to address. This is where NAC comes in. We provide grants to encourage artists to experiment and try new things. Our facilitation is to address market failure. We sometimes need to help expedite certain strategic projects which may take longer if left to the market by removing barriers and providing incentives and seed funding.

The NAC is also working with the MICA to set up a pre-tertiary arts school in 2008, so as to “identify and nurture the creative talents of young Singaporeans” (NAC, 2005: 29). These are plans of the comprehensive strategy to (ERC-CI, 2002: 15 - 20):

build creative capabilities (such as embed arts, design and media into the various levels of education, establish a flagship art, design and media programme at the

National University of Singapore), create “sophisticated demand” for the arts (promote public art projects, create “creative towns”, where arts, culture, design, business and technology integrated within community planning and revitalization efforts, introducing a world class Singapore Biennale, and create a new Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art) and develop the creative industries (including cultural tourism, internationalization of recording music, publishing, arts supporting industries, merchandising Singapore’s heritage resources).

Spicing up the cultural life of the city requires changes to regulations and policies. These changes affect various aspects of social life in Singapore. As a result, during a parliamentary sitting on 13 March 2004, a few Members of Parliament voiced their worries about the loosening up of regulations in Singapore to attract expatriates and to present a more creative image of Singapore. Member of Parliament Ahmad Khalis bin Abdul Ghani said (*Singapore Parliamentary Hansard*, 13 March 2004):

We have seen discernable moves towards greater easing up of our social scene. The main reason for this easing up is to present Singapore as a more happening place to woo tourists and foreigners. [... Some people] are concerned that such moves promote the idea that sexual promiscuity is acceptable, and therefore, this may undermine our family values. [... I believe ...] we do not quite need bar-top dancing or such other types of items to woo more tourists and foreigners.

The then-Minister of State for Trade and Industry, Vivian Balakrishnan, replied that he agrees that Singaporeans “must not lose our values, and we must not lose our compass” and he continued (*Singapore Parliamentary Hansard*, 13 March 2004):

There was an article that Professor Richard Florida wrote, entitled "The Rise of the Creative Class". [...] His research found that cities, which are able to embrace diversity, are able to attract and foster a bigger creative class. These are key drivers in a knowledge-based economy. The larger lesson for us in Singapore is that we need to shift our mindset so that we can be more tolerant of diversity. To achieve this, we have begun to take small but important steps to signal that we need a new respect for diversity and openness to ideas. So these examples that the Members cited, e.g., night spots to open 24 hours, bar-top dancing, and bungee jumping, are just part of that signalling process.

The Singaporean authorities are opening up social spaces to let the creative industries grow (see also Ooi 2005). The nanny way of governance is considered anachronistic, as

Singaporeans are increasingly given more consumption choices and social spaces to mature. Eventually, with the penetration of the aesthetic and the creative into different aspects of life, the “Renaissance Singaporean” will be born (adapted from MITA, 2000: 38-9):

1. The Renaissance Singapore is an individual with an open, analytical and creative mind that is capable of acquiring, sharing, applying and creating new knowledge. He [sic] is able to bring a distinct value-added advantage to each activity that he engages in.
2. The Renaissance Singaporean is an individual with a strong passion for life. The road not taken will be worth taking, for therein lies wonders and opportunities yet to be discovered. He dares to be different; he perseveres and is not afraid to fail. He balances his passion for results and abhorrence for idleness with the wisdom that sometimes the journey is as important as the destination
3. The Renaissance Singaporean is an active citizen who understands the balance between rights and responsibilities
4. The graciousness of our Renaissance Singaporean is underpinned by a fine sense of aesthetics. He appreciates, respects and constantly seeks out the work of artists, drawing from them inspiration, self-renewal and creative inputs.

Limits to the Freedom of Expression in the Creative Economy

The comprehensive strategy to realize the creative economy in Singapore has entailed loosening many social controls in the country. But some creative expressions, especially in the art and cultural sector, are still being policed. Many creative products such as computer games, industrial design and advertising campaigns are driven by their commercial value. This is not the case for some works of art; many artists resist any form of commercialism. These artists may make references to the social and political situations in the society. The Singaporean government is wary of such expressions.

For instance, the authorities have banned the play *Talaq* in 2002 by P. Elangovan. The play dealt with rape within an Indian Muslim marriage, and some members of the local Indian community protested. P. Elangovan lamented, “It makes a mockery of Singapore’s aim to be a Renaissance City” (“The Renaissance starts here?”). In 2005, Martyn See, a young local film maker saw his film, *Singapore Rebel* banned because it is considered to be ‘political’. The 30-minute documentary is about Chee Soon Juan, leader of the Singapore Democratic Party. See was interrogated under the Films Act which states that it is an offence to import, make, distribute or exhibit a film which contains "wholly or partly either partisan or biased references or comments on any political matter". A "party political film" is an offence

punishable by a maximum fine of S\$100 000 or a two-year prison sentence. His film equipment and copies of his film were confiscated. Such incidences are difficult to grasp for artists; creative expressions often reflect the embedded social, cultural and political environment.

In yet another incident, popular blogger, Mr Brown, was censured by the authorities because he questioned the government in his own column in the newspaper, *Today* (“Ensuring standard of national debate”; “Mr Brown opens door to media debate”; “Mr Brown's recent comments 'unjustified'”). He raised issues on the increase in electricity tariffs and taxi fares immediately after the 2006 general elections. He also made reference to the increasing income gap in the country. The authorities lambasted him, resulting in him being suspended by the newspaper. Journalistic freedom has its political limit in Singapore even though the media industry is aggressively promoted.

As a consequent, many creative workers exercise self-censorship (Gomez, 2000). For instance, as reported in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, a local publisher published the book *Crows* by a mainland Chinese author, *Jiu Dan* but not before removing references to the protagonist’s affair with a former Singaporean politician (“The Renaissance starts here?”). The book might be considered semi-autographical because *Jiu Dan* lived and studied in Singapore for many years.

These examples point to the limits of creative expressions in Singapore. While the authorities try to promote the creative economy, they want to keep the Singaporean brand of social and political stability they themselves have established. The Singaporean government does not want to risk the current ethnic and religious harmony in Singapore. Singapore experienced racial riots in the 1950s and 1960s. The Religious Harmony Act of 1990 sought to prevent people from spoiling the religious calm in the city-state. This project is laudable.

On the other hand, Singapore is multi-cultural and one’s ethnic identity is essential to function in the country – all Singaporeans are identified as Chinese, Malay, Indian or Others (Benjamin, 1976; Siddique, 1990). Singaporeans naturally reflect on their identities, and how different ethnic groups function together. And without definite guidelines, and if an artist wants to critically address local ethnic issues, he or she remains unsure if he or she has inadvertently promoted ethnic-religious hatred and has threatened social harmony. In fact, offering one’s critical reflections on ethnic and religious issues is problematic not only in the arts but also in other aspects of Singaporean society. For instance, opposition members have sometimes been framed as dangers to Singapore’s ethnic harmony. In the run-up to the 2006 general election, the opposition Workers’ Party was accused of trying to destabilise

Singapore's multi-cultural harmony on the basis of its election manifesto. The party had suggested that the racial quota that ensured a particular racial mix in public housing estates be removed (Workers' Party, 2006). While people who promote ethnic and religious hatred deserve to be punished, the ambiguity in the Singaporean system has made many Singaporeans afraid to publicly reflect on ethnic and religious issues in a critical manner.

This contrasts to what the government wants – the emergence of Singaporean voices in the creative economy. The authorities argue that Singapore is different from western countries promoting the creative economy because of Singapore's Asian embeddedness. The then-Director of Creative Industries Singapore, Baey Yam Keng, said (personal communication):

The East and West thing is very strong in Singapore. Singapore is based in Asia but because of our colonial days, the way we have connected to the world, the way our education is structured, we are very close to the western world. This is a very nice blend. Creative people like something ethnic, something Chinese, something Japanese and something different. Singapore is where East and West confer.

Such a view is often heard among officials. The Minister of Information, Communication and the Arts, Lee Boon Yang, referred to "Singapore's positioning as an open, multicultural society which is able to draw inspiration from our rich and diverse Asian heritage and at the same time link up with other international partners to widen market access and talent base", and claimed that many companies found "Singapore's unique confluence of eastern and western cultures as a key reason for collaborating with Singapore" (Lee, 2005).

But the confluence of eastern and western ideas – in the context of Singapore – should not include political aspects that challenge the Singaporean government, tarnish its image or raise critical issues on ethnic and religious issues. As alluded to earlier, some artists find it difficult to function in such an environment when their crafts make them comment on their immediate social and political environment. And furthermore the authorities refuse to identify the out-of-bound (OB) markers for them (Singapore Government, point 34). In one of the most important statements on the matter, the then-Deputy Prime Minister, current Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, said ("I have no doubt our society must open up further"):

We did not mark out upfront all the OB markers explicitly and comprehensively, as some civic groups and individuals wanted the Government to do. This would have been difficult in practice, and probably would not have been desirable in principle.

Had we pre-defined all the parameters for discussion, civil society would have lost the spark and autonomy that allows fresh areas to be explored, limits to be redefined, and both Government and civic groups to develop a certain responsiveness to each other and move society forward by engaging each other.

While the minister argues that an explicit set of OB markers would stifle the engagement between the government and civil society, the mechanisms for self-restrain and self-censorship, which the Singaporean authorities rely on today, would also become ineffective. With a clearly defined set of OB markers, activists and other socially engaged persons may find ways to circumvent the formalized markers. Under present circumstances, persons who want to engage in ethnic, religious and political criticisms have to second guess how the government may react. And Minister Lee said in the same speech:

When the opposition criticizes an action or policy, the purpose is usually to show that the Government is not providing good leadership or making good policy. They are fully entitled to do so, but the Government has to rebut or even demolish them, or lose its moral authority. Anyone entering the arena should understand that these are the rules of the game of politics everywhere

Persons expressing criticisms of the government will be treated like opposition party members; they will be – as mentioned – rebutted or demolished. Effectively, persons engaging in social criticism will have to tread carefully, avoiding the wrath of the government, not knowing when they have already crossed the boundaries into opposition politics.

It seems that businesses in the creative industries are not particularly bothered by these limits of social and political expressions in Singapore. No other countries with Singapore's level of economic development has such draconian controls over political and social expressions, but then, such forms of expressions mean little to the bottom-line of most firms in the creative industries. Social and political commentaries in the arts and culture reach small audiences within Singapore. It is yet to be proven that the control of social and political expressions will stifle creative expressions in designing chairs, drawing cartoons or programming software.

The authorities have allowed bar-top dancing, and in 2009, Singapore will house two casinos, a move that is very unpopular with Singaporeans (Ooi, 2005). These projects are allowed because of their commercial value. There is, however, no commercial champion for more critical social and political expressions in Singapore. The pursuit of the creative

economy in Singapore does not entail freedom to create; creativity is bounded by the social political circumstances of the soft authoritarian state.

Concluding remarks

Is it a paradox that a soft authoritarian regime is actively promoting creativity in its own society? The case of Singapore shows that it is not. I will summarize the case in this concluding section. The Singaporean authorities, like most other countries, are trying to tap into the economic potentials of the creative industries. Using the same strategies as to promote other industries, Singapore creates a conducive environment to attract investments, businesses and skilled labour. The social, political, technological, legal and economic circumstances are made right for industry. Singapore is also able to provide the necessary skilled labour for the industry. If the workers are not available locally, foreigners are employed. And in order to cultivate a population for the creative economy, not only are workers trained, the populace is engineered towards becoming more aesthetically sensitive.

More social spaces have opened up in the name of promoting the creative economy. Local residents are given more spaces to express themselves. These new spaces are part of the signaling process to show that Singapore has become more open and tolerant. On the other hand, there are limits to political, ethnic and religious expressions. The authorities want to maintain political stability and ethnic-religious harmony, and do not want to change a tested formula. While the government wants a more disorderly, vibrant and creative Singapore, it still wants to contain any potential chaos. The loosening of controls on the critical expressions of ethnic, religious and political issues is also unlikely because there is no economic incentive to do so.

Despite the criticisms of limits to the freedom of expression in Singapore, one may also ask if the glass is half full or half empty. If one takes the view that the glass was only one-quarter full, and after taking the creative turn, the glass has become half full, then Singapore has made important strides. Paradoxically, the economic potential of the creative industries has provided the push to open up more social spaces, albeit within unspecified OB limits.

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