

Governing the Arts, Bridging Cultures: A Study on the Institutional Management and Intercultural Strategy of Singapore's Esplanade

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Abstract. This study takes Esplanade - theaters on the bay as an example to find out how the national performing art centers balance the national strategy and the artistic creation and succeed in achieving intellectual communication at the same time. It uses an explanatory single-case method, combining policy documents, institutional annual reports, and academic literature for analysis. Through further study of the research, this study finds that Esplanade's operations follow a three-pillar model: policy anchoring, ecological incubation, and operational translation, and proposes the concept of "embedded autonomy". The concept points out that the autonomy of art institutions comes from the deep embeddedness of national strategies rather than keeping a distance. This paper compares the "embedded autonomy" with the western "arm's length", which provides an East and Southeast Asian perspective for comparative cultural governance research and has a reference value for other cities in Asia such as Hong Kong and Seoul to build national performing arts centers.

Keywords: Esplanade—Theatres on the Bay, embedded autonomy, cultural policy, arts management

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background and theme

The national performing arts center often faces a dilemma in Cultural Governance: it should not only undertake the national cultural strategy but also leave space for art experiments and cross-cultural exchanges [1, 2]. Western academic circles often use the "arm's length" mode, and the government avoids direct intervention content through the allocation of funds from independent public institutions [3]. But in Singapore, this model is not applicable. Singapore relies on the precise alignment of multi-ethnic (CMIO framework, namely Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others) to maintain its survival, and the country is deeply embedded in the cultural field [4, 5].

Singapore Esplanade is a key case in this context. It was opened in 2002. At the beginning, because of the high cost and the lack of medium-sized theater, it was approved as "heavy assets, light local" [1, 6]. But after more than twenty years of development, its 2,024 fiscal year influence report shows that more than 4,300 activities in the whole year are free of charge, 136 international

exchange projects are completed, and 1,128 local practitioners participate in the resident or incubation plan [7]. 14% of the audience of the Huayi Festival are non-Chinese, which proves that the curator has achieved cross-ethnic cultural translation [7]. This leads to the core question: how can Esplanade balance national strategy and art autonomy through the management mechanism, and effectively achieve cross-cultural communication?

1.2. Research objectives and significance

This study uses the single case analysis method, focusing on Esplanade, trying to clarify two points. First, how does the institution balance national strategy and art creation. Some studies have pointed out that the government provides funds through the Percent-for-the-Arts scheme and the market-oriented operation of legal institutions instead of directly intervening in the content, but the specific grasp, such as ladder incubation, long-term contract, etc., is lack of systematic deconstruction [2, 8, 9]. Second, explore the operation path of cross-cultural communication. Singapore's multi-ethnic policy and language assimilation mechanism is the background of the exhibition [10, 11]. How to translate it into the actual action of "exhibition translation" and "multi creation" of Esplanade is the focus of this paper.

In terms of theory, this paper puts forward the concept of "embedded autonomy", which provides a different mode from the "arm's length"; In practice, it can provide a reference for Hongkong, Seoul and other places.

1.3. Research methods and structure

This study adopts an explanatory single-case method, with Esplanade as the key case. Data sources include Singaporean cultural policy documents, Esplanade's FY2024 Impact Report, and relevant cultural governance research [4, 7, 8, 11-13]. The content of the article will be carried out in accordance with the introduction of institutional background and mission, the carding of policy environment, the analysis of operation mechanisms, the model refining and theoretical contribution.

2. Institutional background and missions

Singapore's Esplanade opened in October 2002, located in Binhai Bay, with a total investment of about 600 million Singapore dollars, with 1,600 concert halls and 2,000 theaters and other facilities. It adopts the legal institution model, under the supervision of Singapore's Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) and funded by Singapore's National Art Council (NAC), and its daily operation is in the charge of an independent management team, retaining program autonomy [8]. Early critics highlighted the lack of mid-sized theaters suited to local troupes' needs [1]. Koh clarified that its main audience and performance group were local people, and later the organization gradually responded to the query by adding Theatre Studio Season and other small hall Commission projects [3].

Esplanade has a dual mission. The first level is the "world-class performing arts center", serving as the Secretariat of the Asia Pacific Performing Arts Center Association (AAPPAC). In 2024, it completed 136 international art exchange projects, serving Singapore's strategic positioning of "global city" [5, 7]. The second layer is the "National Art Center". In 2024, more than 70% of the activities were free, and the total participation reached 3.75 million. The Huayi festival attracted 40% of the first visitors and 14% of them were non-Chinese [7]. The institution introduced the IOOI (Input-Output-Outcome-Impact) evaluation framework to align the MCCY objectives and promote

the democratization of art [14]. Fu Caiwu pointed out that after the 2,012 art and culture strategic assessment (ACSR), the policy was put back to community participation, and the dual mission is the embodiment of this change [12].

3. Policy environment for Esplanade

3.1. Evolution of Singapore's cultural policies

Fu Caiwu divided Singapore's cultural policy into three periods: from 1965 to 1989, it was the national cultural policy period, and its focus was to balance Western utilitarianism and Oriental Confucian values [12]. 1989 to 2012 was the period of cultural and economic policy, during which culture began to be regarded as an industry. Since 2012, it has been a period of cultural and social policy, and the focus of policy has returned to community and identity.

In 1988, the ACCA report prompted the establishment of NAC in 1990, the launch of Renaissance City Plan in 2000, and Esplanade became a flagship project. Vasu et al. pointed out that the state faces the tension between "global city" and "national state construction" [5]. On external cultural policy (ECP), Singapore does not take the initiative to set up overseas centers, but to be a "Singapore-led platform" [15].

3.2. Constraints of the creative industries framework

In 2002, Singapore issued the Creative Industries Development Strategy, which divides the creative industry into three parts: culture and art, design and media [8]. This framework directly affects the program planning logic of Esplanade. Institutions should not only do pure art performances but also take into account the content of design and media and keep in line with the Economic Development Board's national economic goals.

Under this framework, the state funding for cultural institutions has also changed. Pang Yingzi mentioned that the government has launched the "Percent-for-the-Arts" plan and encouraged legal institutions to adopt the near market operation [8]. As a legal institution, Esplanade should not only fulfill the cultural mission assigned by the state but also realize part of self-financing through site leasing and commercial activities.

In addition, cultural policy is also subject to deeper value constraints. Wang Shuyi reviews Singapore's 1991 Shared Values White Paper, including "the state is supreme, the society is the first" and "ethnic harmony, religious tolerance" and other provisions [10]. These values constitute the invisible boundary of Esplanade. For example, the establishment of the Huayi Festival, the Malay Art Festival and the India Art Festival is ostensibly to show multi culture, but in essence it is also the implementation of the state's control requirements for social harmony under the framework of CMIO [11].

3.3. Pivot from global ambitions to local engagement

The ACSR in 2012 was a symbol of the change of the policy. The policy began to focus on community participation [12]. Esplanade increased community investment and cooperated with MSF and AIC to extend art to medical and social fields [7, 14]. However, the management and control under the CMIO framework still exists, which are covered with the coat of "community participation", providing a background for the subsequent analysis of its operation translation [11].

Further, Kathiravelu's research on Singapore's "invisible second generation" reveals the deep logic of such control [11]. She frames Singapore as "a migrant nation" where "recent immigration trends are engendering new forms of diversity that remain latent because of the reductive ways in which ethnoracial difference is categorized" under the CMIO framework — a dynamic she terms "immigration without diversity" [11]. Through the CMIO classification and English assimilation policy, the state categorizes citizens into the four ethnic frameworks, and those who cannot be classified or are on the edge of the framework, such as foreign workers, new immigrants, and the "invisible second generation", which is ignored by the mainstream narrative in culture, are systematically excluded from the public cultural vision. In this context, the community participation and art democratization promoted by Esplanade are actually limited in the framework of CMIO [14]. Although its cross-cultural exhibition let different ethnic groups meet in the art space through "translation", it did not challenge the ethnic classification itself. This "regulatory pluralism" defines the invisible boundary for the operation of Esplanade: institutions can flexibly translate and co create within the framework, but it is difficult to break through the framework itself to touch more marginal cultural issues [4, 11]. This also provides an important policy footnote for the fourth chapter to analyze the boundary and limitations of its "operation translation".

4. Analysis of Esplanade's operational mechanisms

4.1. Balancing state strategy and artistic creation

4.1.1. Strategic guidance rather than hard intervention

The Singapore government's management of Esplanade is not using an arm's length, but a deeply embedded guidance. As the third chapter mentioned, the state has set a macro boundary through the white paper on common values and the CMIO framework [10, 11]. However, at the specific operational level, the government adopts the way of "strategic guidance rather than rigid intervention". The research of Pang Yingzi shows that the legal institution model of Singapore allows Esplanade to have an independent management team and market-oriented operation means while accepting the supervision of MCCY [8]. The government provides funds through the Percent-for-the-Arts scheme and NAC's annual funding but not directly regulating the content of each program. This arrangement enables institutions to independently plan exhibitions within the scope of policy anchoring.

However, there is an invisible boundary for such autonomy. Chong points out that the state may label artists as "deviants" or "Promethean sufferers" to signal disapproval of contentious content [2]. Alvin Tan also said that one of the survival rules in the industry is "do not bite the hand that feeds you" [9]. This means that the curator team of Esplanade must look for creative space on the premise of complying with the bottom line of ethnic harmony. Kathiravelu's analysis of language assimilation and ethnic classification further shows that the establishment of Huayi Festival, Malay Art Festival and India Art Festival is a cultural projection of the national multi-ethnic policy, and institutions cannot break this classification framework at will [11].

4.1.2. Ecological incubation and long-term commissioning

While institutional design resolves the issue of non-intervention, Esplanade's incubation mechanism answers the question of "how to support". Chapter 2 mentioned that the institution introduced the IOOI evaluation framework. In practice, this is reflected in the long-term investment of local

practitioners. The report for the fiscal year 2,024 shows that 1,128 Singapore artists and technicians participated in resident, tutorial and laboratory projects, reveals an increase of 45% over the previous year [7]. These projects are not one-off funding, but continuous talent cultivation for several years.

A typical example is the cooperation between Esplanade and Thailand artist Pichet Klunchun. According to the interview with Faith Tan recorded by Corrie Tan, the institution started from 2007 with small outdoor free performances [16]. After years of follow-up, contract and support, it eventually helped him establish a full-time Dance Troupe and perform on the international tour. This gradual, long-term way avoids the drawbacks of the short-term political performance project. Another example is Sim Chi Yin, a visual artist. In the 2,024-impact report, she mentioned that it was unimaginable in most countries to receive a commission of a national performing arts center, and this support allowed her to cross the border into the theater field [7]. Hoe believes that Esplanade continues to promote art democratization through free activities and community projects, and such democratization is also reflected in its acceptance towards diverse creative voices [14].

4.2. Realizing intercultural communication through operations

4.2.1. Curatorial practice as cultural translation

The cross-cultural communication of Esplanade is not simply to buy in foreign programs and perform them once. The third chapter mentioned that ECP emphasizes "not to set up overseas sites, but to be a Singapore-led platform" [15]. This logic in the field of performance art has been transformed into "strategy exhibition translation". Fu Caiwu pointed out that the state transformed religious and ethnic content into cultural tourism resources after "desensitization", and Esplanade further completed cultural translation with artistic language [12].

The most intuitive evidence comes from the Huayi Festival (Huayi). According to the data in 2024, the festival attracted 40% of the first visitors, and 14% of the audience were not Chinese [7]. This means that the program originally aimed at the Chinese community has successfully attracted the audience of other ethnic groups such as Malay and India through the exhibition packaging and bilingual publicity. This is the effect of "translation": not to force other ethnic groups learning Chinese content, but to find the expression of cross-cultural resonance. Similarly, Malay Art Festival (Pesta Raya) and (Kalaa Utsavam) also played a role in promoting mutual understanding among ethnic groups under the framework of CMIO.

4.2.2. Multi-party co-creation and regional networks

Beyond festival curation, Esplanade advances intercultural strategy via bilateral commissioning and regional network building. In 2024, Esplanade and Taiwan's Weiwuying National Kaohsiung Center for the Arts signed a contract for "Dance a Dance from My Body" to perform in Kaohsiung after the premiere of the Singapore Huayi Festival [7]. In the same year, the works jointly contracted with Chamber Made and CultureLink SG in Australia appeared in Melbourne Asia TOPA. These projects are not one-way cultural output, but multi-party joint investment, joint production, risk sharing and income sharing.

At the regional governance level, Esplanade serves as the Secretariat of AAPPAC, connecting more than 75 institutions in the region [7]. Ong once mentioned that the regional neighbors sometimes criticized Singapore for "mining" other people's culture, but the approach of Esplanade is to build trust through long-term partnership, rather than one-time procurement of programs [17].

This kind of "embedded" regional cooperation is the extension of Singapore's global urban strategy in the cultural field [5].

5. Discussion

5.1. A three-pillar model: policy anchoring, ecological incubation, and operational translation

Based on the previous analysis of the operation mechanism of Esplanade, its management practice can be refined into a trinity model. The first pillar of the model is "policy anchoring". Through the IOOI evaluation framework, the organization aligned with the three goals of "engaged citizens, cohesive communities, and a confident nation" proposed by MCCY, and internalized the CMIO multi racial framework and common values into the operational direction. This anchoring is not a rigid instruction, but a macro boundary. There is still a large space for the agency in program planning. The second pillar is "ecological incubation". Using government funding and self-employed income, the institution has established a step-by-step support system from outdoor free performance, small hall appointment to resident laboratory and international joint production. In fiscal 2024, a total of 1,128 local practitioners benefited, an increase of 45% over the previous year [7]. Typical cases include more than ten years of follow-up and cooperation with Pichet Klunchun, reflecting the incubation logic of long-term investment rather than short-term transactions [16]. The third pillar is "operational translation". The institution transformed the CMIO policy into a specific art experience, which is evidenced by the fact that the Huayi festival attracts 14% of non-Chinese audiences [7]. At the regional level, through the AAPPAC Secretariat and bilateral commissions, Singapore's cross-cultural logic is exported to the international arena. The three pillars are interrelated: Policy anchor provides resources and legitimacy, ecological incubation ensures content supply, and operational translation enables policy objectives to reach audiences.

5.2. Theoretical contribution: embedded autonomy in the East and Southeast Asian context

The theoretical starting point of this study is the reflection on the western "arm's-length" mode. Koh tried to defend the model in the context of Singapore, but more scholars pointed out that in the context of small countries and highly dependent on efficient governance in East and Southeast Asia, the state never really exits from the cultural field [3-5]. Based on this, this paper puts forward the concept of "embedded autonomy". The so-called embedded autonomy means that art institutions do not get freedom by keeping a distance from the state, but by deeply embedding in the national strategic framework, so as to obtain "relational empowerment". Esplanade is clear about the bottom line of the country - racial harmony and national cohesion - within this bottom line, it can freely plan experimental programs and support controversial artists [9, 10]. This kind of autonomy is possible because of Singapore's city-state attribute and global urban strategy [1]. The state needs an institution that is both obedient and capable of accomplishing internal cohesion and external exhibition at the same time. Different from multiculturalism in the west, Singapore's approach is better described as "managed multiculturalism"—rooted in what Kathiravelu calls "racialised governance", where "the state's justification for such wide-reaching policies is that a population with no shared ethnic basis ... necessitates artificial and invasive policies to create social cohesion" [4, 11]. The embedded autonomy of Esplanade finds a gap in this regulatory framework, recognizing the political presence and learning to be flexible.

5.3. Practical implications

For other cities that are building national performing arts centers, the mode of Esplanade provides three practical suggestions. First, the government should not only regard the Performing Arts Center as a real estate project or tourism landmark but also put it into the long-term cultural policy framework and avoid micro intervention [12]. Second, institutions need to establish their own ecological incubation mechanism, relying solely on the introduction of overseas large-scale production is not conducive to the sustainable development of local art ecology [1]. They should focus on local cultivation through making investments in residencies, laboratories, and local commissions [14]. Third, the cross-cultural exhibition should be based on the reality of the local multi-ethnic groups, through "translation" rather than simply "importing" to achieve dialogue and turn the ethnic harmony clause into a shared artistic experience [7].

6. Conclusion

This study's central contribution is twofold: an operational three-pillar model—policy anchoring, ecological incubation, operational translation—and a theoretical reframing of institutional autonomy as embedded rather than detached. Together, these propositions suggest that for city-states like Singapore, the tension between state strategy and artistic freedom is not resolved by separation but managed through pragmatic entanglement. Esplanade succeeds precisely because it acknowledges the political ground on which it stands and learns to maneuver within it, turning the industry adage "don't bite the hand that feeds you" into a productive, if constrained, creative strategy.

That said, the model's transportability remains an open question. Esplanade's trajectory depends heavily on Singapore's city-state scale, its efficient bureaucracy, and the rigidly administered CMIO social fabric—conditions that federal states or more fragmented politics cannot easily replicate. Future comparative work might track how this model fares as Esplanade opens its new Waterfront Theatre or tests its explanatory power against cases such as Hong Kong's West Kowloon Cultural District and Seoul's performing arts hubs. Such inquiries would not only test the limits of embedded autonomy but also enrich the understanding of how the state, far from being culture's adversary, often emerges as its most enabling—and most controlling—partner.

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