From Nation-Building to Economic Strategy: Shifting Cultural Policy Rationales in Singapore's Visual Arts

Standley Tan, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

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Abstract

This study examines the evolving relationship between economic imperatives and community engagement within Singapore's visual arts sector, situated within the nation's ambition to position itself as a regional arts and cultural hub. Tracing cultural policy developments from the 1970s to the 2020s, it highlights shifts in policy rationales—from arts-led nation-building to the strategic mobilisation of the arts for economic growth, innovation, and social vitality. Rather than replacing earlier priorities, these shifts reflect a cumulative layering and rebalancing of policy rationales that continue to coexist within Singapore's cultural governance framework. While existing research has documented Singapore's cultural policy trajectory, limited attention has been paid to how policy rationales are justified, sustained, and negotiated over time. This study addresses this gap by applying the lens of institutional logics to analyse how evolving policy rationales have accumulated and interacted over time, shaping relationships between economic objectives, social goals, and community-oriented cultural value. Particular attention is given to Singapore's distinctive governance context, characterised by strong state involvement, which shapes negotiations around artistic autonomy, market participation, and cultural legitimacy. By foregrounding policy rationales rather than discrete policy instruments, this paper demonstrates the value of institutional logics as an analytical framework for understanding continuity and change in cultural governance. Drawing on five decades of policy development, the study offers insights relevant to cultural policy debates in Singapore and other contexts where state participation plays a central role in shaping visual arts ecosystems.

Keywords: cultural policy, cultural governance, institutional logics, institutional layering visual arts

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Introduction

Since independence in 1965, Singapore has invested heavily in cultural development as part of its broader nation-building and economic transformation agenda. The visual arts sector has experienced significant institutional growth, supported by the establishment of cultural agencies, public funding mechanisms, arts infrastructure, and strategic cultural plans. Existing studies have documented the evolution of Singapore's cultural landscape and examined the state's increasing support for the arts (Chang, 2000; Kong, 2000; Tan, 2007). However, less attention has been paid to how policy rationales themselves have evolved over time and how different understandings of artistic value have accumulated within cultural governance.

This paper examines the evolution of cultural policy rationales within Singapore's visual arts sector between 1965 and 2025. Drawing upon institutional logics theory, it argues that Singapore's cultural policy development is best understood as a process of institutional layering rather than policy replacement. Successive policy phases introduced new rationales for supporting the arts, but these rationales did not replace earlier objectives. Instead, state, market, and community logics accumulated over time and continue to coexist within contemporary cultural governance.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Cultural policy scholars have increasingly noted that governments rarely support the arts for a single reason. Instead, cultural policy often reflects competing understandings of public value, economic contribution, and social benefit (Belfiore & Bennett, 2008; Holden, 2006). This complexity makes institutional logics particularly useful for examining how different policy rationales coexist and evolve over time. Early cultural policies frequently emphasised nation-building, cultural identity, and social cohesion, while more recent approaches have highlighted creativity, innovation, economic competitiveness, and social inclusion (Belfiore & Bennett, 2008; Gray, 2007).

Institutional logics provide a useful framework for analysing these developments. Institutional logics refer to socially constructed systems of values, beliefs, and practices that shape organisational behaviour and define legitimacy within a field (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). Rather than assuming the dominance of a single institutional order, contemporary institutional theory recognises that multiple logics often coexist and interact within organisational fields (Thornton et al., 2012).

Three institutional logics are particularly relevant to cultural policy. State logic emphasises nation-building, social cohesion, public accountability, and strategic governance. Market logic prioritises innovation, entrepreneurship, economic growth, and competitiveness. Community logic focuses on participation, accessibility, social inclusion, and everyday cultural engagement. These logics provide distinct but overlapping justifications for public investment in the arts.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative historical policy analysis to examine changes in cultural policy discourse between 1965 and 2025. The analysis draws on publicly available policy documents and institutional texts, including government reports, Renaissance City Reports, the Creative Industries Development Strategy, the Arts and Culture Strategic Review, National Arts Council plans and ministerial statements.

Singapore provides a useful case due to the central role played by the state in shaping cultural development. The high degree of policy coordination allows shifts in cultural priorities to be traced more clearly than in contexts characterised by fragmented governance arrangements.

Documents were analysed chronologically and coded according to the presence of state, market, and community logics. Coding focused on identifying recurring justifications for public investment in the arts and examining how these justifications changed across successive policy periods. Cross-period comparisons were then undertaken to identify continuities and shifts in policy rationales.

Findings

Nation-Building and Cultural Consolidation (1965–1989)

Singapore's early cultural policy was closely linked to the broader project of nation-building. During this period, cultural activities were primarily valued for their contribution to social cohesion, multicultural understanding, and national identity formation. Government leaders consistently framed culture as an important component of social integration within Singapore's multi-ethnic society. Shortly after independence, Lee Kuan Yew described Singapore as a "model multi-racial society" that "belongs to all of us" (Lee, 1965), reflecting the state's commitment to multiculturalism and social cohesion (Chua, 1995; Kong, 2000).

Growing governmental interest in culture became increasingly evident during the late 1970s. Speaking at the launch of the Singapore Festival of Arts in 1978, Acting Minister for Culture Ong Teng Cheong acknowledged the complexity of defining culture, noting the many different interpretations associated with the term (Ong, 1978). His remarks reflected an emerging recognition of the importance of arts and culture within Singapore's broader social and national development agenda. These developments foreshadowed the more systematic cultural policy initiatives that emerged in the following decade, particularly *The Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts* (Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts, 1989), which laid the foundation for the establishment of the National Arts Council in 1991.

Within this framework, the visual arts were regarded primarily as cultural and social infrastructure rather than economic assets. Public support for the arts was justified through their role in strengthening collective identity and promoting social stability. State logic was clearly dominant during this period.

Creative Industries and Global City Development (1990–2010)

The establishment of the National Arts Council in 1991 and the publication of the Renaissance City Reports marked a significant shift in cultural policy discourse. The Renaissance City Report positioned arts and culture as strategic assets capable of enhancing Singapore's attractiveness to global talent, investors, and visitors (MITA, 2000).

Similarly, the Creative Industries Development Strategy framed creativity as a strategic resource within Singapore's transition towards a knowledge-based economy (MICA & MTI, 2002). The visual arts were increasingly viewed as contributors to innovation, tourism, international branding, and economic competitiveness.

This period saw the growing influence of market logic. While nation-building remained important, cultural policy increasingly linked artistic development to broader economic objectives and global city ambitions.

Participation, Accessibility and Community Engagement (2011–2025)

The publication of the *Arts and Culture Strategic Review* (ACSR) marked a significant shift in Singapore's cultural policy discourse towards participation and accessibility. The review articulated a vision of "arts and culture for all Singaporeans" and sought to integrate cultural participation into everyday life (Arts and Culture Strategic Review Committee, 2012).

Subsequent initiatives, particularly *Our SG Arts Plan*, further reinforced community-oriented objectives. One of the plan's key priorities was audience development across all demographic segments, with particular emphasis on making the arts accessible to all Singaporeans regardless of age or background. Speaking at the opening of the Gallery Children's Biennale, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Grace Fu emphasised that art should be accessible to all Singaporeans and argued that the arts can foster understanding among people from diverse backgrounds, encourage social discourse, and deepen understanding of "who we are as a people and as a nation" (Fu, 2019). Policy discourse increasingly emphasised inclusion, community engagement, cultural participation, and accessibility alongside economic competitiveness and artistic excellence.

This development reflected the growing influence of community logic within Singapore's cultural governance framework. Importantly, community-oriented priorities did not replace earlier nation-building and economic objectives but were layered onto existing policy frameworks. The result was a more complex policy landscape in which state, market, and community logics coexisted and collectively shaped cultural development.

Institutional Layering and the Coexistence of Logics

The findings suggest that Singapore's cultural policy evolution is characterised by institutional layering rather than policy replacement (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Streeck & Thelen, 2005).

These logics often reinforce one another. Community participation may contribute to social cohesion, while audience development can support economic sustainability. However, tensions may also emerge when different logics promote competing definitions of success. Market-oriented frameworks may prioritise visibility and competitiveness, while community-oriented initiatives emphasise inclusion and participation.

The coexistence of multiple logics has broadened the range of values associated with the arts but has also increased the complexity of cultural governance, as arts organisations and practitioners are increasingly expected to demonstrate economic, social, and community impacts simultaneously.

Discussion

A central contribution of this study is the argument that the evolution of Singapore's cultural policy is best understood through the lens of institutional layering. Rather than being characterised by the sequential replacement of policy paradigms, cultural policy development involved the accumulation of successive rationales that expanded, rather than displaced,

existing objectives (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Streeck & Thelen, 2005). Nation-building priorities remained influential even as economic competitiveness, creativity, and community participation assumed increasing prominence within cultural governance.

This finding contributes to broader debates on cultural policy and institutional change. Existing scholarship frequently portrays cultural policy development as a progression of distinct paradigms, moving from cultural nationalism to creative industries and, more recently, towards participation-oriented approaches (Gray, 2007). The findings of this study suggest a more nuanced trajectory, where earlier policy objectives continue to shape contemporary cultural governance alongside newer priorities. The Singapore case therefore illustrates how cultural policy can evolve through processes of institutional layering, resulting in the coexistence of multiple and overlapping sources of legitimacy within a single policy environment.

The coexistence of multiple institutional logics is consistent with broader institutional theory, which recognises that organisational fields are frequently shaped by competing and complementary logics rather than a single dominant institutional order (Besharov & Smith, 2014; Thornton et al., 2012). Within Singapore's visual arts sector, state, market, and community logics have become increasingly intertwined, creating both opportunities for synergy and potential tensions in the allocation of resources, evaluation of outcomes, and definition of artistic success.

The findings also contribute to scholarship on Singapore's cultural development. While previous studies have documented the state's increasing investment in arts and culture (Kong, 2000; Tan, 2007), this study highlights how successive policy rationales accumulated over time rather than replacing one another. This perspective offers a useful framework for understanding the continued influence of nation-building objectives within contemporary cultural governance despite the growing emphasis on creative economy development and public participation.

Beyond Singapore, these findings have broader implications for understanding cultural policy in developmental states. The Singapore case demonstrates that cultural policy evolution in state-led systems may occur through institutional layering rather than paradigm replacement. This suggests that the institutional logics perspective offers a useful framework for explaining cultural policy change in contexts where governments simultaneously pursue cultural, economic, and social objectives. By highlighting how multiple policy rationales accumulate and coexist over time, the study contributes to broader debates on cultural governance beyond the Singapore context.

Conclusion

This paper examined the evolution of cultural policy rationales within Singapore's visual arts sector between 1965 and 2025. Drawing on institutional logics theory, it is demonstrated that cultural policy evolved through institutional layering rather than sequential policy replacement.

State logic initially dominated cultural governance through its emphasis on nation-building and social cohesion. Market logic subsequently expanded policy attention towards economic competitiveness, creativity, and innovation. More recently, community logic introduced greater emphasis on participation, accessibility, and social inclusion. These logics accumulated over time and continue to coexist within contemporary cultural governance.

The findings contribute to cultural policy scholarship by demonstrating how institutional logics can be used to explain long-term cultural policy change and by showing that policy evolution may occur through institutional layering rather than paradigm replacement. More broadly, they suggest that contemporary cultural governance increasingly involves balancing multiple forms of cultural value rather than privileging a single rationale for supporting the arts.

The study also highlights the continuing negotiation between economic, social, and community-oriented objectives within Singapore's visual arts sector. Rather than representing distinct phases of policy development, these priorities have become embedded within a broader governance framework characterised by multiple and overlapping sources of legitimacy. Future research could further examine how artists, arts organisations, and policymakers navigate these competing expectations and how institutional layering shapes cultural development over time.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that no AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate, refine, or correct the content in the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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