

HOE SU FERN



The National Arts Council (NAC) has withdrawn its grant to Mr Jeremy Tiang for his book *State of Emergency*, which is about the history of leftist movements in Singapore. It explained that the content in the book deviated from the original proposal that had been mutually agreed upon, hence breaching funding guidelines.

This news comes after graphic novelist Sonny Liew became the first Singaporean to win three awards for his book *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* at the prestigious 29th annual Will Eisner Comic Industry Awards.

Two years ago, NAC withdrew a previously approved publishing grant for the novel, citing concerns over "sensitive content" that could potentially undermine the authority or legitimacy of the Government.

However, in an official statement released a few days after the Eisner awards ceremony, NAC congratulated Mr Liew. It also stated that he has continued to receive state support in other ways, including subsidised arts housing.

The two episodes have reignited

a debate on arts funding. These are not the only occasions NAC has withheld funding for artistic projects that it deems antithetical to nation-building, but continued support for the artists in other ways.

In 2011, NAC revoked its funding for a collection of plays by local playwright Chong Tze Chien, although the decision was made before publication.

The collection, published by Epigram Books — which also published Mr Liew's book — includes *Charged*, a play about National Service and race relations that won plaudits from sold-out audiences.

In 2010, theatre company Wild Rice said NAC cut its funding for staging productions that "ran contrary to mainstream societal values and which were critical of the government".

Both *The Finger Players* — of which Mr Chong is company direc-

## CREATIVE WORKS AND THE OB MARKERS

# The art of govt funding still a work in progress



Graphic novelist Sonny Liew in his studio in Singapore last October. Mr Liew's award-winning *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* had its NAC grant withdrawn over concerns it could undermine the authority or legitimacy of the Government. PHOTO: THE NEW YORK TIMES

tor — and Wild Rice continue to receive state support as Major Company Grant recipients and subsidised-arts-housing beneficiaries.

This contradictory nature of state support highlights how the out-of-bounds (OB) markers are obscure and continually redrawn. After all, he who pays the piper calls the tune.

This is not the first time there have been deliberations on the nature, necessity and implications of arts funding by the Government.

In 2015, NAC's then-CEO Kathy Lai stressed the need for arts funding to be attached with guidelines, as a means to safeguard social harmony — which triggered a similar debate.

At this juncture, beyond censorship and the use of public funds, it is useful to ask: What is the value of the arts to Singapore?

The relationship between the arts community and the state has never been an easy one.

The arts and culture have had a sidelined history in the Singapore story, due to the emphasis on material success and economic development in the national narrative.

Over the past 30 years, state funding for the arts has grown significantly, but only after cultural policies were

layered with economic objectives in the 1980s and 1990s.

Cultural policies such as the 1989 Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts (ACCA) and Renaissance City (2000) championed the arts and culture as profit-generating industries and building blocks for Singapore to achieve global city status.

In their attempts to legitimise state investment, these cultural policies have evaluated the arts in terms of their contributions to economic growth, job creation and urban rejuvenation.

Apart from justifying arts funding in economic terms, cultural policy has also prescribed the arts and culture as ideological instruments for nation-building, social cohesiveness and identity.

Community arts, public participation and capability building for arts education all feature in the latest Arts and Culture Strategic Review report, released in 2012. These initiatives were funded to the tune of \$274 million from 2012 to 2016.

It is undeniable that state funding for the arts has grown exponentially.

In 2015, according to the Singapore Cultural Statistics report, the government provided S\$595.7 million or 80 per cent of arts and heritage funding. Contrast this with 1987, when — according to ACCA — the Government provided only S\$3.5 million.

Of the S\$3.7 million spent on the 1988 Singapore Festival of Arts, less than 10 per cent was borne by the Government.

In a state where arts philanthropy remains relatively weak, Government-led development of the arts has provided ample financial and creative opportunities for arts practitioners and organisations.

For instance, the Arts Housing Scheme, which was implemented in 1985, has provided more than 220 artists and arts groups with subsidised work spaces where they are able to practise and develop their art without worrying about paying rents at market rates.

While many artists are grateful, the generosity has come with an instrumental approach to evaluating the merits and value of the arts for Singapore society.

In Singapore, art for art's sake finds less traction in the eyes of policymakers than art that can fulfil an economic or nationalistic agenda. An artwork's compliance with the prevailing state narrative is accorded merit in funding decisions.

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## The art of govt funding still a work in progress

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Some may argue that this is fair, given that state funding is limited, why should it be used to fund material that potentially undermines the legitimacy of the funder, in this case,

the Government? This view, however, fails to take into account that art can raise critical questions for healthy debate, which is part of the process of building political legitimacy.

In fact, the 1992 state-commissioned

Censorship Review Committee report acknowledged that "by its nature, art must be understood, at times, to challenge orthodoxy and provide a stimulus for social change and evolution".

It is also important here to stress that nation-building should include an exploration of the diverse stories of our experiences, histories and identities, particularly the unseen, unheard of and unacknowledged.

At LaSalle's 30th anniversary dinner in 2014, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong spoke of how artists "create inspiring works, which build on and transcend the diversity of our culture, race or religion", and "enable us to discover new ways to express our thoughts and views, to articulate the hopes and dreams of the community".

He added that arts institutions have created a strong cultural base to "help us to understand who we are as Singaporeans, and how far we have come as a nation".

Is this not exactly what The Art of Charlie Chan, Charged, and Wild Rice's political plays do?

Art is integral to the cultural evolution and betterment of society precisely by challenging and disrupting one-dimensionality, and functioning as a safe space for contentious issues to be discussed with nuance and perspicacity.

It is inevitable that certain artistic works will provoke debate, and rightly so. The challenge is how we as a society respond to such works — with vitriol and calls for the revoking of state funding, or with mature and measured debate.

In 1990 — the 25th anniversary of Singapore's independence — the late theatre doyen Kuo Pao Kun warned against "undue interference" from the state, especially for the arts, which exist in a rich multiplicity of forms, modes, aspects and levels.

He wondered if a new perspective on the arts in Singapore would arise, with a ground-up approach to creating a national arts scene and the "original creative urge of individual artists and groups would be given due respect so that their impulses could enjoy sufficient leeway to prove their creative worthiness, or otherwise".

As we celebrate our 52nd year of independence, the new perspective referred to by Kuo appears still to be very much a work in progress. Until we recognise what the arts can truly bring to the table, artistic merit will be easily undermined by terms such as "socially subversive", "objectionable content" and "undermining state authority".

Arts practitioners and organisations who wish to obtain state funding will simply have to continue the endless dance around tenuous OB markers and practise self-censorship, or risk having their funding curtailed.

As our arts scene matures and more artists such as Mr Liew and filmmaker Kirsten Tan achieve laudable international success, NAC might also consider loosening its reins in leading the development of our arts, and place more trust in our artists to be socially responsible civic citizens whose art is able to help us make sense of our world, and broaden our experience, resilience and understanding.



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