Towards a 'New Equilibrium': The Economics and Politics of the Creative Industries in Singapore

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Abstract

On 26 September 2002, as Singapore faced up to its worst economic year since attaining full political independence in 1965, the Creative Industries Working Group (CIWG) of the Economic Review Committee (ERC), a government-appointed, high-level body tasked with identifying future economic growth sectors and opportunities for Singapore, unveiled its report entitled *Creative Industries Development Strategy: Propelling Singapore's Creative Economy* (CIWG, 2002). This was the first time the voguish concept of the 'creative industries' had been publicly acknowledged and embraced in Singapore. It is believed that the development of a 'creative cluster' – or a creative network comprising the arts and cultural sector, the design sector and the media industry – would propel Singapore's new innovation-driven economy by 'industrializing' the cultural (and culture-related) sectors in Singapore. Among other envisaged outcomes, this policy aims to encourage risk-taking and entrepreneurship and to attract creative 'talents' to locate in Singapore. Whilst the notion of the 'creative industries' has been objectively modelled after global trends and policies, its application in a society notorious for its censorious political and cultural climate is fraught with problems. This article offers a critical examination of this new creative industries policy direction spearheaded by the Singapore government, and considers the economics and politics of creativity in what is being presented as the 'new' Singapore of the twenty-first century.

Introduction

On 26 September 2002, as Singapore faced up to its worst economic performance year since attaining full political and administrative independence in 1965, the Creative Industries Working Group (CIWG) of the Economic Review Committee (ERC) unveiled its report, entitled *Creative Industries Development Strategy: Propelling Singapore's Creative Economy* (CIWG 2002). Having been tasked with identifying future

economic growth sectors and opportunities for Singapore, the government-appointed, high-level committee singled out the development of a 'creative cluster' – as a creative network comprising the arts and cultural sector, the design sector and the generic media industry – as a key factor to propel Singapore's new innovation-driven economy. The voguish concept of the 'creative industries', which had been introduced in developed countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia in the latter half of the 1990s, was swiftly adopted by the Singapore government as a means towards encouraging risk-taking, entrepreneurship and to attract creative 'talents' into Singapore. According to the *Creative Industries* report, Singapore would become the 'New Asia Creative Hub' of the twenty-first century, which would in turn ensure its longer-term economic prosperity (CIWG 2002: v).

In order to (re)package the city-state as a creative and vibrant place to 'live, work and play' – a contemporary catchphrase in Singapore – for both local and foreign talents, the government initiated several policy shifts. These aimed to demonstrate a paradigm shift from an infamously rigid demeanour to one displaying a metamorphosing 'liberal' mindset. Changes included the prospective admission of gays into the civil service, the granting of permits for pubs and nightclubs to introduce 'bar-top dancing', the auto-registration of societies, clubs and interest groups, and other permissive social and cultural practices (Lee 2004). More recently in 2006, the government overturned a long-held ban on casinos and awarded US-based Las Vegas Sands and Malaysia's Genting Group contracts to construct two gaming cum tourism venues – known as integrated resorts – in Singapore. As these forms of 'liberalization' were being initiated, there were signs that such 'open' mindsets exist only on the 'non-political' margins of society. Indeed, the Singapore government continues to forewarn individuals and groups to steer clear of controversial political issues (Lee 2002a). Such behaviour is consistent with the ruling People's Action Party's (PAP) approach to political administration and governance, where strategies of 'diversion' have been variously applied to depoliticize the citizenry since it came to power in 1959 (Leo and Lee 2004). I argue in this article that the focus of these 'creative' proposals is for the government to appear to be doing something, of keeping up with global trends in the cultural and media industries, rather than reflecting any substantive changes.

The paradoxical nature of the notion of 'openness' in Singapore, which is meant to anticipate an environment conducive to creativity, was well captured in a speech delivered by then-Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien

Loong to the elite Harvard Club on 6 January 2004 – and reprinted in full by *The Straits Times* the very next day, presumably for broad national consumption and application. Characterized by the media as Lee's maiden speech as Prime Minister-Designate, the content was broadly centred on how Singapore 'must open up further'. As Lee declared:

I have no doubt our society must open up further. The growing participation and diversity over the two decades have been vital pluses for Singapore. … Looking ahead, the important task of the Government will be to promote further civic participation, and continue to widen the limits of openness. (Lee 2004)

Lee's speech began with an acknowledgement of Singapore's need to cultivate greater tolerance for diversity in the future, but soon slipped into an authoritarian mode when he began to reiterate the limits to such tolerance. A closer reading of his speech points to the fact that signs of optimism were quickly obfuscated by Lee's reassertion of the importance of instituting parameters for political debate and commentary. In Singapore, such parameters are known as out-of-bounds markers, or 'OB-markers', an analogy well known to avid golfers (Lee 2002a: 109-11). Demonstrating the effectiveness of the PAP government's *Realpolitik*, Lee cautioned that the OB-markers, designed to ensure that government authority would not be eroded, continue to apply in the new 'open' Singapore because the majority of Singaporeans, euphemistically described as the 'moral majority', 'still do not play golf' (Lee 2004).

Such contradictions suggest that the government-initiated notion of 'openness' that is meant to pave the way for a new creative outlook is likely to conform to the terms and tenets of political engagement and economic imperatives, not unlike the actualization of many other government policy directives (Leo and Lee 2004; Throsby 2001: 10-12). However, as this article will argue, because creativity requires an open and questioning disposition to challenge existing status quos, in order that original and innovative outcomes can be produced, the government's contradictory positions may actually limit its flowering, despite seemingly bold statements aimed at 'industrializing creativity'. This is likely to result in a new kind of Singapore-branded 'equilibrium', one that is loosely creative at the margins but which bears the marks of political conformity and economic pragmatism in the main (Leo and Lee 2004).

This article will begin by examining the rudimentary question of what constitutes 'creativity' and the necessary socio-cultural factors that are conducive (or not) to its nurture. It will then consider the question of

whether the industrialization of creativity is possible in light of Singapore's censorious political climate as well as its tendency to focus chiefly on economic productivity. As I shall argue, these problems, though not necessarily insurmountable, have the effect of discouraging or preventing people from challenging prescribed norms, a requisite process for the development of a truly open and creative society.

Invoking 'Creativity' Creatively

While its definition is often abstruse and cryptic, the concept of creativity is gaining popularity across governmental bureaucracies, businesses as well as within academia. From the domains of cultural studies to psychology and business administration, researchers have scrutinized the thought processes of historical great minds, monitored creativity in living subjects through research experiments, and explored how to capture creative capabilities in the individual, workplace and society at large (Leo and Lee 2004; Florida 2002; Howkins 2001; Hesmondhalgh 2002). The various foci of these studies on creativity have reaped a diverse pool of conceptualizations on the discourse of creativity. As Terry Flew notes most cogently, in a review essay on the rise of creativity as a cultural discourse, 'creativity is both big business and a lot of different things to a lot of different people' (Flew 2003: 90). While the discourse of creativity is broad and impossible to define or expound fully within the space of this article, I aim to outline in this section three pertinent associations of creativity and the creative environment that have repeatedly emerged in literature dealing with what appears to be a nebulous concept.

First, creativity is primarily associated with the evocation of new ideas, solutions or products that have not previously been explored, and that are relevant to a specific domain. *The Oxford Dictionary* (1998) defines creativity as the ability to invent or develop new and original ideas. Congruent to this, social psychologists Amabile and Tighe (2003: 9), who have conducted extensive research on creativity, point out that most conceptual acceptances include the key element of novelty (or originality and 'newness') coupled with 'appropriateness' within a specific domain. While 'appropriateness' is admittedly subjective within different contexts, its inclusion serves to highlight that not every original idea is necessarily creative. Rather, each idea needs to have a certain level of suitability in a specified field or domain. Prominent scholar Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi similarly defines creative people as those who frequently conceive new ideas, decipher problems and generate new products,

which must be accepted in at least one cultural setting (Gardner 1993: 32). In short, the first marker of creativity lies in the originality-cum-appropriateness of an idea, solution or product.

Second, creativity is largely motivated by a passion for the creative activity, rather than any external stimulator. Amabile calls such passion 'intrinsic motivation' or the ability to engage with a creative activity due to genuine fervour for the task (1990: 78-79). Intrinsic motivation is diametrically opposed to extrinsic motivation, which includes external rewards such as monetary payment, and external pressures such as deadlines, evaluation stress, surveillance and limited alternatives (Lepper *et al.* 1973; Ng 2001: 5). Numerous studies and experiments over the past decades have shown that those performing under intrinsic motivation produce far more creative results than those operating under extrinsic motivation (Amabile and Tighe 1993: 22-23). While it is possible for intrinsic motivation to co-exist with extrinsic motivation, Amabile makes it clear that one tends to emerge as the primary driving force in any task, and any task undertaken primarily with the former tends to be more creative as a result (Amabile 1990: 78). Singaporean psychologist Ng Aik Kwang argues that the people who tend to be task-involved are more creative than those who are ego-involved. The former, who perceive themselves to be the 'cause of [their] own behaviour', will experience 'an inner sense of psychological freedom to create', while the latter will feel like 'a pawn to the action' – as one controlled by extraneous circumstances (Ng 2001: 80). In addition, Csikszentmihalyi observes that people who are task-involved (or intrinsically motivated) are more likely to experience 'flow', or the ability to become totally involved and immersed in one activity. They can also smoothly transit between different stages of the task, resulting in greater creativity and productivity (Amabile 1990: 63-64). In short, a person working with primary intrinsic motivation tends to be more creative than one driven primarily by extrinsic motivation.

Third, creativity requires a special kind of social environment/culture that is sufficiently mature and broad-minded to nourish creativity amidst its possibly subversive manifestations. As creativity at the critical level entails challenging status quos so that innovative and inventive outcomes can be produced, the socio-cultural environment in which it occurs needs to be accommodative towards non-conformists who dare to explore beyond established norms. Richard Florida, economics professor and author of the bestseller and influential *The Rise of the Creative Class*, elaborates on this idea by championing the promotion of

tolerance, in addition to *technology* and *talent* – collectively known as the '3Ts' – as one of the keys to harnessing creativity (Florida 2002; esp. Ch. 14). In his book, Florida cites bohemianism and homosexuality as two 'deviant behaviours' that test the tolerance of a society, and suggests that creativity is present in intellectuals who are enriched by such diverse experiences and perspectives. Creativity thus appears to venture into uncertain territories for the purpose of challenging workers to discover novel alternatives, and as such, is typically found in places open towards social plurality and cultural diversities.

Dean Keith Simonton, a leading psychology professor who has written material linking the fields of creativity, leadership and politics, suggests that 'domain activity, intellectual receptiveness, ethnic diversity, [and] *political openness*' are important factors in nurturing creativity (in Florida 2002: 35; emphasis added). While defiance or rebellion against establishments may not be requisites for creativity, a significant level of non-conformity and democratically instituted freedom to explore previously uncharted grounds are certainly useful (Ng 2001: 54). The implication here is that the lack of political openness, or the steering of people away from political discussion, is problematic to the cultivation of creativity on two interrelated levels. On a macro level, impeding thought processes necessary for – or at least supportive of – intellectual development and maturity via legal and/or regulatory means is likely to blunt one's creative edge. On a micro level, setting and regularly fine-tuning societal and political rules may create a censorious climate of fear, resulting at the minimum in psychological barriers that prevent people from thinking and 'creating' revolutionary ideas (Gomez 2000: 68). In other words, an open society that espouses non-violent political and democratic freedoms of speech and association is a fundamental criterion for the existence and subsequent promotion of creativity.

Industrial Economics of Creativity

There have been distinct applications of 'creativity' with economic benefits in mind since the late 1990s, particularly in governmental policy-making and academic research. Such trends began with Britain's *Creative Industries Mapping Document* (Creative Taskforce 1998), and were further applied by academics, with the overhaul and re-branding of the former Faculty of Arts and Humanities in Australia's Queensland University of Technology as the Faculty of Creative Industries being the most prominent case in point in the Asia-Pacific region (Flew 2003: 89; Leo and

Lee 2004).[1] The creative industries, as determined by Britain's *Creative Industries Mapping Document* and adopted into Singapore's own creative industries strategy document, are defined 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' (Creative Taskforce 1998: 5).

In employing the nascent concept of the creative industries, the Singaporean government demonstrated its agility in jumping swiftly on to the global economic bandwagon, not to mention an unproblematic acceptance what I consider as a 'voguish' buzzword into the realm of policy. In effect and essence, the *Creative Industries Developmental Strategy* (CIWG 2002) is an extension of earlier cultural policies aimed at enlivening the arts and cultural scenes in Singapore. Indeed, the CIWG Report acknowledges that 'the arts and culture sector is the artistic core' of what is known as the 'creative cluster' (CIWG 2002: 10), essentially a concentration of interconnected industries or institutions that rely on innovation and creativity for growth and development (Flew 2002: 130). In Singapore, three broad groups who work in the arts and culture, design and media industries were defined as the 'creative cluster' to be developed for the 'propelling of Singapore's Creative Economy' (CIWG 2002). The 'creative cluster' idea is drawn heavily from the work of Florida, where he notes that creative workers have become the decisive source of competitive advantage in the contemporary economy and society (Florida 2002: 5-6). For this reason, businesses seek to situate themselves in places where clusters of creative people reside.

In Singapore's case, the first creative cluster initiative is a minor revision of the *Renaissance City Report*, mainly to include 'innovation' as a key policy outcome within the arts and cultural sector. This was codenamed 'Renaissance City 2.0' within the CIWG Report (2002: Chapter 2), which is to be read as Version 2.0 of the *Renaissance City Report* (originally published in MITA 2000). Such nomenclature reflects once again Singapore's ability to keep up with 'cool' management trends and technological buzzwords. In essence, however, this section is mostly a rehash of old policy statements pertaining to Singapore's 'Asian Renaissance' vision, in which every Singaporean is imagined to be civic-minded, 'attuned to his [*sic*] Asian roots', and is an 'active citizen who is not just a mere actor in a vast nameless play, but a co-writer of the Singapore Story, with the latitude and responsibility to input his own distinctive [and creative] ideas' (MITA 2000: 39). To be sure, the 'Singapore Story', as defined by Singapore's 'founding father', now Senior

Minister, Lee Kuan Yew in his highly publicized dual-volume memoirs, is a political/politicized account of the economic miracle of Singapore fashioned by Lee himself (Lee 1998; Lee 2000). Hence, the 'creative' and 'innovative' Singaporean must be one who vindicates, both figuratively and literally, the economic and political meanings embedded within the creative industries discourse.

The second vision of the Creative Industries policy is to spearhead a 'Design Singapore' initiative, so as to position Singapore as a global hub of multimedia design capabilities (CIWG 2002: Ch. 3; *Straits Times Interactive* 2003). Apart from a general recognition of the importance of good commercial design, particularly in product packaging and the (re)branding of Singapore as a high-tech and global hub city, not much has been articulated about the significance of a 'Design Singapore' initiative under the rubric of the creative industries. This is due to the fact that the concept of creative and multimedia design, even within the higher education sector, has had very little discussion in the public domain. While the government has injected more funds into design education within the tertiary and vocational institutions (CIWG 2002: 24-25) – such as the Arts School (for secondary level students) and the new School of Art, Design and Media at the Nanyang Technological University – it remains to be seen whether the foregrounding of design as a viable economic pursuit will invoke cultural and 'creative' shifts amongst Singaporeans.

The third and final 'cluster' initiative, also known as Media 21, envisions Singapore as 'a global media city, a thriving media ecosystem with roots in Singapore, and with strong extensions internationally' (CIWG 2002: 37).[2] The drawing of the ecosystem idea within Media 21 is intended to link the Singapore media sector within a broader creative network that includes the arts, multimedia design cum digital technologies, as well as media exchange and trading. The physical manifestation of an ecosystem lies in the 'creation of a media city to capture public and industry imagination', and to 'underscore government commitment to develop [the media] sector' (CIWG 2002: 39). This media city, which is being constructed at the time of writing this article, is referred to as Mediapolis@one-north, or Fusionopolis, defined as a 'state-of-the-art work, live, play and learn environment for media and info-communication companies, and the artistic community' (Singapore Broadcasting Authority 2002: 7). Official statements and documents claim that the intention behind this physical creative-clustering of media and media-related professionals into a single township is to increase economic vibrancy and to inspire the wider

community towards greater creativity and social vitality (CIWG 2002: 2). Of course, whether this media city will deliver the projected dividends – apart from enticing global media players to headquarter their regional offices in Singapore – remains an open question, and must therefore be the subject of further study at a later time.

As extrapolated from all three clusters – or more accurately, sub-policies – the new emphasis on creativity in Singapore tends to approach the so-called creative sectors not so much from cultural or artistic viewpoints; rather, the approach is almost overwhelmingly economic or commercially orientated. Although the term 'creative industries' clearly suggests a consideration of the commercial in policy-making, Singapore's uptake of the concept is an extraordinary case study in that it privileges economic returns over all else. Lily Kong, in an earlier study on cultural policy in Singapore, calls this the 'hegemony of the economic in Singapore' (Kong 2000: 423). Unlike the emphasis on social, political, intellectual and emotional development of the individual in Florence, Italy during the original Renaissance period, the Singaporean Renaissance is designed to industrialize creativity so that every individual with creative potential can and *will* become economically productive. In actuality, the Mediapolis/Fusionopolis concept is intended to replicate cluster centres such as New York's Silicon Alley and San Francisco's Silicon Valley, in the belief that it would be a drawcard to lure creative talents for the sake of economic prosperity and longevity (Flew 2002: 130).

The primacy of Singapore's economic priorities for the creative industries is highly problematic. As mentioned earlier, creativity is predominantly associated with the evocation of new ideas, solutions or products that have not previously been explored. The island-state's virtual absence of natural resources has turned it into a trading port, with an overt dependency on imported goods for consumption. This has in part led to the privileging of cultural and creative products from foreign sources (usually the West) over the local, a complaint that has been variously aired over the years by arts practitioners and aficionados alike (see *inter alia* Wee 2003; Chong 2005; Lee 2004). After all, it is economically more viable to import cultural products than to produce them 'in-house' for only 4 million people (Chang and Lee 2003: 137). The corollary is that such economic rationales lead to – for want of a better word – 'decreased' creativity, with local or indigenous cultural workers robbed of their physical and metaphysical creative spaces to explore and nurture their crafts.

As a classic example, the building of the S$600 million mammoth *Esplanade: Theatres by the Bay* – opened amidst a multi-million dollar fanfare in October 2002 – was regarded by local arts practitioners and critics as a dual economic cum tourism strategy to attract world-class acts to perform in Singapore, as only such 'surefire successes', as measured by box office takings, would be able to afford the space (Kong 2000: 419). Local art forms were thus deemed unimportant, or at least secondary, to their foreign counterparts. Yet, a professing creative city would only be truly creative if local art forms were developed, instead of standing merely as an empty shell through which global acts transit. While the state currently attempts to nurture its creative industries, its inherent bias towards foreign art forms, as a result of its focus on immediate economic returns, makes the notion of creativity as the harnessing of new ideas, solutions or products untenable in Singapore.

In addition, the economic pragmatism that has been drilled into the Singaporean mindset hinders the development of creativity by setting externalized and overwhelmingly economic inducements as motivations, rather than encouraging a more 'humanistic' approach to the sector (Chang and Lee 2003: 133). As discussed earlier, a creative society can only be nurtured if people are intrinsically motivated in creative tasks (Amabile 1993 and Tighe: 22-23). In a country where 'economic growth is the anchor without which all issues become irrelevant' (Birch 1993: 4), the meanings behind nurturing a creative, enlightened and appreciative society have been rendered secondary to maintaining the economic bottom line. In the context of Singapore's struggle to embrace the creative industries, I would suggest that creativity of the inventive and innovative sorts could flourish only if the 'cultural horse' were placed before the 'economic cart'. In other words, in pursuing one's creative passion(s), it is vital to ensure that the social, cultural, intellectual and indeed political aspects are openly explored well before economic motivators are considered (see Kong 2000; Leo and Lee 2004). While it is true that the arts and creative industries can benefit the economic gross domestic product (GDP) in no small terms, the 'capacity to unleash social and cultural vibrancy can be easily shackled by an uncompromising focus on the commercial' (Tan 2003: 418). The mindsets of the authorities, as well as the people, must be altered before creativity and innovation can emerge.

Creativity and Creative Politics

Since Singapore's full independence in 1965, the PAP government's legitimacy has been largely founded on its economic management and performance. At the same time, its perpetual endorsement and promotion of economic pragmatism has effectively re-routed the attentions of Singaporeans away from political issues (Leo and Lee 2004). While the government is loathe to admit it, this strategic depoliticization of the citizenry is problematic to the cultivation of creativity in so far as the notion of creativity is representative of the openness of a culture and its polity. As posited earlier, creativity requires a social environment that is tolerant enough to cultivate new ideas, even in their possibly politically subversive manifestations (Florida 2002). Singapore's reputation as a no-nonsense, semi-authoritarian regime, with its political leaders ultra-sensitive to political criticisms and its citizens highly subservient and docile (Mauzy and Milne 2002), makes the discourse of creativity somewhat incompatible, possibly even futile. After all, creativity requires not passive and mechanical workers, but thinkers who constantly challenge the status quo so that originality and innovation can be promulgated. Rather than make substantial changes at the ideological level, the government has sagaciously opted to make strategic concessions to demonstrate to the world that Singapore is 'opening up'.

Whilst actively promoting the economic benefits of the forthcoming 'integrated resorts' or casino complexes, and concomitantly making concessions such as granting permits for extreme sports such as reverse-bungee-jumping and sky-diving, the auto-registration of societies and civic/interest groups, along with a general relaxation of rules governing bar-top dancing and other night-time activities, the government continues to enforce the existence of OB-markers and other state-defined conditions (Lee 2002a: 110). As I have argued elsewhere (Lee 2005), such concessions entail the politically creative practice of 'gestural politics', where on the one hand the government seems to accommodate greater socio-cultural plurality, but on the other, it suppresses the emergence and development of an independent civil society. These gestural concessions are intended to further depoliticize the citizenry by appearing to increase the vitality of a society without any risk of the ruling party's authority being challenged or undermined. The focus shifts to the fact that the government has become media savvy enough to understand that its liberal gestures hold greater sway than its substance (Lee 2005: 150). Thus, such widely publicized

measures to 'liberalize' Singapore do not possess much practical or political significance.

The government's defence of its sluggish rate of liberalization has often been its reinforcement of 'Asian values' (Tan 2003: 408). The concept of Asian values has been invoked, especially in the 1990s, to 'counteract the disruptive individualism of western liberalism' in Singapore (Hill 2000: 178). To legitimize the continued succession of the government's power, the discourse of Asian values has become a useful political tool to avert excessively 'democratic' or 'liberal' behaviour by advocating deference for authority (Chua 1995: 22-23). Prior to the advent of the creative industries project, the government had vehemently rejected the moral and cultural values of the 'decadent West', particularly with regard to homosexuality. However in July 2003, despite the fact that homosexuality remains a criminal offence in Singapore under the Penal Code (*Reuters*, 15 November 2003), Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong made a peculiar declaration that the Singapore government was prepared to hire gays in 'certain positions of government' (Nirmala 2003; Elegant 2003). Lest one gets too caught up with governmental 'spin', this seemingly liberal statement needs to be tempered by the authority's continual refusal to grant Singapore's most prominent gay rights group 'People Like Us' a legitimate and licensed existence (*Straits Times Interactive* 2004), using the convenient Asian conservatism argument as a justification.

It is debatable whether the majority of Singaporeans are truly 'Asian' or strictly 'conservative', or if the myth of a moral majority is simply a politically useful fiction (Tan 2003: 410). The PAP has historically associated homosexuality with Western 'baser instincts', and the resistance towards such behaviour indicates an unrelenting move to insulate Singapore against any subversive conduct that might threaten the government's authority and electoral standing. However, in buying into Florida's (2002) assertion that creative people are mostly found in places that are tolerant, diverse and accepting of gay lifestyles, Singapore has sought to pre-emptively assuage fears by creative workers that they would be taken to task for their bohemianism or alternative lifestyles (*Today* 2004). The unwritten message here is that 'deviance' is an acceptable component of creativity only if workers remain apolitical and economic productiveness is not compromised.

In addition to 'Asian values', the combined invocation of the OB-markers and other juridical actions remain potent in ensuring the political docility of the population. Through ideological reasoning of communitarianism and deference to authority, the PAP moralizes the Asian

cause of self-reduction in the name of a collective national interest, to ensure the depoliticization of the citizenry (Chua 1995). Additionally, the PAP summons the use of OB-markers to publicly rebuke political transgressors or 'trouble-makers', a tactic that is highly effective in a society where 'face' is of utmost importance. First coined by Prime Minister Goh when the government issued a caustic rejoinder to a bold article written by Catherine Lim in 1994 on the 'great affective divide' between the PAP and the people (Lim 1994: 12; see also Mauzy and Milne 2002: 141; Lee 2002; 2005), OB-markers were evoked as recently as 2003 to rebuke two Nanyang Technological University professors who challenged the government on foreign talent and employment figures (Fernandez 2004: 12). In refusing to define the limits of OB-markers, the government uses them in a catch-all manner, often retrospectively, thus achieving a sophisticated mode of auto-regulation to enforce mass subjugation and discipline (Lee 2002b: 10). Without the need to spell out exact limits, it has created a culture for people to err on the 'safe side' of the non-political. In addition, draconian legislation such as the Internal Security Act (ISA) and applicable defamation laws have allowed the government to 'restrict individual liberties and impede mass political organization' through harsh punishments that are meant to deter others (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 128).

These laws, codes and rules – whether written or unwritten, real or imagined – combine to create a climate of fear and excessive caution in Singapore, resulting in the enactment of psychological barriers that prevent people from 'pushing the limits' for fear of being incarcerated or blacklisted. Singaporeans are thus discouraged from thinking outside the box, a common element of creativity, preferring instead to remain within secure boundaries. Even if a creative individual has no wish to rebel against the political establishment, the ability to freely explore uncharted territories is often inhibited. Indeed, I would contend that according socio-political space for an individual to think, speak and act is indispensable to the creative process.

Despite Singapore's professed desire to become a 'global media city', as envisioned by the *Media 21* statement (SBA 2002), PAP leaders have repeatedly echoed Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew's credo that the primary purpose of the media is to be the government's mouthpiece and thereby assist in nation-building (Leo and Lee 2004; Birch 1993). This means that the Western model of the press as the fourth estate and the media as society's watchdog is frowned upon in Singapore (George 2002). Even as the key deliverables of the Creative Industries strategy,

such as the Fusionopolis/Mediapolis structure as the epitome of a global media city, start to unfold, there are signs that the forthcoming PAP administration under the premiership of Lee Hsien Loong will maintain tried and tested media policies of containment. As Lee has declared in his 'open-up' Singapore speech:

> The [Singapore] media should report news accurately and fairly, in order to inform and educate the public. It should adopt a national perspective on issues, educating Singaporeans on the reality of global competition, or the need for healthy habits during the SARS outbreak. But it should avoid crusading journalism, slanting news coverage to campaign for personal agendas. This way, the media helps the public to decide and judge issues for themselves, and provide a valuable channel for them to voice news and opinions. (Lee 2004).

The term 'global media city' implies a relevance to the larger global population, yet it contradicts the government-mandated nationalistic role of the media. It is clear that the absence of 'crusading journalism' and 'slanting news coverage' in the media works well to indirectly control the amount of alternative ideologies circulating in Singapore (Lee 2002b: 10). Yet in the context of the creative industries, a socio-cultural and political environment that is open to diversity, alternatives and the tolerance of differences does not appear to be optional. The unwillingness of the authorities to loosen their monopolistic grip on power suggests that Singapore is poised for a rough journey as it strides towards realizing its ambitious 'New Asia Creative Hub' vision (CIWG 2002: v).

Conclusion: A New Equilibrium?

On 19 July 1999, *Time* magazine fronted its issue of the week with the headline: 'Singapore Swings: Can Nanny State Give Up its Authoritarian Ways?' The lead story in the globally distributed current affairs magazine, entitled 'Singapore Lightens Up', attempted to answer the opening question by declaring: 'Nanny state? Hardly. Once notorious for tight government control, the city-state is getting competitive, creative, even funky' (McCarthy and Ellis 1999:17). Since then, there have been several overt and bold attempts to enliven the creative climate in Singapore, described by Tan (2003) as attempts at 'sexing up Singapore' for the sake of the new economy. While these changes are a positive step towards liberalizing Singapore, this article has argued that most of the modifications have been cosmetic and inconsequential – or in a word,

gestural (Lee 2005). The government's obdurate insistence on economic outcomes continues to limit the development of creativity. In addition, its reluctance to embrace political openness hinders wider possibilities vis-à-vis the cultivation of creativity (Florida 2002).

Under the present political regime and climate, Singapore's creative industries strategy cum policy is likely to evolve into a rather unique Singapore-branded 'equilibrium', one that is loosely creative at the margins but bears the marks of political conformity and economic pragmatism in the main (Florida 2002: 249-50; Leo and Lee 2004). Unfortunately, this mode of equilibrium is nothing more than manufactured gestural creativity, and clearly not the kind of enterprise Singapore needs or desires. Whilst the industrialization of creativity, along with cognate fields and industries, is to be expected in a developed economic set-up, Singapore as a culture, society and polity needs to move beyond token gestural changes (Lee 2005). As Cherian George (2000: 207) puts it, centralized control must 'give way to individual autonomy, steep hierarchy to flat structure, and standardisation to diversity [of thought and opinion].' Echoing George, I would argue that the (re)packaging of Singapore as a creative, 'cool' and 'funky' place to live needs to coincide with the loosening of political rigidity in order to open up a brand new equilibrium. It is more likely though that the embracing of creativity – via the creative industries project – could begin to forge a new Singapore-branded equilibrium, one that manages creative and artistic tensions in tandem with politico-economic realities.[3]

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NOTES

1. For more information about the Creative Industries Faculty at Australia's Queensland University of Technology, go to the website: www.creativeindustries.qut.com. It is also worth noting that several other institutions around the world have since adopted the 'Creative Industries' rubric in their faculty or departmental nomenclature.

2. The 'Media 21' blueprint was first released by the Singapore Broadcasting Authority (SBA) in early 2002. Formed by a three-way merger of the Films and Publications Department, Singapore Film Commission and the SBA in January 2003, the Media

Development Authority (MDA) has since taken over the management of the 'Media 21' vision. For more information on the roles and functions of the MDA, visit: www.mda.gov.sg

[3] A new study cum re-examination of the state of the creative industries in Singapore should ideally be undertaken after key initiatives have been constructed or delivered (*c.* 2010-2012). These include, inter alia, the Fusionopolis/Mediapolis structure and the Integrated Resorts in Marina Bay and on Sentosa Island.

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