

To what extent do the Arts contribute to the Singaporean identity?

"This is home, truly." These four simple words are enough to trigger feelings of nostalgia and patriotism for many Singaporeans, especially those who have grown up to this well-known National Day song "Home" by local singer Kit Chan. While some may feel that the censorship of Arts in Singapore has prevented the Arts from contributing to the Singaporean identity, the government's efforts to integrate the Arts into Singaporeans' lives and connect it to the Singaporean identity, as well as the intricate way the Arts can promote our shared experiences and culture, are reasons why I feel that the Arts contribute to the Singaporean identity to a large extent.

Admittedly, there are strong criticisms that censorship of the Arts in Singapore has hindered the Arts' contribution to the Singaporean identity by limiting Singaporeans' access to these forms of arts. One example of this would be the banning of the locally made short film "To Singapore, With Love" from being screened in Singapore due to its portrayal of Operation Coldstore in Singapore. As a result of this, Singaporeans were unable to access the film in Singapore, preventing them from learning about the perspectives of those affected by this significant Singaporean event, which is ironic considering that the film's very title suggests that the film was directed at Singaporeans. The censorship of the film has therefore directly contributed to the erasure of the voices of the filmmakers and the supposed victims of Operation Coldstore featured in the film, thereby eliminating this aspect of the Singaporean identity. This is not a one-off event; another instance of this would be the cancelling of grants for the locally written "The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye" due to the book's supposed undermining of the government's authority. Apart from limiting Singaporeans' access to this aspect of the Singaporean identity that the author has identified with, the act of censorship also inevitably creates a sense of disconnect with the Singaporean identity – why would one feel the connection to this piece of Art when they were explicitly denied access to it by the government in the first place? As such, it can be seen how the Arts may not have had a significant contribution to the Singaporean identity due to its censorship.

Despite this view, I still believe that the Arts ultimately do contribute to the Singaporean identity because its medium allows poignant messages to be transmitted with nuance that allows Singaporeans to identify with them. Beyond the scope of censored art in Singapore, one would actually find themselves greeted with a wide array of the Arts that are robust with the Singaporean identity. For example, local Youtube channel NSFTV uploads short films specific to the Singaporean experience, ranging from tear-jerking scenes of conversations between a grandmother and grandson making mooncakes during Mid-Autumn Festival, to nostalgic moments of running to the "Mama shop" (local convenience store) to buy ice popsicles after school. Its nuanced and exquisite filmmaking is able to not just allow Singaporeans to relate to these communal experiences we all once went through, but also sheds light on the perspectives of other Singaporean cultures that may not have been our own, further enhancing the Singaporean identity of integration between the different communities, from racial to that of socio-economic status. This similar phenomenon can be seen in other aspects of Arts too. On the stage, Faith Ng's play "Normal" details the experiences of a student in the "normal academic" (NA) stream in a local all-girls' school. Singaporean members of the audience were able to see themselves in the characters of the play, beyond the specific experiences of the NA stream and of being in a single-sex school, finding themselves relating to the uniquely Singaporean themes of academic pressure and conformation in our traditional society, thereby contributing to the Singaporean identity. Moreover, from the perspective of the literary arts, "Singaporean Literature" (commonly dubbed as Singlit) also plays a significant role in contributing to the Singaporean identity. The poem "Placenames" by Boey-Kim Cheng which muses on the rapid urbanisation of Singapore is certainly something many Singaporeans identify with, and the collection of short stories "Ministry of Moral Panic" by Amanda Lee-Koe is able to put the Singapore experience into words. Therefore, it is evident that the ability of local arts to bring to life the various Singaporean

experiences and perspectives through their different art forms reinforces and contributes to what makes us truly Singaporean.

Additionally, the rampant efforts of the government to integrate local arts into our lives has helped the Arts in contributing to the Singaporean identity. This is mostly evident in the yearly National Day songs pushed out by the National Day committee. Every year, large amounts of funding by the government is put into creating the most memorable, catchy song with the purpose of fuelling patriotism for our country. Moreover, a very high production music video will also be created alongside the song itself, and promoted to the citizens by screening it during television commercial breaks, boosting it on social media “recommended” pages, and is even displayed in the train stations’ televisions that show what time the next train is coming. More significantly, the National Day songs are taught to primary school students as part of the music syllabus. By integrating the songs from such a young age, both in school and outside of school, it is no surprise that Singaporeans are so well acquainted with the lyrics and melody of many songs like “Home”, “Where I Belong”, and “See This Island”, just to name a few. With the efforts of the government, these songs of patriotism and national culture have certainly enhanced the Singaporean identity. Another example of governmental efforts enhancing the Arts’ contribution to the Singaporean identity would be by offering discounted prices to local museums like the National Museum of Singapore, ensuring the accessibility of local artworks to Singaporeans and thereby making it easier for Singaporeans to interact with local art and therefore feel a sense of connection to it. Therefore, it is evident that the Arts has contributed to the Singaporean identity thanks to the help provided by the government.

In conclusion, the Arts have significantly contributed to the Singaporean identity by promoting our shared experiences, and governmental efforts have helped to increase the extent of this contribution. However, we must not overlook the voices of the disenfranchised or minority whose Singaporean identity has been censored by the government, as their voices are indeed still part of the Singaporean identity, albeit small.