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The economics and politics of 'creativity' in Singapore

Terence Lee and Denise Lim

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). Among other envisaged outcomes, this policy aims to encourage risk-taking and entrepreneurship, and attract creative 'talents' to set up shop in Singapore. While the notion of the 'creative industries' has been modelled after global trends, its application in a society notorious for its censorious political climate, as well as its overt emphases on commercial outcomes, is fraught with problems. This paper offers a critical examination of this new creative industries policy direction spearheaded by the Singapore government, and considers how, if at all, Singapore may achieve its prescribed goal of becoming a 'New Asia Creative Hub' of the 21st century (CIWG, 2002, p. v).*

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,

Terence Lee and Denise Lim, School of Media Communication and Culture, Murdoch University, Perth, Western Australia.

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'—a creative network comprising the arts and cultural sector, the design sector, and the generic media industry—as a key factor that would 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 and entrepreneurship, and attracting creative 'talents' into Singapore. According to the *Creative Industries* report, Singapore would become the 'New Asia Creative Hub' of the 21st century, which would in turn ensure its longer-term economic prosperity (CIWG, 2002, p. 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 to demonstrate a paradigm shift from being characterised by an infamously rigid demeanour to displaying a metamorphosing 'liberal' mindset. These changes included the prospective admission of homosexuals 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 (see Lee, 2004). As these forms of 'liberalisations' were being brought on, 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 (see 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 depoliticise the citizenry since it came into power in 1959 (Leo & Lee, in press). I argue in this paper that the focus of these 'creative' proposals points to the fact that the government is seen to be doing 'something', of keeping up with global trends in the cultural and media industries, rather than the substance of the initiative(s) put forward.

The paradoxical nature of the notion of 'openness' in Singapore, which is meant to anticipate a conducive environment for creativity, was well captured in a speech delivered by Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong to the elite Harvard Club on January 6, 2004—and reprinted in full by *The Straits Times* newspaper the next day, presumably for wider

national consumption and application. Characterised by the media as Lee's maiden speech as Prime Minister-Designate, the content was broadly centred on how Singapore 'must open up further' (Lee, 2004). 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 acknowledgment of Singapore's need to cultivate greater tolerance for diversity in the future, but soon slipped into an authoritarian mood when he began to reiterate the limits of 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', a golfing analogy well known to avid golfers (Lee, 2002a, pp. 109–111). 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).

This paper 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 industrialisation 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 will argue in this paper, 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 and innovating creativity

While its definition is often abstruse and cryptic, the concept of creativity is gaining popularity across governmental bureaucracies and businesses, as well as within academia. From the domains of cultural studies and psychology to business administration, researchers have scrutinised 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 (see, e.g., Florida, 2002; Hesmondhalgh, 2002; Howkins, 2001; Leo & Lee, in press). The various foci of these studies on creativity have reaped a diverse pool of conceptualisations on the discourse of creativity. As 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' (2003, p. 90). While the discourse of creativity is broad and impossible to define or expound fully within the scope of this paper, 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 are relevant to a specific domain. *The Oxford Dictionary* (1998) defines creativity as the ability to invent or develop new and original ideas. Congruent with this, social psychologists Amabile and Tighe (2003, p. 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 Fulbright Fellow 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 (cited in Gardner, 1993, p. 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, pp. 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 (see Lepper et al., 1973; Ng, 2001, p. 5). Numerous studies and experiments over the past decades have shown that those performing under intrinsic motivation produce far more creative results than those under extrinsic motivation (Amabile & Tighe, 1993, pp. 22-

23). While it is possible for intrinsic motivation to coexist somewhat with extrinsic motivation, Amabile makes 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, p. 78). Veritably, 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, p. 80). In addition, Csikszentmihalyi observes from his research 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 could also smoothly transit between different stages of the task, resulting in greater creativity and productivity (Amabile, 1990, pp. 63–64). In short, a person working with primary intrinsic motivation would tend to be more creative than one driven by primarily extrinsic motivation.

Third, creativity requires a special kind of social environment and culture that is sufficiently mature and 'broad-minded' to nourish creativity amid its possibly subversive manifestations. As creativity at the critical level entails challenging the status quo 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 best-selling book *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 '3 Ts'—as one of the keys to harnessing creativity (Florida, 2002; see especially chap. 14). In his book, Florida cites 'bohemianism' and 'homosexuality' as two 'deviant behaviours' that test the tolerance of a society, and suggests that creativity presents itself in intellectuals who are enriched by such diverse experiences and perspectives. Singaporean creative-thinking professor and poet Kirpal Singh also recommends that in order for creativity to flourish, workers should have the freedom to explore beyond conventional norms and customs, comfortably leave behind baggage-laden restrictions of the past, and tread into uncharted grounds to generate new ideas (Singh, 2004, p. 16). In other words, creativity ventures 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 (cited in Florida, 2002, p. 35, emphasis added). While defiance or rebellion against establishments might 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, p. 54). The implication here is that the lack of political openness, or the steering of people away from political discussion, is problematic for the cultivation of creativity on two inter-related 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 of societal and political rules have the effect of creating a censorious climate of fear, resulting, at the minimum, in psychological barriers that prevent people from thinking and 'creating' revolutionary ideas (Gomez, 2000, p. 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.

Negotiating the 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* (UK Creative Taskforce, 1998), and were further applied by academics, with the overhaul and re-branding of the former Faculty of Humanities in Australia's Queensland University of Technology as the Faculty of Creative Industries the most prominent case in point in the Asia-Pacific region (Flew, 2003, p. 89; see also Leó & Lee, in press)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, p. 5)

In employing the nascent concept of the creative industries, the Singaporean government demonstrated its agility in jumping swiftly

onto global economic bandwagons, not to mention an unproblematic acceptance of what I consider as a 'vogueish' 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, p. 10), essentially a concentration of interconnected industries or institutions that rely on innovation and creativity for growth and development (Flew, 2002, p. 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, who notes that creative workers have become the decisive source of competitive advantage in the contemporary economy and society (Florida, 2002, pp. 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' in the CIWG report (2002, chap. 2), which is to be read as version 2.0 of the *Renaissance City Report* (originally published by the Ministry of Information & the Arts [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 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, p. 39). To be sure, the 'Singapore Story', as defined by Singapore's 'founding father', now Senior Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, in his highly publicised dual-volume memoirs, is a political/politicised account of the economic miracle of Singapore fashioned by Lee himself (Lee, 1998, 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, chap. 3; 'Government Has Designs', 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 announced plans to invest in design education within the tertiary and vocational institutions (CIWG, 2002, pp. 24–25), it remains to be seen whether the foregrounding of design as a viable economic pursuit will invoke cultural and 'creative' shifts among Singaporeans.

The third and final 'cluster' initiative, also known as 'Media 21', 'envision[s] Singapore as a global media city, a thriving media ecosystem with roots in Singapore, and with strong extensions internationally' (CIWG, 2002, p. 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 and 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, p. 39). This media city, which is being constructed at the time of writing this paper, is referred to as 'Mediapolis@one-north', or 'Fusionpolis', 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 [SBA], 2002, p. 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 toward greater creativity and social vitality (CIWG, 2002, p. 2). Of course, whether this 'media city' will deliver the projected dividends 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 emphases on 'creativity' in Singapore tend to approach the so-called 'creative' sectors not so much from cultural or artistic viewpoints; rather, the approach is almost overwhelmingly

economic. 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, p. 423). Unlike the emphases on social, political, intellectual, and emotional developments of the individual in Florence, Italy, during the 'original' Renaissance period, the Singaporean Renaissance is designed to industrialise creativity so that every individual with 'creative potential' can and *will* become economically productive. In actuality, the Mediapolis/Fusionpolis concept is intended to replicate 'cluster centres' such as New York's 'Silicon Alley' and San Francisco's world-renowned 'Silicon Valley', with the belief that it would be a drawcard to lure creative talents for the sake of economic prosperity and longevity (Flew, 2002, p. 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 local. After all, it is economically more viable to import such products than to produce them 'in-house' for only four million people (Chang & Lee, 2003, p. 137). The corollary is that such economic rationales lead to 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\$600million mammoth *Esplanade: Theatres By The Bay*—opened amid 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, p. 419). Local artforms were thus deemed unimportant, or at least secondary, to their foreign counterparts. Yet, a professed 'creative' city would be truly creative only if local artforms 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 artforms, 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 externalised and overwhelmingly economic inducements as motivations, rather than encouraging a more 'humanistic' approach to the sector (Chang & Lee, 2003, p. 133). As discussed earlier, a creative society can be nurtured only if people are intrinsically motivated in creative tasks (Amabile, 1993, pp. 22–23). In a country where 'economic growth is the anchor without which all issues become irrelevant' (Birch, 1993, p. 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' is 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 & Lee, in press). 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, p. 418). The mindsets of the authorities, as well as the people, must be altered before creativity and innovation can emerge.

Negotiating the politics of creativity

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 & Lee, in press). While the government is loath to admit it, this strategic 'depolicitisation' of the citizenry is problematic to the cultivation of creativity, insofar 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 (see Florida, 2002). Singapore's reputation as a 'no-nonsense' authoritarian regime, with its political leaders ultra-sensitive to political criticisms and its citizens highly subservient and docile (Mauzy & Milne, 2002),

makes the discourse of creativity somewhat incompatible, 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 allowances to demonstrate to the world that Singapore is 'opening-up'.

While 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, and the 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, p. 110). As I have argued elsewhere (Lee, 2002a), such concessions entail the politically 'creative' practice of 'gestural politics', where on 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 'depoliticise' the citizenry by appearing to increase the vivacity of a society without running any risk of the ruling party's authority being challenged or undermined. The focus shifts to the fact that the government is 'doing something', rather than the substance of the initiative implemented. Thus, such widely publicised measures to 'liberalise' Singapore do not possess much practical or political significance. They are, in other words, purely gestural (Lee, 2002a, p. 111).

The government's defence of its sluggish rate of liberalisation has often been its reinforcement of 'Asian values' (Tan, 2003, p. 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, p. 178). To legitimise 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, pp. 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 ('Singapore Does Some Soul Searching', 2003), Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong made a peculiar declaration that the Singapore government was prepared to

hire homosexuals in 'certain positions of government' (Nirmala, 2003; see also Elegant, 2003). Lest one gets too caught up with governmental 'spin', this seemingly liberal statement needs to be tempered with the authority's continual refusal to grant Singapore's most prominent gay-rights group 'People Like Us' a legitimate and licensed existence (see 'Gay Group Fails', 2004), using the convenient Asian conservatism argument as a justification for its austerity.

It is debatable whether the majority of Singaporeans are truly 'Asian' or strictly 'conservative' or if the myth of a 'moral majority' is simply 'politically useful fiction' (Tan, 2003, p. 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 (see 'What's So Subversive about People Like Us?', 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 moralises the 'Asian' cause of self-reduction in the name of a collective 'national interest', to ensure the depoliticisation 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, p. 12; see also Lee, 2002b; Mauzy & Milne, 2002, p. 141), 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 (see Fernandez, 2004, p. 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, p. 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 organisation' through harsh punishments that are meant to deter others (Mauzy & Milne, 2002, p. 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 dis-incentivised from 'thinking outside the box', a common element of creativity, preferring instead to remain in 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 (Birch, 1993; Leo & Lee, in press). 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 Fusionpolis/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 number of alternative ideologies circulating in Singapore (Lee 2002b, p. 10). Yet in the context of the creative industries, a socio-cultural and political environment that is open to diversities, 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 realising its ambitious 'New Asia Creative Hub' vision (CIWG, 2002, p. v).

Conclusion

On 19 July 1999, *Time* magazine fronted its issue of the week with the heading: '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 & Ellis, 1999, p. 17). Since then, there have been several overt attempts to enliven the creative climate in Singapore, described by Kenneth Paul Tan (2003) as an attempt at 'sexing up Singapore' for the sake of the new economy. While these changes are a positive step towards liberalising Singapore, this paper has argued that most of the modifications have been but cosmetic and inconsequential—or in a word, gestural (Lee, 2002a). 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).

In conclusion, I postulate that, under the present political climate, Singapore's Creative Industries strategy cum policy is likely to evolve into a 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, p. 249–250; Leo & Lee, in press). While the industrialisation 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. 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 new and diverse possibilities. As former high-profiled Singaporean journalist Cherian George (2000, p. 207) puts it, unless 'centralised control' is prepared to 'give way to individual autonomy, steep hierarchy to flat structure, and standardisation to diversity [of thought and opinion], it will be difficult, if not impossible, for Singapore to realise its 'New Asia Creative Hub' ambition.

Notes

1. For more information about the Creative Industries Faculty at Australia's Queensland University of Technology, go to <http://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 naming.
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 <http://www.mda.gov.sg>.

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