

Cultural diplomacy of a “Lion City”

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Abstract: The Republic of Singapore, or in Malayan language, known as a Lion City, is today considered to be one of four Asian Dragons, side by side with Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea. But it was not always like that. To be precise, it gained its independence only fifty years ago, and since then its star is constantly on a rise. In this paper I will give a brief summary of how cultural policy of this city-state today looks like, what is the current focus on the government and in which direction are its actions guided. Hence, while explaining what cultural diplomacy is all about I will also make clear which are the state organs that are in charge of a cultural diplomacy of Singapore and in what way is their structure organised. Finally, my focus will be on the cultural diplomacy of this country seen through the prism of signed bilateral agreements and conventions. Nevertheless, I will also mention other international cultural relations that this country cherishes without signing any form of legal act as a basis. In conclusion I will give overall impression of its international cultural relations, how they can be improved, moreover on what authorities of the Republic of Singapore should pay attention in the future. All in all, this paper should be seen as a friendly critique and I honestly hope that other fellow researchers and cultural workers in this domain would find it useful.

Keywords: Singapore, cultural diplomacy, cultural policy

Introduction

The Republic of Singapore, or in Malayan language, known as a Lion City, is today considered to be one of four Asian Dragons, side by side with Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea; previously vastly important British colony due to its strategic position as a port, is these days maybe best known for its high quality standard of living, technology, great economy, hence friendly and open politics. It is been a long road for this city-state to become

what it is today, from 1965 when it gained its independence out of Federation of Malaysia. When it comes to the Republic of Singapore, there is several paradoxes, starting from the way how it became state on its own (it was voted out of the Federation by the Malaysian Parliament), or considering how small this state is and yet, how powerful is, up to its politics towards immigrants (unlike any other country in the world in this Republic they are more than welcome; actually this is the way how the population remains the same, considering that population growth is constantly negative, besides all the benefits given by Singapore government). Nevertheless, since the creation this city-state cultural policy was always one of the main focuses of the government. It should not be such a surprise if we know importance of it and effects that can cause. However, in this paper my focus will be on the cultural diplomacy of the Republic of Singapore, created and practiced over the years in surroundings like this one. Further on, at the beginning I will give brief summary of current cultural policy in the country, considering it as a basis for practicing cultural diplomacy. After that, I will pay special attention to the structure of organs that are responsible for international cultural relations. Hence, I will analyse existing bilateral agreements and signed conventions. Finally, in the last section I will give some recommendations how current international cultural relations can be improved.

Brief summary of overall cultural policy of the Republic of Singapore

First thing first, when we talk about Singapore it should be emphasised on the very beginning that this city-state “grew from a third-world country to a first-world country in a span of one generation, 40 years”. From one side, it is famous for its medical care, education system, tourism, etc. and on the other this country has really a lot of disadvantages when it comes to natural resources and its size, of course. However, when we only mention its name all kind of positive pictures come to our mind. Reaching that image in the world was not an easy task for the newly born country and its government. Yet, today it established its status of a ‘Global city for the Arts’ and since before it was known as a ‘Global desert’ I can honestly say that efforts of the government in the last 25 years paid off.

One of the main characteristics of Singapore’s cultural policy, which remained unchanged during half of the century of existence of this state and which is tight connected with the idea of surviving among its surroundings, and the fact that it is quite young multi ethnic, multi religious and multiracial nation, is using the arts and culture in order to raise awareness of

belonging to a nation. At the same time, nation is being branded the as young and fun and in a way created. This popularisation of the nation is a strategy that has also immediate effect on economy and politics. It should not be such a surprise if we know how authentic Singapore's culture is-made out of a mixture of Chinese, Malayan, Indian and other nations. Although creating of one nation out of several of them is something that is done for five decades now, throughout the whole year, National Day celebration, highly ritualised and stylised event is the day when all the efforts of the government reach its culmination. Different state bodies are included into organisation of this event which is planned for months in advance and at first it was dominated by the militaristic events, since the '80s it have been commodified as partly entertainment.

Hence, it is more than clear that cultural policy in Singapore is heavily affected by politics. Nevertheless, government expects from the artists and art sector to contribute to the economy of the country in a significant way so all of their efforts are directed toward that aim. On the plus side it led to rapid evolution of Singapore's arts and cultural sector. But on the other side, I could not help but wonder does this sort of policy have really such sort of positive effect?! It is known that if the arts and culture are dependable on being self-sustainable and if they have not just to be self-sufficient but also to contribute its country's economy that they cannot really have the role of a mediator and that the artists will never be totally free in their expressions. Artists will always have to obey to the laws of the market which will be affecting their creative process and final product. Maybe the idea for this view on culture derived from the '80s when its only role was to attract tourists and in a way help to the economy of the country. Though time had changed and new approaches toward culture are a necessity.

Moreover, cultural workers in the Republic of Singapore may have one bigger problem-which is existence of many different forms of restrictions. By that I just do not think of expectations of Singapore's government that arts should be focused on economic and marketing objectives or the demand for government agencies to "shift away from the 'arts for arts' mindset... to contribute to the development of the creative industries as well as our nation social development". Or, how in fact artists are expected to take active roles in order to promote art as a part of its 'global city', which is again decision of those who have the power. As I stressed out before, there are restrictions and I can honestly say that it is a sort of censorship; government from the creation of the country had and still has control over how things are presented, for example all public performances require a permit. Luckily, artists in Singapore 'took the bull for its horns' and they are fighting for their 'place under the sun'; now they

even their own representative in the Parliament with a role to participate in the process of decision making when it comes to cultural policy of this state-city. Furthermore, media and social networks should not be forgotten. They were used heavily during the *ArtsEngage* programme which was response on the new government's idea on new forms of censorship which are considered to be necessary considering the fast progress of technology, modernisation and constant evolution of Singapore.

Moreover, government had launched idea of Connected Nation i.e. nation with ability to connect with the others through creative cluster or via the combination of arts, culture, technology and business. Again, in here we can see that culture is considered to be just one of the instruments in reaching the ultimate goal.

Structure of organs responsible for the Singapore's cultural diplomacy

The state organ that is in charge of the conducting international cooperation with other countries all around the globe is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs-MFA. It is divided into eleven directorates which deal with political and economic matters, and seven directorates which are in charge of the matters of relating to protocol, consular issues and Singapore Cooperation Programme among others. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Singapore has exactly forty-nine overseas missions. This Ministry works closely with Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts-MICA. MICA is in charge of the government's information and public communication policies. Its mission is to build a nation of connected people and achieve a better quality of life. This is achieved by developing vibrant infocomm, media and design sectors, cultivating learning communities and fostering an engaged public. Together these two state bodies work on a fostering intercultural dialogue, building international cultural relations, promoting Singapore's culture in another countries, presenting Singapore's values and in a way letting the world to know that this state-city has to offer more than just latest achievements of technology. Third organisation that is quite important for the Singapore's cultural life abroad and within the borders is NAC-National Arts Council with the vision to develop Singapore as a distinctive global city for the arts and the mission to nurture the arts and make it integral part of the lives of the people of Singapore.

These three organisations together work on promotion of culture of the Republic of Singapore abroad. We should know that notion of international cultural relations exists in theory as well

as in the real situations in the politics i.e. international relations. It is used in order to describe usage and transfer of ideas in the field of culture between different countries and nations in order to develop mutual understanding, create positive picture in the minds of people that belongs to a different nation who have not got the chance to get in touch with particular culture or to change the picture that already exists. At the same time all of the mentioned is helping in overall international relations of the particular country and its picture abroad. It should be also stressed out that international cultural relations is a pretty wide notion, so it can be looked as whole international flow of the people, goods, information, with all different headings; or it can be looked as politics which is directed toward cultural contacts, two sided interactions, but also to exporting of culture to other countries. When it comes to exporting culture to other countries, it is important to say that this sort of export can be done by governmental organisations and non-governmental organisations. In the case of the Republic of Singapore it is more than clear that most of the intercultural dialogue and fostering international cultural relations is done by the government, ministries and its organisations. Maybe that is the product of the fact that political regime of the Singapore is not a real democracy. Even though it is stated that it is unitary multiparty country with one legislative house-Parliament, it is more than clear that since there is one really strong party-People's Action Party (PAP). It is important to notice that there is also another strong party in the country, represented in Parliament-Worker's party nevertheless PAP is being constantly in charge since 1959. It is controlling the country in a strict way, but that should not be surprise if we know that main concern of Singapore is survival.

Considering the size of this city-state, which is something that is always on minds of its politicians and the way how they have to make all sort of agreements with different countries (like the one with U.S. according to whom Singapore is buying weapons out of U.S. and it can use its military bases to train its army services), no wonder that Singapore's soft power has to be so developed and why it grows various friendly connections with countries all across the globe. Its soft power is its main tool in international relations and Singapore has developed it to perfection. In addition to that, it is well known that persuading through culture is way more powerful than for example military or economic diplomacy, since it can be done long-term, during peace and conflicts, plus it is always a two-way road. Maybe, that is the reason why term 'cultural diplomacy' was previously considered to have negative connotation as a sort of manipulation via cultural materials and cultural workers.

Cultural diplomacy of a Lion City seen through bilateral agreements and conventions

As I have stressed out before, cultural diplomacy can be seen in its wider sense, like the whole flow of everything that will carry information of a certain culture further on, or it can be seen in its more narrow sense, as an action of government focused toward export of art, values, in one word culture to other countries. Conducting bilateral or multilateral agreement and signing conventions represents direct actions of legal authorities directed toward getting other nations to know about the culture of the country which is making those moves.

In the case of the Republic of Singapore, even though the world is constantly admiring the way they have developed their soft power, but if we take a look at the number of those legal acts it is quite surprising what we can find. Just on the first look we can see that Singapore had signed bilateral agreements with only few countries: 1) “Memorandum of understanding on cooperation between the ministers of education of the Republic of Singapore and the Republic of Finland in education, training and research” signed with Finland in the year of 1997; 2) “Agreement to promote cultural, scientific and technical cooperation” from 1982 and “Agreement on enhanced cultural cooperation” from 2009, both signed with France; 3) “Cultural accord” from 1994, signed with Germany; 4) “Agreement on cultural and scientific cooperation between the government of the Socialist Republic of Romania and the government of the Republic of Singapore” signed in 1971.

According to the legal act signed by the Minister of Education of the Republic of Finland, Olli-Pekka Heinonen, and by the Minister of Education and Second Minister of Defence of the Republic of Singapore, Teo Chee Hean, they have agreed on the following questions: strengthening the links in the field of education and promoting cooperation; facilitating immigration procedures for those who are involved in exchange and training programmes; encouraging joint research projects; facilitating the exchange of information on archives, cultural exhibitions, film, the fine arts, language, literature, music, museums, radio, sports, television, theatre and cultural cooperation in general. It should be also stressed out that the forms and contents of the cooperation will be agreed in detail with institutions and organisations concerned. Thus, it is more than clear that through this form of legal regulation, which represents in a way *lex generalis* is made only basis for the future and opened the doors for all sorts of cooperation. That means quite a lot considering that upon this agreement are all future ones made.

Hence, out of all European countries Republic of Singapore maybe has the best developed international cultural connection with the Republic of France. First agreement was signed over 30 years ago and represents a basis for the next one signed in 2009. Memorandum of understanding signed in Paris on 20 January 2009 between the Minister of Foreign Affairs George Yeo of the Republic of Singapore and Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of the French Republic Bernard Kouchner. Before the signing of this agreement National Arts Council (NAC) made a proposal of the government of Singapore in which direction should collaboration go. Idea of NAC was to create residency programmes for the selected artists which will provide greater exposure of Singapore's art abroad while enhancing cultural experience and cooperation; mentorship programme for young, emerging choreographers; showcasing mini arts festivals in Paris and not to forget obligatory exchanges of festivals, institutions, community arts, and last, but not least student exchange programmes. Finally, agreement was implemented and the cooperation begun. At the very beginning of the cooperation the following projects had been launched: 1) an exhibition of haute-couture works of celebrated French Fashion designer Christian Lacroix; 2) presentations by French arts groups – Compagnie 111, Theatre Le Palace, Compagnie Beau Geste and Malabar at 2009 Singapore Art Festival; 3) exhibition of Peranakan artefacts from Singapore's Peranakan Museum was displayed at the Museum Quai Branly at Paris in 2011. According just to these couple of projects we can see that some of ideas that NAC proposed were implemented. As we can see, parties of this agreement instantly started to work on promotion of mutual understanding and getting to know each other's culture which is demanding two-way cultural cooperation. Memorandum of understanding was also signed at the same time in Paris. Signing parties were Union of the National Museums of France and Singapore's National Heritage Board. Minister for Culture and Communication of French Republic Christine Albanel and Minister of Foreign Affairs George Yeo were present, and legal act was signed by the legal representatives of both institutions. Thanks to this memorandum these two organisations will work together on bringing the travelling exhibitions both in France and Singapore respectively. Hence, their idea is to explore more cross borders opportunities like in putting together exhibition that will involve several French museums and then sending it to a city-state, as well as joint cooperation of Singapore's institutions to host it. Sharing of expertise and intellectual capital is next in line. Teamwork on this reflects on organising study trips in order to explore various aspects in growing the cultural industry; invitation the expert speakers to seminars/conferences to exchange ideas and knowledge; organising curatorial residences in both of the countries as well as internships; co-curation of major exhibitions

which will involve French and Singaporean curators. All of the mentioned is used in order to promote Singapore's cultural assets in this overseas mission, while at the same time promoting it as a vibrant cultural city. Even though, when he was asked, acting Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Lawrence Wong, replied in one of his interviews that he is so proud on Singapore's good ties with other countries, especially those with France.

Further on, like I have already mentioned before, Republic of Singapore has also signed bilateral agreements with Federal Republic of Germany and Socialist Republic of Romania. While the agreement with Romania was signed in the early '70s and most of the intercultural cooperation between these two countries today is done via ASEAN, situation is different when it comes to Germany. Cultural diplomacy between them is highly developed and although they have 50 year long history of diplomatic relations, idea of promoting and exchanging culture emerged in the mid '90s with "Cultural accord". Cultural accord, as a legal act, represents only a basis so it was upgraded in 2007 with Memorandum of understanding signed between Germany's Vitra Design Museum, National Museum of Singapore and DesignSingapore Council. Main aim of this Memorandum is to initiate a partnership to create original and innovative design exhibitions. It is interesting to mention that Goethe Institute in Singapore did such a great job in connecting these two nations that today German is the third most expanded language that young Singaporeans are learning beside French and Japanese.

Yet, even though Republic of Singapore does not have any more bilateral agreement signed with some of the European countries it does not mean that it have not developed cultural relations. For example, Singapore has its pavilion on the Venice Biennale or its cultural cooperation with United Kingdom also exists. Two Memorandums of Understanding were signed-one between NAC and Arts Council England in the period from 2005 until 2008 and the other one that NAC had signed with Scottish Art Council for the period from 2007 until 2009. Of course, not to forget cultural relations with Ireland and Sweden which whom close cultural contacts are enabled for years now. Actually, in 2009 Memorandum of Understanding on interactive media was signed between Singapore's Media Development Authority and Sweden's Business Region Göteborg with the goal to work together on development and commercialisation of new digital media technologies, applications, services and content that will be guided toward Singapore's, Sweden's and global market. So, once again, even in the cases of international cultural cooperation we can see that unfortunately Singapore's economy will be always number one in the eyes of its government. Everything needs to work in

enhancing economy, even when it comes to promoting values of Singapore as a part of promotion culture of this country. So, another question emerges-what are the real values of the Republic of Singapore then?!

Beside above mentioned bilateral agreements, Singapore has also signed three different conventions related to the intercultural cooperation: 1) “Florence agreement”; 2) “Customs convention on the ATA carnet for the temporary admissions of goods”; 3) “Berne convention for the protection of literary and artistic works” from 1886, last amended in 1979.

Agreement on the Importation of Educational, Scientific and Cultural materials or better known as Florence Agreement is considered to be one of the UNESCO legal instruments created back in the 17th of June in 1950 and it is still opened for signing. With the changes that time has brought, new needs and circumstances state parties has realised that some new arrangements have to be made so they agreed and came up to Protocol to Agreement on the Importation of Educational, Scientific and Cultural materials, or better known as Nairobi Protocol in the year of 1976, to be precise on the 26th of November. Its status is the same as the one of the Florence Agreement-it is opened for signature. Core of the Florence agreement is focused on giving facilities on importing educational, scientific, or cultural material, for example just like it was stated in this agreement, there will be no customs duties when it comes to the importation of books, publications and documents nor any other kind of educational, scientific or cultural materials. Further on, it is predicted that each of the signing parties have to grant necessary licences for the importation of the books and publications of the UNESCO or received by the UNESCO, as well as those consigned to the public libraries and similar institutions and not to forget official government publications. All of these relates also on the publications for the blind. For the international cultural cooperation and building cultural relations between the countries it is also important that signing parties agreed to continue their common effort in promotion free circulation of educational, cultural and scientific materials, simplify the administrative procedures governing the importation of these materials, facilitate the expeditious and safe customs clearance of already mentioned materials. Nairobi Protocol came after but has not changed anything important, it had just adjusted some of the already existing articles with existing situation. Considering that this agreement was signed by more than 20 state parties, who all have agreed to follow instructions in this legal instrument we can see that Republic of Singapore as one of the contracting countries has full responsibility on this matter. On the one side, this sort of agreement is helping its cultural diplomacy and promotion of its country, as well as the

process of introducing new cultures to the Singaporeans, but on the other it is quite big burden that it has to carry.

In addition to this legal instrument Republic of Singapore has also signed Customs convention on the ATA carnet for the temporary admissions of goods and in that way it became a part of well-known ATA system. Even though this convention entered into force on the 30th of July of 1963 it took two decades to the Republic of Singapore to sign it during which this country was focused on its internal politics and solving great deal of constantly emerging problems. ATA system is allowing the free movement of goods across borders and their temporary admission into customs territory with relief from duties and taxes. Even though it is used widely by the business community it still represents important document for Singapore's cultural diplomacy. After all, at the very beginning of the paper I made it clear how everything in this country, including the culture, which role should be to educate, to reveal and deal with all the problems that one society has and to enrich every single participator of culture. Nevertheless, practical as always Singapore's government has their mind set only on benefits that it will bring to the economy of the country and considering that this legal act has been signed by other 62 states benefits are not negligible.

Finally, Berne Convention for the Protection of the Literary and Artistic Works created on the 9th of September of 1886, amended several times, with its changes made on the 28th of September 1979. This convention in its different articles is regulating the protection of literary and artistic works (which was specified in the Article 2 of the Convention); hence on the criteria for eligibility for the protection and terms that follows; guaranteed rights, like moral ones, but also the ones related to reproduction, translation, broadcasting, etc; finances, executive committee, international bureau, etc. Its focus is of course, on the protection, copyright and other related rights. Nevertheless, Article 1 states that the countries to which this convention applies constitute a Union for the protection of the rights of authors in their literary and artistic works. On the first sight, someone could wonder why is this Convention important for the cultural diplomacy of a state!? The answer is quite simple and it lies in the fact of that it is quite important for artists and creators in general to be well protected when it comes to the export of culture to another countries, especially if they need to represent the country they are coming from in the best possible way, as a sort of ambassadors of one nation's culture to another.

Not to forget to mention, Republic of Singapore is a member of the Association of the Southeast Asian Countries-ASEAN which was established in Thailand on 8th of August 1967. Together with nine other ASEAN member countries (Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Vietnam, Cambodia, LAO PDR and Myanmar) Singapore is working on accelerating cultural development in the region through joint endeavours in the spirit of equality and partnership in order to strengthen the foundation for the prosperous and peaceful community of Southeast Asian Nations. This is done via serious agreements as a basis, who did or did not need ratification, and upon those legal regulations via media, broadcasting, various projects, promotions, education, exchanges, events, establishing associations and organisations, establishing linkages, etc. Moreover, state members consider ASEAN as a community, so large amount of their efforts is guided toward raising awareness of belonging to this community and strengthening connections between all ten countries. Hence, Republic of Singapore along with other nine state members of ASEAN works on promotion of active collaboration and mutual assistance on matters of common interest in the field of culture and to maintain close and beneficial cooperation with existing international and regional organisations with similar aims and purposes and to explore all avenues for even closer cooperation among themselves. Further on, ASEAN as a community has developed various international relations with countries all across the globe, starting from Australia, and ending with EU as a community. So, as a member of ASEAN, city-state Republic of Singapore also cherishes these connections. After all, soft power is the strong side of this country.

Conclusion

Just as much as it can be hard to define cultural diplomacy (because it is a sort of a grey zone, between public diplomacy, manipulation and exchanges among the cultures, connecting them and creating new bonds), it can be as much as hard to track all the directions into Republic of Singapore has developed its soft power and cultural diplomacy as a main part of it.

Since, Singapore is such a small country and young, multi ethnic nation developing good relations with other countries in the region as well as abroad is its only chance for survival. Luckily, its government have mastered it. Yet, on the other side, its cultural policy, “national policy designed to support the export of representative export of that nation’s culture in order to further the objectives of foreign policy” is quite questionable with its main goal to boost economy, raise awareness of membership of a nation and above all censorship. Just like artists

are controlled within borders of their country, control is even more severe outside since Singapore really wants to show its best to the outside world. Further on, government cannot expect for culture to be self-sustainable, it also cannot expect to get other nations to know more about Singapore's values if it does not invest in it. Bigger budget for culture, is a must have, just like new partnerships and break thru on the new markets, while at the same time branding the nation. Luckily, government's moves are directed towards it so we can expect it in the years to come. Moreover, even though organisations in charge of Singapore's cultural diplomacy work closely with ASEAN's organisations this is not enough. In order to develop deeper understanding and friendly relations with other countries signing more bilateral agreements with more countries is a must, just like it would be helpful for the Republic of Singapore to take a bigger role in international cultural organisations. With such varieties of culture and paradoxes a lot can be done. It is a plus that authorities realised it before, in the '80s, when they leaned on it heavily in order to promote this city as a tourist attraction, yet their focus changed.

All in all, even though Singapore is having strong connections with other ASEAN countries and via this regional organisation with other around the globe that ASEAN collaborates with, bigger involvement of Singapore's authorities and NAC above all, when it comes to this topic is really needed. Signing new agreements, as *lex generalis*, or a basis upon which the rest of cooperation will be developed will help it on its way. Even though Republic of Singapore is a member of ASEAN it cannot expect that all of the cultural diplomacy is done via this regional organisation. Some hard work on its own is required, after all who knows what the future will bring.

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