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## Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Creative Economy: Examples from Singapore

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### Opportunities and Challenges for ICH in Singapore and its Creative Economy

While there is a vibrant, multi-cultural and diverse ICH landscape in Singapore, the sustainability of ICH has been complicated by various structural challenges, including an aging population and a shrinking workforce, exposure to a broader variety of cultural content through globalisation and technology, and changes in social lifestyles and preferences among younger generations. In Singapore's context, focus group discussions with ICH practitioners organised by the National Heritage Board (NHB) highlighted several challenges around the future of ICH – including livelihood concerns, driven by the lack of consumer demand for ICH trades, goods and content due to lack of awareness or appreciation and competition from mass-produced alternatives; and complexities around labour supply due to the lack of skilled successors and difficulties in attracting youths into ICH trades. The COVID-19 pandemic accentuates these challenges, as it has resulted in a decreased consumption of goods and services, fall in tourism activities and at times, the temporary closure of businesses due to COVID-19 related measures.

Many of these concerns are not unique to Singapore and reflect the vexing issues around the economic sustainability and cultural relevance of ICH trades, and the need to enhance the livelihoods of ICH practitioners as part of safeguarding ICH.

### **Supporting the Evolution of ICH or Accelerating its Demise?**

This means that while there are legitimate concerns around the risks of over-commercialisation and its impact on cultural heritage, generating economic opportunities for ICH trades can have a positive effect if done sensitively and in accordance with the wishes of the practitioners. On this note, we should recognise that ICH, as a living heritage, will evolve with the times, and shaped by environmental, economic, and social factors, as well as the creativity and inventiveness of communities, groups, and individuals. Technology, innovation, and adaptation can help keep our ICH alive and relevant, adapting to the changing needs and preferences of people. However, a fast pace of change, or the replacement of craft skills by machinery can also lead to the erosion and loss of knowledge and skills, or the loss of its social and cultural meanings to the communities concerned. Given such potential negative impacts on ICH, what is an acceptable rate of change, or should there even be such a consideration?

Another impact that we must consider is that of commercialisation and overcommercialisation. The inclusion of ICH in the creative economy necessitates some form of commercialisation. Commercial activities can bring benefits to the communities concerned, but overcommercialisation leads to unintended consequences, as highlighted in the UNESCO 2003 Convention Operating Directives Clause 116:

*“They (commercial activities) can contribute to improving the living standards of the communities that bear and practise the heritage, enhance the local economy, and contribute to social cohesion. These activities and trade should not, however, threaten the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, and all appropriate measures should be taken to ensure that the communities concerned are their primary beneficiaries... ensuring that the commercial use does not distort the meaning and purpose of the intangible cultural heritage for the community concerned.”*

Similarly, while technological development has catalysed changes in both modes of cultural production and changes in societal lifestyles and preferences, the COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted the new opportunities that technology presents for cultural heritage and the creative economy, and *“digital technologies are being used in new ways by audiences and cultural professionals alike, triggering the emergence of innovative digital production, distribution and consumption patterns”* (UNESCO, 2021).

Therefore, the creative economy, and the innovative use of digital technologies by creative and cultural professionals, offers opportunities to enhance the long-term sustainability of ICH, by harnessing their potential to promote the economic and cultural value of ICH, and also by demonstrating that ICH can contribute to the vitality of the wider creative economy. But, encouraging creative economic activities linked to ICH requires a delicate balance. Ultimately, it is the views of the practitioners and communities that are of utmost importance and any interventions and support rendered, should respect their wishes and aspirations.

## Fostering Creative Partnerships: Craft X Design

The creative economy encompasses both “*fully-fledged, globalized cultural industries that are strongly connected with digitization*” and “*locally-anchored, tradition-based cultural industries, such as crafts, which are heavily enshrined in the informal economy and local communities*” (UNESCO, 2021). In Singapore’s context, there are opportunities for harnessing the economic value of developed cultural industries, such as the design sector, to overcome the commercial challenges facing ICH practices and related businesses. In particular, as a UNESCO Creative City of Design since 2015, there has been strong recognition of the role which the local design sector can play, in building a thriving innovation-based economy, in contributing towards a stronger sense of national identity, and in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals outlined by the 2030 Agenda. The potential value of cultural heritage as an engine for economic growth has been reflected in the success of Singaporean design firms such as Supermama and WhenIWasFour in retailing products that draw on and reflect elements of Singapore’s cultural heritage.

To explore how traditional crafts can capitalise on the growing demand for artisanal crafts and local cultural products and tap on the strengths of the local design sector, NHB launched a pilot initiative “Craft X Design” in June 2021. The Craft X Design initiative pairs traditional craft practitioners with contemporary designers and studios, to co-create innovative products which reflect both traditional cultural heritage and modern design trends. By fostering collaborations across different sectors of the creative economy, the initiative seeks to raise awareness and appreciation of local traditional crafts, and highlight how design innovation can contribute to the revitalisation of the traditional craft industry, and how designers can be inspired by and draw on the rich cultural heritage within local communities.

NHB has identified four traditional craft practitioners for the 2021 edition of Craft X Design and will select four designers/studios (based on their design proposals) to partner with them over a period of four to five months. Various stages of this process of co-creation will be documented via photos and videos, and the collaboration will culminate in public showcase of the completed product prototypes and the co-creation process in mid-2022. By offering a safe sandbox for innovative experiments that bring together cross-industry collaborations and inter-disciplinary expertise across creative and cultural sectors, such creative partnerships can increase the access of the traditional craft industry to new ideas, opportunities, networks, and markets, and encourage the public to rethink the economic value and cultural relevance of these crafts.

### **Empowering Communities: Stewards of ICH Award and Project Grant**

ICH practitioners and communities play a central role in ensuring the transmission and safeguarding of ICH in Singapore, and many of them have been innovative in capitalising on creative opportunities and mediums to further their efforts in passing on their ICH.

The NHB launched the Stewards of Intangible Cultural Heritage Award in 2019, as a platform to recognise the practitioners and communities' own efforts in promoting and transmitting their ICH practices, and generate greater public awareness of ICH in general and appreciation of our ICH practitioners. Since the launch of this annual recognition scheme, a total of 10 practitioners and organisations have been awarded. To further support them, award recipients can apply for a Project Grant that provides up to S\$20,000 for initiatives that promote and transmit their respective ICH.

Among the award recipients are several traditional arts groups, which have utilised the Project Grant to adapt to changing trends within the creative and cultural economy. For instance, Mr Gwee Thian Lye, a veteran *wayang peranakan* performer, is translating the traditional Peranakan theatre form typically performed on stage in Baba Malay into a series of podcast episodes, accompanied by English commentary from Mr Gwee to explain the broader cultural context around the various scenes performed in the podcast. Similarly, Nam Hwa Opera, a traditional Chinese opera group, worked with photographers, designers, and publishers to produce a children-friendly handbook on Chinese opera, aimed specifically at keeping the attention of students through colourful visuals and engaging content.

The endeavours of these traditional artists to promote and transmit their ICH through creative mediums speaks to the growing interest in and demand for a wider and diverse variety of arts and cultural experiences, and also underscores the synergies between cultural production, consumption of creative content, and transmission of cultural heritage.

### **Supporting Innovation: Organisation Transformation Grant**

To enable ICH trades to cope with the impact of COVID-19 and to build the foundations for long-term sustainability and growth beyond COVID-19, NHB launched the Organisation Transformation Grant in June 2021. The grant supports four main areas of business transformation, namely:

1. People – including apprenticeships and other forms of training or up-skilling.
2. Process – including mechanisation or using new tools or materials.

3. Product – including development of new products, new designs, or rebranding.
4. Systems – including adoption of new digital platforms for online sales or marketing.

Undeniably, COVID-19 has exacerbated long-standing concerns over the economic precarity of ICH practitioners and trades. However, there are practitioners who have taken the initiative, with the support of the grant, to transform their business operations and develop new capabilities through innovative solutions. An example of this is Say Tian Hng Buddha Shop, a 125-year business and the last Taoist effigy-making shop in Singapore. Due to the lack of skilled effigy hand-carvers, and the high cost of time and labour involved in hand-carving, Say Tian Hng is exploring the use of machine carving in the future, to ensure that the craft of effigy carving will still be retained in some form. As an intermediate step towards that transition, they have begun 3D scanning to compile a digital database of Taoist effigies. Similarly, Toh Hong Huat Trading, one of the last business offering traditional stonemasonry services in Singapore, has adopted machine equipment such as porcelain cutters to improve the speed and efficiency of tombstone carving, and reduce the time and labour cost which was making the business commercially unsustainable in the long-run. Toh Hong Huat has also adopted software to enhance their design processes.

### **Harnessing Digital Technologies**

Besides enabling ICH businesses to address manpower challenges and enhance their long-term commercial viability, digital technologies can also offer new channels and modalities for the promotion and transmission of ICH, in ways

that enable ICH to reach and engage with new audiences. Globally, amidst the impact of COVID-19 on in-person activities and programmes, one of the most significant developments in the creative and cultural industries has been the increased demand for and consumption of digital cultural content, and the adaptation of these industries to generate and disseminate such content (UNESCO, 2021).

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been active efforts to harness the high level of digital access in Singapore as an opportunity to disseminate heritage content and promote ICH, and the pandemic has accelerated this trend. Several of NHB's educational campaigns on ICH, such as *A Journey of Devotion – Celebrating Thaipusam in Singapore*, were presented through online and social media channels. In addition to disseminating cultural content to wider audiences, digital programmes can also offer a platform for ICH communities to stay connected. In 2020, NHB organised a series of online activities as part of the Ramadan Together campaign. The campaign includes online concerts, live streaming of cooking demonstrations of festive food, and virtual conversations between members of the Muslim community about Ramadan, to bring the Muslim community together when they could not congregate in person due to COVID-19.

In addition, technological tools and platforms have played a major role in co-production of heritage content. Since 2017, NHB's DigiMuse initiative has brought together artists, technology specialists and culture professions to co-create projects which integrate culture, heritage, and technology. In 2020, in the lead-up to the inscription of Hawker Culture as Singapore's first ICH element on the UNESCO Representative List of ICH, NHB launched an edition of DigiMuse based on the theme of Hawker Culture. A call for proposals led to the creation of



projects such as ‘*Deep Sound Map: Hawkers*’, a series of immersive audio tracks that replicated the everyday soundscapes of hawker centres; and ‘*Thank You Hawker AR*’, which created ready-to-use augmented reality (AR) filters for users to share and express their appreciation for hawkers.

## Conclusion

As living heritage, ICH practices are influenced by and have to continuously navigate the changing social, economic, and cultural landscape around them – including the continued growth of the creative economy, and the increasing importance of digital technologies in creative and cultural sectors. While there will be risks when embracing commercial opportunities in the creative economy and adopting digital technologies, the various examples highlighted in this paper suggest that the creative economy and cultural heritage can also be complementary and add value to each other. As more ICH communities and practitioners recognise the need to adapt and innovate to address economic challenges, maintain livelihoods, and stay relevant, creative industries and digital technologies can offer ways to safeguard ICH while preserving the meaning and value of the ICH for the communities and practitioners involved, and government agencies such as NHB can play a role in supporting the aspirations of ICH communities in their transmission of ICH.

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