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Cultural Policy and the Performing Arts in Southeast Asia

The influence of national government policy and structures for culture upon the shape and survival of pre-national ‘traditional’ performing arts in Southeast Asia has interested scholars for some time.\(^1\) Given the rapid economic, social, and political change in the region over the past fifty years, and the emergence from colonial domination of nations that state their new nationhood in cultural terms (against an arbitrary political unity imposed by the previous colonial power), the theatre of cultural change that is part of this process is itself a dramatic performance to observe.

Staged before us is a drama of change sharp-focused over two or three generations. In all societies, cultural forms are intimately linked to a sense of social and national identity. In the post-colonial societies of Southeast Asia, as that sense of identity shifts with each generation moving further towards a new national reality – (a sense of identity both expanding and contracting, for on the one hand becoming nationally aware provides a larger consciousness and a place in an inter-national arena, but on the other hand national consciousness forces an awareness of one’s cultural origins as merely regional or infra-national) – so are pre-national cultural forms called into question. In this context, what is the purpose of performing arts? What is their meaning as ‘heritage’? What role have performing arts played previously, and what role do they play now? How do the priorities of nationhood and national identity, and the image the nation wishes to portray of itself internationally all affect the form, status, and support for the performing arts?

The focus of much recent research into the contemporary situation of performing arts in Southeast Asia has been in two main areas – the redefinition of pre-national performance forms into nationally acceptable ideals of ‘tradition’, and the role of tourism in redefining and commoditizing of culture.\(^2\) In both cases, the tendency is to view national cultural policy and government structures of administration for culture as an outside agent of change (usually the major outside agent of change) that

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\(^1\) To mention a few recent examples: Hatley 1993; Geertz 1990; Hughes-Freeland 1993; Lindsay 1985; Rutnin 1993; Sutton 1991; Tan 1993; Zurbuchen 1990.

\(^2\) As above. The issues of tourism include the appropriation of ritual as spectacle by the state for local and foreign tourist consumption, and the dressing up of custom as performance. Acciaioli 1985; Volkman 1990; Sellato 1993; and writing about the Pacific, Keesing 1989.
forces pre-national, regional performance into new forms. The direction is portrayed entirely as top-down, with the imposition from above of undesirable requirements forcing undesirable changes. While this top-down process exists and does indeed effect drastic change, homogenization, and even obliteration of previously vibrant cultural variety, it is not the whole story. I would like to suggest a more symbiotic scenario: that we should observe cultural policy as part of cultural expression in Southeast Asia – and that the government structure, funding, and policies are not only something superimposed upon indigenous, regional, traditional, infra-national cultural forms, but are themselves also formed by the traditional context within which these forms exist.

Cultural policy, legislation, bureaucracy, and education are all part of the context within which cultural forms work and function. While scholars writing on contemporary cultural policy in Southeast Asia have identified and lamented the situation of government control effectively altering and destroying traditional performing arts, through either heavy-handed intervention, misguided policies, or neglect, no attention has been given to the symbiotic relationship between cultural policy and cultural context. Without viewing this broader picture we cannot become more informed about why the current situation exists; why it is, for example, that governments in Southeast Asia so easily take on the role of national cultural arbiter and why this role is so easily accepted, even by artists themselves. Understanding the culture of cultural management in Southeast Asia is not to promote an apologetic stance in the face of negative aspects of governmental cultural control, but rather to suggest that a broader understanding of how the situation works may better prepare one to work for change within it.

Contemporary systems of and ideas about cultural management and policy in Southeast Asia at a national level have strong links with traditional cultural practices within each country and also show strong similarities within the region. With regard to the performing arts, government policies for their development, preservation, or perpetration are grounded in such concepts as what performing arts are for, the expectations of both donor and recipient of patronage, and the role of performers and of audiences in society. While national policies may be new and intrusive upon the intrinsic identity of performance forms, the concepts underlying these policies are not necessarily new at all – often they appear to be grounded in very traditional practices and ideas about the role of performance as art, and of its patrons, performers, and audiences.

In this article I wish to discuss some of the interrelationships I see as significant between national policy, administrative structure, and support for the performing arts in the region, and the way that performing arts exist and change, emphasizing ways that policy, structure, and funding are shaped by ways people think the performing arts should exist, do exist, and have existed in the past. I will consider three elements in the per-
forming arts complex: the overall national administrative structure (government), the performers, and the audience.

*Cultural policy and government administrative structure*3

Governmental administrative structures for culture and statements of national cultural policy indicate both the social approach to culture and the cultural role of the state. The prominence given to culture in Southeast Asia both socially and in terms of national policy is demonstrated by the fact that all of the countries in the region name culture within a government ministry (or the equivalent of a ministry), and most of them established a government portfolio for culture very soon after independence.

The speed with which the new post-colonial Southeast Asian nations set up government portfolios specifically for culture indicates the importance placed on culture in establishing nationhood. From the outset, culture was identified as a state-directed tool of national identity. In Indonesia, where the debate about cultural heritage and national identity had been raging long before independence, the government department for culture was established immediately in 1945. In Malaysia, the first full agency for culture at ministerial level was established in 1964, seven years after independence. The Philippines established a culture department within the Department of Education when this department was established in July 1947, the year following independence. In the case of Thailand, the only non-post-colonial nation amongst those discussed here, the government agency for culture (Department of Fine Arts) was established in 1933 as part of the state’s new independence under constitutional monarchy, the year after the system of absolute monarchy was overthrown, with an emphasis not on the creation of something new in terms of fashioning national identity, but rather on making the cultural heritage that was previously attached to the institution of monarchy, public property (Rutnin 1993:189). In 1942 this department became the Bureau for Culture.

Most countries in the region have shifted culture between various government portfolios, or restructured the total portfolio of the ministry under which culture falls: Malaysia moved culture from its grouping with ‘Youth and Sports’ to ‘Culture, Arts, and Tourism’, Singapore from ‘Community Development’ to ‘Information and the Arts’. Vietnam removed sport from the previous ‘Culture, Information, and Sport’, and now has a Ministry of Culture and Information. Indonesia is the only Southeast Asian

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3 Information on the government bureaucracies for culture and the statements of cultural policy were gathered in early 1994 during my research for a survey on cultural organization in Southeast Asia commissioned by the Australia Council, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and the Myer Foundation. The Southeast Asian countries covered here (Indonesia, Brunei, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Vietnam), as in the survey, were determined by their level of cultural exchange activity with Australia. Please refer to that survey for more detailed information and for diagrams of the actual administrative structures (Lindsay 1994).
nation that has not altered its original governmental division, for culture has been consistently linked with education since the ministry's establishment in 1945 (then known as the Ministry of Education and Culture, but since 1966 called the Department of Education and Culture). Thailand is the only nation that has had a ministry solely for culture - from 1952 until 1958, after which period culture was subsumed under the Ministry of Education, then moved to the Department of Religious Affairs, and in 1979 back to the Ministry of Education where it is today.

The placement of culture overall within a government ministry indicates both the role society gives to culture and the role the government wishes it to have, and I would contend that the former informs the latter. In Indonesia, for example, the cultural polemic preceding and immediately following independence was very much to do with the kind of 'culture' to be accepted, developed, and promoted at a national level - whether this be pan-Indonesian, Western, and progressive, or protected 'high' forms of regional cultural heritage - but the debate never questioned the basically accepted premise of the educative value of culture itself as a civilizing agent of human behaviour, and as such, a source of pride and sense of identity. Where societies stress an educative role for cultural forms (the arts, language, literature) this translates with ease to a national educative role for culture in forming national identity (including the fostering of a national language, for example). From building the person, or building the kingdom, comes building the nation. Linking education and culture in a government ministry is a natural progression.

Thailand is the only country in the region where culture has been overtly linked with religion through placing them together within one ministry. The more homogeneous structure of Thai society, particularly in terms of religion, makes this possible, but the non-colonial past of Thailand also allows for a broader statement of cultural policy in terms of preserving a heritage that has served it well in the past rather than the more forward-looking definitions of post-colonial nation building, and the Thai heritage is a tight amalgam of monarch, the arts, and religion. Religion-as-culture is encapsulated in the official Thai definition of culture as a 'way of life', and expressed in the official policy of preservation and protection of a cultural identity that is largely defined through religion. Although culture is now again under the Ministry of Education (where it began), there is still close liaison with the Ministry of Religion on policy matters.

Malaysia, like the Philippines and Indonesia, states its cultural policy in terms of building national identity - yet in Malaysia the government culture portfolio has not ever been part of the Ministry of Education. As in Singapore and Brunei, culture is treated more narrowly in terms of entertainment and community leisure activity, and categories that fall under the cultural portfolio elsewhere in the region (libraries, national language) in Malaysia come under the aegis of a separate Ministry of Education. The role of culture as community activity is shown by culture initially (1953)
being placed under ‘youth activities’ within the Ministry of Social Welfare, and later at ministerial level together with youth and sport, and most recently tourism. Since the racial riots of 1969, Malaysia’s cultural policy has been articulated in racial terms through active discriminatory policy favouring Malay culture. This policy automatically links culture to religion, as Malay culture (in Malaysia) is, by definition, Islamic. The national cultural policy states that ‘Islam shall be substantive in formulating the national culture’; but with culture itself treated more narrowly as community activity and entertainment rather than a ‘way of life’ as in Thailand, there is no administrative link between the culture department within the Ministry of Tourism and the Division of Islamic Affairs within the Prime Minister’s Department.4

The culture portfolio
Treating culture as a portfolio within a government ministry is a matter of administrative practicality which indicates a social and cultural emphasis of operation. While this placement may differ, in fact the activities of the culture departments in Southeast Asia show more similarities than differences.

Within the portfolio for culture, all the countries in the region include performing arts, visual arts, museums, monuments, and shrines, in other words the material and expressive heritage of the nation. For the arts, the culture departments administer funds for activities and research, and support national troupes (where these exist). The responsibility for arts education and training shifts (and is often split) between the portfolios for culture and for education depending on whether culture is itself within a ministry of education, and also on the vocational versus academic orientation of the training. Most portfolios include language and/or literature (Brunei, Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines). Vietnam includes publishing and film. Libraries fall within the cultural portfolio everywhere except Malaysia (as explained above) and Indonesia, where under the National Library they have been set up as an autonomous agency.

‘Culture’ in the culture portfolio is, then, generally synonymous with ‘arts and heritage’, other than in Thailand where, as we have seen, it refers to a ‘way of life’. Indonesia stands apart in including ‘traditional values’ and ‘local beliefs’ within the culture portfolio as part of the heritage of expressive culture. The Philippines has special committees for minority cultures.

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4 The Traditional Arts Unit of the Ministry of Culture, Arts, and Tourism defines its role as ‘To preserve, promote, and develop traditional and indigenous art forms including theatre, games, and the art of self-defence, for their conservation and upliftment, and encourage wider participation of the masses in such activities.’
Performing arts
Assistance to performing artists through the government cultural agencies in Southeast Asia is predominantly directed to them from above rather than applied for by them from below. State cultural agencies act as patrons bestowing project funds and rewards rather than as service organizations reacting to applications from the artistic community. Artists and troupes do not usually apply independently for grants for their own projects, but they are appointed as part of a project devised by a state cultural office (or centre) at national or regional level, and a lucky few may receive awards in recognition of their work. Only the Philippines and Singapore have established a formal advertised system of grants for which individual and independent artists may apply, and where the decision-makers for the grants include non-government personnel. In both cases the infrastructure for this is very recent (the National Arts Council in Singapore was set up in 1991, and the National Commission for Culture and the Arts in the Philippines was established in 1992), the processes of grant-giving only just commencing, and the grant amounts still relatively small.

Elsewhere, government funds for performing arts activities are used to support a government infrastructure of arts councils, cultural centres, and performance venues, the use of which may be given for free or for cheap rental to artists as a type of production or venue grant. (In Singapore and the Philippines this earlier system still also applies.) To be accepted for such assistance, performers must apply to the local organization that is in charge of the venue. However, the government cultural venues are most heavily used for government projects, especially festivals and competitions which are a feature of the performing arts scene in Southeast Asia and absorb a major part of government funding.

The cultural departments supervise direct assistance to performers in the form of national awards (Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia) as a reward for service to the community and the nation. In Vietnam, the Department of Performing Arts is responsible for the national performance troupes, which receive full government support. The Department of Fine Arts in Thailand is also responsible for the national troupes.

State institutions giving training in the performing arts also fall within the cultural portfolio where those institutions have a strong vocational emphasis. In Vietnam, this refers to all the training institutions; in Thailand it is only the college that is linked to the National Theatre; in Malaysia, the National Arts Academy. In Indonesia and the Philippines, the state institutions teaching performing arts come under the aegis of the education portfolio. (Brunei and Singapore have no state centres of performance training.)

Before leaving this section on the government administration, a special mention must be made of Singapore – for there, unlike elsewhere, the government agency for culture acts not only as a grant-giver and policy director, but also as an entrepreneur. In Singapore, the government owns
all the major performance venues and rents them out as a commercial enterprise. The National Arts Council also acts in a profit-making manner as presenter of performances – especially imported foreign performances (*Les Misérables* is a recent example). While unusual in the Southeast Asian set-up just outlined, in fact this commercial activity is perfectly in keeping with Singapore’s own identity as a marketplace – the very rationale for its existence since Raffles. The performing arts (as entertainment rather than edification) are treated in a traditional Singaporean manner as any other marketable commodity imported or assembled for sale. Singaporean cultural administration functions within its own specific social setting.

The procedures of cultural funding to the performing arts through the government infrastructures in Southeast Asia strengthen the role of the state as patron and employer (and in Singapore, as merchant-impressario). Having discussed how the government structure operates, I will now move on to look at the way performers and audiences interact with that structure.

*The performers*

In all of Southeast Asia except for Vietnam, the full-time professional performer is the exception. The great majority of performers (dancers, actors, musicians) work within a long-standing system of part-time employment as an artist (often in tandem with other unrelated work), being paid per commissioned performance. These performances may be for family celebrations (weddings, circumcisions, births), religious ceremonies (Easter pageants, Buddhist temple festivals), village or urban occasions (blessing a new house or harvest, celebrating the new year), or government events (national day, visits of state officials, openings of conferences).

The better the performer, the more popular the group, the more the commissions and the more chance of the performer making a living from his or her performing skill. Even so, most troupes are tied into celebration seasons – the ‘wedding season’, the ‘harvest season’, and so forth, – and intersperse times of relatively full employment with times of no employment at all. Furthermore, some forms of performing arts have a wider appeal or wider application for a variety of celebrations than others (*wayang kulit* compared to *ludruk*, for example), so their performers have more chances to get work. Some forms are more limited in opportunities for commission, either because of cost, or because of inappropriateness (a Javanese *bedhaya* performance could only be ‘hired’ by those having the equivalent status of its royal origin – like the government or foreign festivals). Their performers can no longer be specialists in one genre – to find work they must be flexible.

The living of a performer is precarious, and today, as fifty years ago, performers seek out patronage in order to have some stability in employment. Fifty years ago, those patrons were the palaces, temples, wealthy aficionados, and radio stations. Today they are the government
departments and institutions, businesses and corporations, television stations, and, of course, still the wealthy aficionados. While the system of patronage itself is merely perpetuated in a modern setting, the new patrons have new tastes and different reasons for their choice of performances to sponsor, and they also have more power. While a traditional patron in a village may choose local musicians to play at his daughter's wedding because of their musical skill, a government agency acting in a traditional manner as patron will be concerned with ideas of national identity, acceptability, and image.

Opportunities for performers for employment in full-time government-supported national companies are few, apart from Vietnam where the state supports about two hundred troupes on full or two-thirds salary. Thailand's national theatre and dance companies employ about three hundred and sixty artists as civil servants on salary. Elsewhere, government 'salaries' are seasonal or small honoraria: in the Philippines, the seven resident companies at the Cultural Centre receive seasonal salaries or honoraria, performers for the National Cultural Centre in Kuala Lumpur are also given honoraria (or short-term contracts). In a country like Indonesia, where music, theatre, and dance have no single identifiable 'national' form, the choice of any one performance form for government sponsorship as a national company is not politically viable.

Performers seek access to government money through aligning themselves with government institutions, venues, government-supported celebrations, projects, festivals, and competitions. In doing so, they are forced to comply with government-determined standards. The structure of fund-giving works against performers as individuals applying for government assistance to mount projects and performances of their own definition. The more usual scenario is for performers to be invited to participate in a performance set up as a government project - whether that be a national or regional festival, a tour abroad, research into threatened performance genres, or public performances to celebrate national days.

As the government is a powerful potential patron, it is to the advantage of performers to align themselves with government institutions. National television stations provide an important source of work (especially in Malaysia), but generally the state training centres for the arts are the places to be. Not only do these schools provide a pool of performers for selection for government-sponsored performances, but they also provide a source of government employment as teachers, usually with the status of civil servants (in Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Thailand). In a country like Indonesia, the government employment of performers as bureaucrat-teachers (via the Directorate General of Higher Education) is the major government expenditure paid directly to performers.

Business and corporate sponsorship plays a significant role in supporting the performing arts in Southeast Asia. Performers request sponsorship from banks, newspapers, oil companies, and other businesses which
are generous in their support either in cash or in kind. It is important for performers to maintain and develop a close personal network of friends with access to corporate ears – family connections are even better. Apart from cash support, sponsors also provide an alternative physical infrastructure. For example, in Malaysia, the state oil company (Petronas) runs an art gallery and a performance space, which is made available to selected artists free of charge, and the major newspapers frequently sponsor performances. In Indonesia, the weekly journal Tempo, which was banned in June 1994, used to support a number of small venues used for exhibitions, meetings, rehearsals, and discussions and had a further annual budget of around three hundred million rupiah (US$ 150,000) for cultural sponsorship. Other journals and newspapers also spend generously on such sponsorship.

Corporate sponsors do not give their support for reasons of tax deductibility. Only Singapore has formalized a system of tax incentives for donations to the arts. (A system is being introduced in the Philippines.) In Thailand, arts sponsorship falls into a traditional Buddhist practice of gaining merit through donation. Elsewhere, corporate sponsors in Southeast Asia support the arts in order to appear as good corporate citizens, and indeed to foster a public image as patrons. To be an arts patron is the traditionally expected role of the wealthy. However, the intricate link between business and politics in Southeast Asia – particularly in countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore – also ensures that corporate sponsorship may not be forthcoming for controversial material overtly offensive to the government. Corporate sponsorship is also entwined within the overall system of state patronage.

An alternative avenue for performers to obtain government funding as direct assistance is through regional, state, or provincial governments, where those funds allotted for expenditure at the discretion of the State Minister/ Governor may be spent on cultural activities, and are often given as assistance to performing groups in financial difficulty, for costumes, musical instruments, repairing performance venues, and so on. Such support is often at the whim of the state or provincial governor (and his wife). Again, performers must develop good personal connections with state or regional officials to keep open potential channels of assistance.

Now, as before, performers gravitate to sources of patronage. Today the government is the most significant source of such patronage. But patronage comes with a price, and that price is loyalty and acquiescence to imposed standards. From the performers’ point of view, then, the context of employment as a dancer in a national dance troupe, a teacher at a state academy, a musician touring abroad on a government-funded cultural mission, or an actor paid by the local arts council to perform in a regional theatre festival for a national day – this context is not essentially different from a pre-national context of a dancer being taken into the palace as a retainer, a musician being invited to perform in a temple (festival, or an
acting troupe called in to perform at the house of a noble to entertain his guests.

The government acts in the way a patron is traditionally expected to act – nominating the kind of performance, choosing the performers, vetting undesirable elements, favouring those whose performance pleases, and rejecting from favour those whose performance offends. The performers in return display loyalty and gratitude. For what they have received is not merely money – not a grant that is seen to be an individual artist’s right to anonymous public funds – they have been given status as the ones chosen to have noblesse bestowed upon them.\(^5\)

The audience

A major factor that shapes performing arts in Southeast Asia is the pattern of their consumption. In one sense, the context of performance has changed radically from an overwhelmingly ceremonial or ritual pre-national context of many ‘traditional’ performances to a secular post-colonial and contemporary context. However, in another sense the transformation of context is not radical at all, and the process of commoditization is not as thorough as may first appear. For while in the past performances were commissioned by individuals, palaces, temples, or communities for a ceremonial event, the pattern of commissioning continues in contemporary national secular ceremonial contexts, with the state and businesses as patrons.\(^6\) The resonances of traditional performance context in contemporary official commissioned performances extend beyond the authority of the commissioner. As with performances held in a village setting, the audience is invited and its members are not anonymous either to the host, to the performers, or to each other; the performance itself is expected to have a high level of familiarity for its audience, and is also expected to be both entertaining and contemporary in relating directly to the ceremony or event at hand.

Invited audiences are captive audiences. They have not exercised choice in selecting a type of performance they wish to see. An audience at a state function sees a performance that has been chosen for it – so do invitees at a corporate function, the public at a festival or competition, or guests at a wedding. Until recently, with the blossoming of commercial television stations, national television also beamed to captive audiences – they could turn off the TV, but not switch to an alternative channel. Captive audiences exist even for national performing companies that sell

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5 Mention should be made of foreign funding agencies which provide an alternative source of support to artists – and which have the advantage of operating in a way that allows them to apply directly and receive funds directly. The thriving community theatre scene in the Philippines is virtually run on foreign support, for example.

6 Volkman, writing on ‘Toraja, notes ‘a ritual that in the past might have been measured in number and value of buffalo and pigs is now measured in terms of number and rank of government representatives’ (Volkman 1990:107).
tickets for admission. In Thailand, for example, the government-subsidized National Theatre charges for admission. It performs khon (masked drama) and lakphon (dance-drama) for the public, and the performances are well attended. However, it is school groups that form the largest proportion of their audience, for the study of classic Thai drama is part of the school curriculum. (Rutnin 1993:201). Although the performances are open to the general public, in fact the audience is still appointed by the state, and the form of the performances, which are simplified and condensed to make them more accessible to the young audience, is also determined by that audience.\textsuperscript{7}

Throughout Southeast Asia, performances of traditional performing arts are commissioned for state events. As with traditional ceremonies like weddings, state ceremonies also require some aspect of non-offensive entertainment as part of the overall ceremonial context. In Malaysia, the need for such performances for national celebrations and for visits of state guests was a rationale for setting up the Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sport in 1964 (Mohd. Osman 1988:278). In Thailand, the National Silapakon (Department of Fine Arts) dance troupe has been used by successive regimes for performances mounted in the same way as the Royal Court (Rutnin 1993:190-3). In Indonesia, the state performing arts colleges virtually serve as training centres for state ceremony, creating tailor-made performances for government ceremonies, and providing the pool of musicians and dancers for employment.

The requirements of performances for state celebrations are brevity (the performance is not necessarily the only or the main part of the programme), an appropriate formality and display (no embarrassing scruffy village performers), and accessibility for a mixed audience – men and women, people from various regions. It is important that the performance is not offensive to other ethnic and religious sensibilities, or to a sense of official decorum and respectability, for the audience members are not anonymous individuals – they are invitees who share the status of invited guests, attend as a group, and are usually known to each other in person or in position. Audiences for state celebrations are not usually attending the performance because of their interest in the performance itself. They are there to be seen and to fulfil obligations, and only a small percentage may have any special interest in the actual performance. The performance should be dignified and entertaining.

Businesses or corporations sponsoring performances for an invited audience will have the same concerns for their guests. Events organized with such sponsorship where proceeds go to charity actually involve

\textsuperscript{7} Rutnin explains; 'since the Ministry of Education prescribes only excerpts from dramatic masterpieces [for Thai literature courses], the National Theatre productions present mostly short scenes from these classical plays in the form of variety shows rather than complete plays as in the past'(Rutnin 1993:197).
payment by those who attend – yet here the payment is not for tickets bought anonymously by an audience member. Rather, those who attend are demonstrating their joint support for a cause – they are there so that others may see that they have contributed to a joint effort. The audience members are guests – guest donors in this case – and again must be presented with a performance that is pleasing and appropriate to the sense of occasion.

State-commissioned performances for display to visiting foreign dignitaries or for display abroad must also fit into a formal framework of image and appropriateness. The ASEAN festivals function in this way – artists do not apply to attend; instead, the performances have been selected by the governments that send them. The audiences are made up largely of government officials and invited guests. In the audience expectation of what the type of performance should be, and in the way that the performances operate in such situations, the nations of ASEAN speak to each other – they share the same expectations.

The State supports and maintains a traditional system of presentation of performance. Although the performing arts schools may create new types of performances, this does not change the way people actually see them. As a captive audience, they will see them anyway. (What Indonesians would pay to see a condensed bedhaya, and are they any more likely to pay because it is condensed?) The point is that a commercial framework for the traditional performing arts has not yet emerged, and where a semi-commercial structure did exist, for example for urban popular forms such as bangsawan in Malaysia or wayang wong in Java, the state has taken up the slack of support and moulded these too into its system of patronage, the result being that the more they are subsidized and acquiesce to the demands of their patron, the less likely people are to buy tickets to see them (Tan Sooi Beng 1993).8

There are, of course, obvious exceptions to this generalization, both within each country and between countries. In Vietnam, for instance, the performing arts thrive in state-subsidized venues attended by a ticket-buying public, yet one could still argue that the performances are not commercial commodities, that attendance is also a national duty, and that in many senses (also through limitations on other forms of entertainment) the audience is a captive one. Nonetheless, overall a system of patronage for the arts is the traditional way the arts have functioned in Southeast Asia, and that way is perpetuated by the state. The traditional role of the

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8 I am struck with the difference in the way visual arts operate in Southeast Asia, where the approach appears to be the opposite to the performing arts. Throughout the region, exhibitions of contemporary art have become virtually synonymous with sale. The attachment of a money value to something on display in a gallery is part of the exhibition process. There appears to be little tradition of viewing art objects displayed in a gallery-like context for no other reason than display.
audience as invited participants to an event, rather than a conglomeration of individuals purchasing tickets to a performance of their choice, is also perpetuated.

The role of subsidy

In Australia, Europe, and the United States, government subsidy for culture is grounded in the concept that society recognizes certain cultural forms as more than entertainment, and that because of their educative, moral, heritage, aesthetic, or even spiritual value to society as a whole, these should be supported with public money. More pragmatically, there is also recognition that such subsidy helps to maintain an industry of people working in associated activity. Government subsidy or public money supports cultural forms which are not in themselves fully commercially viable, but these activities are also part of a greater whole. Practically speaking, though, these cultural forms operate (on the whole) within a commercial framework, in the sense of venues used, tickets sold, publishing, and so forth. The way subsidy works is to cover a loss in the calculation of income and expenditure within a commercial situation which operates in the same way for everyone.

In Southeast Asia, government subsidy for the arts functions differently because the sociopolitical context of the arts is different. On the level of government subsidy, the rationale behind it, the expectations of the public for such subsidy, and the government's demands and expectations in giving it, Southeast Asia differs markedly from European, Australian, or US models. Subsidy is for reasons of establishing national identity, protection of moral and religious values, or protection of indigenous cultural heritage (material and expressive). In terms of the performing arts, this subsidy functions like patronage, because there is no commercial framework within which these performances function. Subsidy is not a payment of the deficit in a calculation of income and expenditure for a performance which operates commercially like any nonsubsidized performance.

In Southeast Asia, government support to artists is in general associated with government control. Government funds are not given -- nor (yet) expected -- as direct grants to individual artists who determine their own artistic direction and apply for public funds from an anonymous donor called 'the government'. In Southeast Asia, the government-patron has a face. Government control is reflected in the award systems used to give funds to artists, and in the employment of artists as civil servants within the state cultural administration or teaching bureaucracies. Furthermore, subsidy operates within an overall context of government control of cultural expression, for example with the requirement of permits for performance and exhibitions, and censorship.

This nexus of government funding and control also affects the role of subsidy with regard to international cultural promotion in Southeast Asia. Government funds given for cultural promotion abroad are also usually
tied to the choice of artists sent. International tours or exhibitions by artists of these countries are in general not seen as something that artists themselves negotiate and for which they request subsidy towards the difference between income and expenditure for an event that will function within a commercial framework – but rather as cultural missions or festivals which are noncommercial and where the cultural image presented abroad is something determined by the government that funds it. This is the way that most inter-ASEAN cultural exchange operates, for example, and it is also the way (or at least the government-preferred way) that Southeast Asian artists are sent elsewhere abroad.9

The concept of government subsidy being tied to government direction and control underlies the fact that in Southeast Asia, with the exception of Singapore, an artificial distinction is drawn between foreign ‘commercial’ and ‘noncommercial’ cultural activity brought into the country, a distinction which could only be made by countries where government subsidy to the arts is not given within an independent commercial framework of presentation. The distinction drawn between ‘commercial’ and ‘noncommercial’ performing arts, for example, has very real implications for the legislation (tax, customs, visas, permits) which affects this activity. Basically, the distinction made is based on whether the activity has an income component in the host country (i.e. in Southeast Asia). If so, it is considered commercial, and must be entirely handled by agents and entrepreneurs who organize relevant work permits and taxes. If there is no income component, then it is considered a ‘government-to-government’ cultural activity.

Conclusion

Government control and direction in Southeast Asia is part of an overall ‘tradition’ of the way the performing arts operate. It is an inherited aspect of patronage, which itself persists in various ways. The issue is not merely that in Southeast Asia, as everywhere, any form of government aid comes with strings attached. As the Mapplethorpe case in the US has recently demonstrated again, the issue of the public accountability of government money given as grants to artists is an ongoing social debate in all societies (Hughes 1992). The difference, though, is that in the US, European, and Australian models, as the Mapplethorpe case showed, the public feels it has a right – both as a taxpayer (therefore donor) and as a consumer who buys tickets or pays gallery entrance fees – to comment on the value of what the

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9 In Indonesia, for example, there is a complicated legal requirement that performers touring abroad must obtain permission from the Department of Tourism and must then make all arrangements with the foreign agent through a local Indonesian ‘impresariat’, authorized through the Department of Tourism. The role of the ‘impresariat’ is basically to obtain (for a price) the approval from the Department of Tourism for the artists to tour.
assisted artists produce. The audience pays for a commodity. The arts operate in a fully commercial environment. In Southeast Asia, the performers are commissioned, the audience is invited, and the patron pays, and neither audience nor performer criticizes the patron.

Without a truly commercial context – where performance is a purchased commodity and where both audiences and subsidy-givers are anonymous – government subsidy cannot really function in a more independent fashion which would allow the performing arts to develop in their own way. Without an independent commercial framework, it is difficult to see how subsidy and government support can function with less control and less direction, and it is to be expected that the situation of government dictatorship of ideas about heritage and tradition, and its implementation of nationally acceptable standards in cultural forms, will continue.

Ironically, it is precisely because the new patrons and audiences operate in such a traditional way in Southeast Asia that such radical demands are imposed upon traditional arts; it is not the expectations and basic approach to performance itself that are different, but the fact that the actual patrons and audiences are different. State cultural bodies directing the shape of traditional performing arts act in a very traditional way as patrons, but because they are not the traditional patrons, their demands are made to meet a different taste and for reasons of national unity and national identity, reasons that are inimical to the very authenticity of those art forms. National audiences for traditional and regional performing arts, especially official audiences, also act in a very traditional way in expecting presentations to be made familiar and pleasing to them and in some way contemporary. However, national audiences are by definition nontraditional and non-regionally-specific, and their expectations of familiarity can only be met with pastiche.

The future of threatened traditional performing arts in Southeast Asia cannot rely merely on salvage efforts directed narrowly at those art forms themselves. The problems lie deeper than this. The future vitality of authentic traditional performance in contemporary modern Southeast Asia depends on a less traditional manner of watching and a less traditional manner of control. As long as government structures and support for the performing arts function in a traditional way, governments will play the intrusive traditional role of patron, imposing demands on what those performing arts forms should be, directing their consumption via state events, festivals and competitions, and state television channels, and determining the image to be portrayed abroad. Government structure is not just forcing and moulding change, but is also moulded by concepts of performance, audience, patronage, image. Cultural policy and procedure is part of the performance culture itself.
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