

Staging Singapore's Cultural Economy

Growing and cultivating soft power is the name of the game.

Entrepreneurship and innovation are normally discussed

within the context of company (or individual) aspiration and achievement, in a business or academic setting. But these two attributes can also be applied to government agencies seeking to advance a country's commercial fortunes, just like what corporations do.

Singapore provides a very current mini-case study of state-level enterprise and out-of-the-box thinking and action.

In March 2024, American pop superstar Taylor Swift played six nights of her *The Eras Tour* concert to more than 300,000 fans at the Republic's National Stadium. About 70 per cent of the concert-goers had flown in from the city-state's regional neighbours.

Swift is in a league of her own, and an outlier as a concert performer, with her *The Eras Tour* shows leading her to be officially declared a billionaire in April 2024 by Forbes magazine.¹ Some estimates suggest that the Singapore concerts, with their multiplier effects, could add some S\$500 million to the Republic's economy.²

A similar phenomenon had been seen in other venues of Swift's tour, such as in Australia. But what appears to have set Singapore apart from other host locations of her tour is the direct

involvement of the state in securing this run of concerts.

This is a reflection of what could even be considered one of Singapore's lesser-known nation brand attributes: A government that behaves in ways more often associated with a multinational corporation (MNC), exemplifying an entrepreneurial mindset and instincts, that seeks to be innovative to gain an edge over the competition.

It was Thailand's Prime Minister, Srettha Thavisin, who revealed in February 2024 in remarks reported in the media, that Singapore had brokered an exclusive deal with Swift's team, under which monetary incentives had been given in exchange for Swift not to perform anywhere else in Southeast Asia.

Two months later, Srettha said his initial remarks had been "distorted" by the media as criticism and jealousy, and clarified that he had actually spoken of Singapore "with admiration". He also said he thought, when then Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong was asked by journalists about the concert deal at the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations)-Australia Special Summit in March 2024, that Lee's explanation illustrated Singapore's approach to such deals as "a wise way of managing a country".³

GOVERNMENT AGENCIES CAN BEHAVE LIKE PRIVATE COMPANIES TOO

Also responding to news of the exclusive arrangement with Swift's

- Singapore used soft power to secure Taylor Swift's concerts. The resulting projection of a culturally rich image enhances its national branding, and attracts global talent and investors.
- Investment in local arts is key to balanced cultural development and integration into the global market.



team, Singapore's Minister for Culture, Community, and Youth, Edwin Tong, revealed that, some months earlier in 2023, he had personally led a multi-agency team of officials from Singapore to visit Los Angeles, California, in the US, to negotiate this deal.⁴

That was a pre-emptive move that took everyone, including Singapore's regional neighbours, by surprise. Clearly, this new strategy by the Singapore Government to promote the country as a 'cultural hub' is a game-changing shift, steered from the highest levels.

What this shows is how the public sector has the capacity to behave, in many ways, like the private sector. This includes envisioning a long-term development plan; studying the means to get ahead in 'red ocean' market segments, as well as the market potential and gaps in 'blue ocean' opportunities; devising a staging and marketing strategy; and then sitting down with private sector players to strike or in short, to 'hustle', which in commercial parlance means to 'always work hard and smart, and seize the best opportunities'.

In fact, this is something Singapore has done since its earliest days of internal self-government, even before

achieving independence in 1965. Devoid of natural resources such as oil or oil palm, this small island has always had to look outwards for sources of development. Since 1961, promoting Singapore as a magnet for foreign investment and talent has been a top priority of the government, from the establishment of the Singapore Economic Development Board (EDB) that year.

Since then, every day, EDB officers have engaged the captains of industry based in high-growth economies overseas, to try to persuade them to relocate business activities to Singapore, to grow the economy here, and to create jobs for the people. Incentives and other forms of assistance are always part of the offer.

WHAT'S NEW ABOUT FOCUSING ON A 'CULTURAL ECONOMY'

Drawing foreign investments is supported by efforts in sustaining the 'total infrastructure'—the entire environment in Singapore that would contribute towards making the country a favoured place for MNCs (along with other related organisations such as research and development units) to locate their activities, and for their

top executives and staff to relocate to live, work, and play.

That third component, 'play', has become more significant in recent years—and this is where the new 'cultural economy' comes in.

Boosting tourism has also been a key focus since 1972, when the Merlion⁵, together with a second statue of Sir Stamford Raffles⁶, was erected by the then Singapore Tourist Promotion Board, as part of major efforts to attract more visitors to Singapore. Tourism, however, has always been a 'supporting actor' as an economic driver, adding, at most, around four percent to Singapore's Gross Domestic Product (GDP),⁷ compared with some 20 percent from manufacturing.

What is new now, with this fresh focus on the 'cultural economy', is the elevation of arts and culture to centre stage as a facet of national reputation, and a driver of foreign revenue. This increasingly important source of investment from major cultural acts, as well as a segment of tourists who are primarily drawn to arts and culture, will play a greater role in Singapore's economy in the years to come.

This is a significant advance from earlier years, when arts and culture was seen, in some quarters, as a secondary concern for economic growth. This has changed now, in a world in which culture is a vital growth driver in itself, and it has also become key to differentiating a country in the relentless global contest for investment and talent.

Culture is always where national identity and belonging are

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being fostered, and where outsiders can see, and feel, the authenticity and character of a place. Hence, quite apart from the material and monetary gains of hosting mega-concerts, such big-name shows also have an impact on the host country's brand, which, in turn, is the fundamental basis for all other sources of economic growth.

One way to assess the lasting net impact of shows like Swift's on Singapore's country brand is by analysing it through the lens of hard and soft power. Deciding which location to include on a concert's tour itinerary, and for how many shows in each place, always depends on a mix of considerations of hard and soft power.

The concept of 'hard power', coined by Harvard Kennedy School professor Joseph Nye, Jr. more than two decades ago,⁸ refers to securing cooperation from others by using concrete, material incentives, such as, in this case, a concert location partially funding a show.

By contrast, 'soft power' is about earning support from

others through non-monetary, inherent attractions, such as a city's existing reputation as a culturally interesting place. If you already have a powerful brand, there is much less need to spend money to attract more investment. The world's top cities—London, New York, and Paris—are in this special league.

Concerning hard power, Singapore's advantages as an international entertainment hub are already well-known, including reliable state-of-the-art infrastructure, minimal traffic congestion, and exceptional public safety, in this context, especially for young women travelling alone to, and from, the concerts.

After the revelations about how Singapore became the only Southeast Asian stop for Swift's *The Eras Tour* concerts, one more of Singapore's hard power factors can now be added to the list: Proactive deal-making to secure top A-list shows, with commercial incentives funded with government backing added to the mix.

These added incentives are an additional facet of Singapore's hard power, but its soft power characteristics are clear, nonetheless.

TAYLOR SWIFT'S IMPACT ON SINGAPORE'S COUNTRY BRAND

As for soft power (always the less obvious dimension), Swift's concerts will win even more affinity for brand Singapore, for a few reasons.

First, many more positive impressions of the Lion City have been gained by the thousands of visiting 'Swifties' (the moniker for Swift's fans) from all over the world. They all exchanged friendship bracelets, took selfies, and sang their hearts out here with citizens, residents, and fellow tourists inside the National Stadium, outside, and elsewhere around the island. They also experienced more of Singapore during their stay—not just the facilities and infrastructure, but also the friendliness of the people they met, and the general vibes of the country.

In future, to build on these real-life connections and impressions, it would benefit the development of the homegrown arts scene to see more Singaporeans being included in similar A-list shows, such as Coldplay having Singapore singers Jasmine Sokko and Riley as opening acts in January 2024, and Ed Sheeran having JJ Lin perform with him onstage the following month.

The memories that audiences take away with them become visitor testimonials that will add to the international awareness

of Singapore as a diverse, cosmopolitan, open, and welcoming place for people of all ages to have wholesome fun.

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Second, Singapore has been, and will be, featured with these appealing country brand attributes countless times on mainstream and social media, amplified by the power of the Swifties' word of mouth. Singapore will be seen on many more TV and smartphone screens around the world, creating an effect similar to having scenes of the island nation as the backdrop for the annual Formula One night race events here, beamed and shared across the globe.

Third, as they say, even 'bad publicity' is publicity. Singapore appears to have been able to "shake off" (from the title of a Swift song) the few initial media attempts to suggest that the Republic's exclusive staging of Swift's concerts had stirred "bad blood" (the title of another Swift song) in what could have become an emerging diplomatic row with its regional neighbours.

Instead, this controversy, which some dubbed 'a storm in a tea cup', only sparked many more media headlines abroad, winning even more mindshare for Singapore. In fact, a survey of online media across Southeast Asia reveals very little rancour expressed, and instead, much more positive regard for Singapore's first-mover proactiveness to secure Swift's concerts for a longer run in the Republic. Some even dubbed Singapore's move "a masterclass in concert economics".⁹

A broader regional perspective could perhaps be highlighted more in future, where it can work commercially: Singapore playing the role of a regional gathering place for such acts in Southeast Asia, with room for spillover benefits of 'concert economics' for the rest of the region. For example, there could be joint marketing of Singapore tour packages to visitors from other continents that also include stopovers in other Southeast Asian countries.

Fourth, the media's highlighting of Swift's mother and grandparents having lived in 1960s Singapore,¹⁰ and Singapore being featured as a setting in Swift's music video for



her song entitled “marjorie” (a tribute to her grandmother),¹¹ adds to the awareness of Singapore’s longstanding appeal as a home away from home for MNC staff and international talents. This news about her grandparents was reported in Vietnam, Hong Kong, and elsewhere.

Swift’s grandfather, Robert Finlay, was a construction engineer. His move to Singapore for work was most probably facilitated in some way by EDB’s efforts to attract oil and manufacturing companies to relocate here. Till today, the sector is an anchor of Singapore’s success as an economy.

Meanwhile, Swift’s grandmother, Marjorie Finlay, is a reminder of Singapore’s pedigree as an arts hub. She was an accomplished opera singer who performed as soprano lead for five nights running in 1968 in the opera *The Bartered Bride* at the Victoria Theatre in Singapore.¹²

ONLY SOFT POWER CAN BE SUSTAINED IN THE LONG TERM

In essence, the magic of soft power is that its effects can work through the subconscious, and it can entice even pure spectators to begin with, but, very often, leads to far-reaching, enduring outcomes.

As a personal example, in 2022, I went to a community club to watch a few matches of the FIFA World Cup hosted by Qatar. My positive impressions of Qatar from the viewings prompted me, a few months later, to travel to Doha, the Qatari capital, where I enjoyed my visit so much that I have been an unpaid, unofficial brand ambassador of the city ever since, telling others about the place’s plus points.

Overall, from these Swift concerts in Singapore, there is one key country branding takeaway for the future: Nations applying hard power to boost their appeal

(to investors and singers alike) can usually achieve significant results in the short to medium term.

For example, everyone has, by now, probably heard of footballers like Cristiano Ronaldo moving to play in Saudi Arabia. Ronaldo is, in fact, just a prominent example of what has always been standard practice in the global competition for investment and talent.

All the big names in Singapore in the business sector and the arts—from appliance manufacturer Dyson setting up its global headquarters in 2022, to groundbreaking art exhibition company Art Stage that organised Singapore’s largest art fair Art Stage Singapore from 2011 to 2018—would have received state assistance, and some form of incentives.

But hard power is finite, and can do only so much. Only soft power can sustain the attractiveness of any place for the long term.

When his contract runs out, only the soft power—i.e., the intrinsic, intangible merits—of his present place of residence can entice Ronaldo to keep living there. Similarly, if Swift and her legions of Swifties had a great time in Singapore, they will be back for sure.

GOVERNMENTS ALWAYS HAVE A DUTY TO NURTURE HOMEGROWN TALENTS

But, even as the successful staging of acts like Swift’s concerts will boost Singapore’s soft power, developing Singapore as a cultural hub could also bring about unforeseen consequences that may need to be addressed, such as the ‘global versus local’ gap widening

further in Singapore’s arts and culture scene.

Governments can behave like the private sector, but they ultimately cannot forget that they also have a duty to act in the public’s best interest. As more resources and attention are channelled to wooing big, foreign acts like Swift that appeal to the masses and especially the youth demographic, one question that emerges is whether there will be, at the same time, added investment in homegrown arts and culture to help build Singapore’s soft power?

Even if few seemed to question the initial offering of incentives to Swift’s team to secure the exclusive shows for Singapore, queries may surface later about how the revenue earned from these shows could be re-invested to support the growth of Singapore’s own arts and culture.

As is true everywhere, even major arts players like the national galleries and symphony orchestras can stand only with state funding. Against pop culture, the small-scale, indigenous ‘vanishing trades’ of arts and culture—such as, say, Peranakan¹³ folk songs—would stand no chance at all of gaining national attention without some form of state assistance.

An insight from the world of tourism—and, more specifically, in mitigating over-tourism in places such as Venice—is that any promotional effort to attract tourists to any place can be sustainable only if there is no ‘collateral damage’ to the local infrastructure, and also, if the

domestic population can participate in that growth and derive some benefits from it.

Knowing Singapore, the country will, in future, surely come up with even more enterprising, inventive ways of stimulating growth for business and culture, and for culture as a business.

But the path forward will be best served by applying hard power always in tandem with also building up soft power. And soft power is best developed by investing in, and showcasing, the homegrown, in what is rooted in the place itself. **AM**



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For a list of endnotes to this article, please visit <https://tinyurl.com/5suahf42> or scan the QR code below.

