Creative imaginings : the production of aesthetic culture by choral music practitioners in Singapore

Mohamed Shahril Mohamed Salleh

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**NANYANG
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SINGAPORE

**CREATIVE IMAGININGS: THE
PRODUCTION OF AESTHETIC CULTURE BY
CHORAL MUSIC PRACTITIONERS IN
SINGAPORE**

MOHAMED SHAHRIL BIN MOHAMED SALLEH

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

2019

**Creative Imaginings: The Production of
Aesthetic Culture by Choral Music Practitioners
in Singapore**

School of Social Sciences

A thesis submitted to the Nanyang Technological University in
partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy

2019

Statement of Originality

I certify that all work submitted for this thesis is my original work. I declare that no other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement. Except where it is clearly stated that I have used some of this material elsewhere, this work has not been presented by me for assessment in any other institution or University. I certify that the data collected for this project are authentic and the investigations were conducted in accordance with the ethics policies and integrity standards of Nanyang Technological University and that the research data are presented honestly and without prejudice.

15/12/2019
Date	Mohamed Shahril Bin Mohamed Salleh

Supervisor Declaration Statement

I have reviewed the content of this thesis and to the best of my knowledge, it does not contain plagiarised materials. The presentation style is also consistent with what is expected of the degree awarded. To the best of my knowledge, the research and writing are those of the candidate except as acknowledged in the Author Attribution Statement. I confirm that the investigations were conducted in accordance with the ethics policies and integrity standards of Nanyang Technological University and that the research data are presented honestly and without prejudice.

[Input Date Here] 2 Dec 2019	[Input Signature Here] Teo You Yenn
Date	Associate Professor Teo You Yenn

Authorship Attribution Statement

This thesis contains material from **ONE** paper accepted at conferences in which I am listed as the sole author:

Parts of the content of Chapter 4 and Figure 4.2 is presented at:

Mohamed Salleh, Mohamed Shahril Bin. 2018. 'Divisi et Tutti: Networks & Strategies of Choral Musicians in Singapore'. Presented at the SHIFTING UNDERGROUNDS IN EAST AND SOUTHEAST ASIA Transformations and Declinations of Cultural Self-Expressions and Communities in Cityscape, October 26, Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore.

15/12/2019
Date	Mohamed Shahril Bin Mohamed Salleh

Dedication

I dedicate this work first and foremost to

Allah Subhanahu wa-ta'ala,

Most Merciful Creator and Author of my life.

In his Infinite Mercy and Wisdom, He has given me all the tools I need to succeed, and gifted me with agency, thought and inspiration to see this project done.

And to my Mother,

Shariffa Maimuna binte Syed Abdul Kader Alsagoff,

I can never imagine success in anything without your blessing and your presence.

In Memoriam

To the eternal memory of those who have gone before;

*my late grandmother **Makbulah binte Abdullah,**
and my late father, **Mohamed Salleh bin Sairi** -*

Their love has guided and shaped me to be the person that I am today.

And to my hall neighbour, supper buddy and friend,

Ding Zheng Yang
(died 21st Feb 2019)

*You left us too early, too soon,
and Meranti Hall 7th Floor will never be the same without you.*

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In all honesty, my journey in the last five years has not been easy. I have lost my dad in the first year of the programme. Soon after, my mum was diagnosed with stage 4 breast cancer. More often than not I felt terribly alone, and the demands of managing the expectations of the doctoral programme and managing as well as home and life outside school can be soul-crushing. It took an entire village to help me succeed, and I want to take this time to acknowledge them for helping me survive the journey.

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Abstract

This dissertation employs the case of choral music practitioners and their work in schools in relation to the Singapore Youth Festival to examine how the Singapore state rule, and how state and arts practitioner relations in Singapore affect the ways in which aesthetic culture is produced. Singapore's policies pertaining to the management of the arts are expansive and complex, ranging from how citizens are educated in the consumption of the arts to the ways in which arts content is managed via state institutions. I choose to focus on the everyday arts-making that is found in schools. More specifically, I examine the professional labour of choral music practitioners, who themselves are arts practitioners in their own right, in order to show how arts practitioners have allowed themselves and their arts to be governed by the state.

Combining analyses of interviews, site and participant observations, policy and media documents, as well as secondary scholarship on Singapore and the arts, this dissertation examines how tensions between the state and the arts practitioners are ongoing, and shows that the tensions which arise out of this relationship generate a "culture of arts practitioners" that is key to the proliferation of the arts practices carried out in schools in Singapore's schools. From the perspective of arts practitioners, policies have not been successful in turning Singapore into a veritable arts hub. Nonetheless, they have had important latent effects. Normative practices and values that are generated constitute the Singapore's arts practitioners as subjects, especially those who work for the state in schools. These subjects see themselves as part of a nation where the arts is a developmental strategy to become a Global City.

Despite misgivings about the state's approach and attitudes, arts practitioners perceive the state as employers, as well as a source of funding. The "culture of arts practitioners" consists of these practices, expectations and values that citizen subjects embody and which orients them to the needs of the state.

Against the statist literature that emphasizes the coercive powers of a top-down, bureaucratic state, the dissertation, on one hand, takes a more Foucauldian perspective that incorporates positionality, subjectivity and meaning. On the other hand, my thesis positions itself against the Foucauldian governmentality scholarship which insists that the state remains a dominant power in managing the minutiae of the lives of arts practitioners. Finally, my thesis goes beyond either of these approaches in showing that the production of culture is both a way of performing meaningful consent as practitioner-subjects, as well as to maintain their agency in the praxis of their craft and their own lives. Like state actions, the arts practitioners' consent is strategic, and depends on the state's effective provision of valued material and cultural goods.

List of Abbreviations

CPF	Central Provident Fund
EDB	Economic Development Board
GCE	General Certificate of Education
GST	Goods and Services Tax
HDB	Housing & Development Board
IRAS	Internal Revenue Authority of Singapore
iMDA	Infocomm Media Development Authority of Singapore
MCDS	Ministry of Community Development and Sports
MCYS	Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports
MCCY	Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth
MHA	Ministry of Home Affairs
MOE	Ministry of Education
MOM	Ministry of Manpower
MTI	Ministry of Trade and Industry
NAC	National Arts Council
NAC-AEP	National Arts Council Arts Education Programme
NHB	National Heritage Board
NTUC	National Trade Union Congress
PAP	People's Action Party
RCP (I,II,III)	Renaissance City Plans (I,II,III)
SYF	Singapore Youth Festival

CHAPTER ONE:

Arts Worlds as Developmental Strategy

1.1 – Introduction

In 2015, local playwright Haresh Sharma said the following in his acceptance speech for Singapore's Cultural Medallion award:

... [L]et's have faith in our artists. Let us not be judged by the decisions made in the past. Forum theatre was once banned. And then it was re-instated. Performance arts was once banned. Also re-instated. So, as we celebrate our artists today, let history guide us as we move to the future – together, as a community of artists, audience and policymakers. Let us all spare a thought for all the artists out there who want to do good – and doing good means being passionate, having a vision and maybe even challenging the status quo and sharing alternative views on life. Let us all not dismiss artists or artworks or plays or films because of fear or uncertainty; because of a lack of imagination; because of anxiety that people might complain or 'write-in'. And if someone does complain or write-in, then side us. *Side the artist* [emphasis mine]. Let us all stand up for the artist. Let us be the ally of the artist. The most fundamental frontier of change is the mind. If our mindsets can't change then there is very little hope for our attitudes to change. Our attitude towards censorship and regulation, our attitude towards openness and dialogue, our attitude towards risk-taking, and ultimately, our attitude towards the value of the artist in society (Anon 2015b).

'Side the artist' was his simple yet poignant message. He evoked the history of the terse relationship that arts practitioners have with the government. Sharma's speech was also timely, as the relationship between arts practitioners and the government had recently become more strained due to Infocomm Media Development Authority of Singapore's (iMDA) pushing for theatre and film content producers to rate their own works, which was read by the arts practitioners as a move to auto-regulate and self-sensor the arts. Sharma used the

examples of forum theatre and performance arts to illustrate the shift in how the state views towards the arts, where what was once disallowed eventually became acceptable in due time. Considering these shifting positions, Sharma asked his audiences to be an ally to arts practitioners and to reflect on the challenges faced by arts practitioners from the state's heavy-handed management of the arts, which includes the policing of the arts and its contents.

His speech summed up his personal view of how the relationship between the Singapore State and the arts continues to be riddled with tensions. This clarion call for advocacy and the state's sympathy would have been innocuous if not for the context in which the speech was delivered. The cultural medallion represents the Singapore State's highest honour for arts practitioners. The ceremony itself was held at the Istana, the official residence of the President of the Republic of Singapore. Members of the senior leadership of the state were present at the awards ceremony, and the message and tone of Sharma's speech did not seem to sit well with many of them (Jagdish 2017; Koh 2015a; Wee 2015).

Sharma's speech sparked a series of terse public exchanges between prominent arts practitioners and the senior management of the National Arts Council (NAC) of Singapore through both mainstream and social media (Gerard 2015). Another Cultural Medallion winner, theatre doyen Ong Keng Sen shared sentiments similar to Haresh Sharma's speech in a radio interview with Bharati Jagdish. He spoke about the daily limitations faced by arts practitioners and wondered if the state could allow more space for arts which that may not be directly "useful for society" (Jagdish 2015). In response to both the speech and the interview, Kathy Lai, who was then the CEO of the NAC, wrote an opinion

piece in the *Straits Times* about how the state has been increasingly supportive of the arts over the years. She wrote the following:

However, are things so egregious that artists are routinely denied their right to make art? I think most Singaporeans would say no. A look at our lively theatre scene - from satirical comedies to challenging experimental plays - suggests these protests are overstated (Lai 2015).

Her stand was to remind everyone that the Singapore government has embraced the arts through the years (Chan 2015; Lai 2015), and emphasized how the state had been very generous in providing public funding for the arts. The onus on providing public funding would be to ensure that each supported arts endeavour reflected the sensibilities of the state and to uphold the values espoused by the more conservative members of society. Furthermore, despite the state being very selective in awarding funding to artists and arts projects, she further clarified that the lack of funding should not stop arts practitioners from pursuing their artwork.

In the last 30 years, the state has devoted a lot of resources to develop the arts scene. According to the Renaissance City Plans III (RCP III) report by the then Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts (MICA, but now re-organized as MCCY),

MICA's average annual recurrent funding for arts and culture across 2003-2007 was about \$114 million. This does not include expenditure on capital development. A majority of this goes towards funding the operational budgets of NAC and NHB... The average annual funding from RCP I and II across FY2003-2007 was about \$12 million. This is embedded into the operating budgets of NAC and NHB, with NAC receiving about \$8 million and NHB \$4 million. RCP funding went directly into financial assistance to arts groups, as well as NAC and NHB programmes. (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts 2008:42)

A clearer overview of the monies spent by the Singapore government can be found below:

Year	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Arts and Heritage*	344.2	320.4	439.6	495.1	522.7	420.1	420.8
Cultural Matching Fund*	-	-	-	51.9	79.5	19.8	20.5
Total Funding for MCCY*	554	541.4	689.4	884	936.7	720	840.7
* Figures here are in units of one million Singapore Dollars (SGD).							

Table 1.1 – Singapore Government Funding on the Arts
Source: (Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth 2018:11)

Table 1.1 shows the total amount of government funding for the arts. The Ministry of Culture, Community and the Youth (MCCY) is the parent ministry for arts and culture in Singapore. Under their purview are various statutory boards that administrate state policies and initiatives for the arts and culture. Examples of such statutory boards include the National Arts Council (NAC) and the National Heritage Board (NHB). We can see that the amount of money, allocated to Arts and Heritage projects, is quite substantial — in the region of above \$300 million every year since 2011.

Many arts practitioners felt that the responses and statements given by Kathy Lai (as seen above) egregiously misrepresented the issues that they faced in the day to day practices of arts making. It has never been about whether artists are allowed to make arts in Singapore — many Singaporean arts practitioners are quite prolific in their output. In fact, since the late 1990s, it has never been a question of whether funding for the arts and culture in Singapore exists. It was during that period that the state reoriented itself and its developmental model to embrace the arts as a strategy to transform its economy. In Singapore, the state is the largest source of funding for arts practitioners. When the state has a monopoly

on how arts funding is disbursed, we can see how said funding is used as a medium for public imperatives which determine, and sometimes over-determine, the artistic outcomes (See also Nanda 2015).

The purpose of this preamble is to highlight the issues that foreground my own work. Scholarship on the arts in Singapore identify the tension between the state and the arts practitioners as coming from (1) the way the state polices content creation and sentiment expression, and (2) how the state imposes a narrative on the arts that is often contrary to the truths and tropes articulated by the arts practitioners through their works (Chong 2011; Wee 2016; Wong 2012). More explicitly, the tension between the two is centred on the ownership and control over the production of the arts. My thesis builds upon two aspects of the discourse of these scholarly works: The first being that the tension between the state and arts practitioners is long drawn, and the second being that the tensions that are borne out of the relationship between the state and arts practitioner is not static and evolves as both the state and arts practitioners evolve over time. This evolution on the part of the state is deeply anchored by the nation's developmental model, and as the developmental model changes, so too does its attitude towards the arts. Knowing that this attitude towards the arts has improved over the years, as briefly mentioned in both quotes above, a sociological puzzle emerges. This puzzle is encapsulated by two questions: If the state has indeed adopted a more equitable attitude towards the arts over the years, are there still tensions in the relationship between the Singapore state and arts practitioners? If there are indeed tensions between the state and arts practitioners, what do these tensions look like?

In order to address this puzzle, this study examines Singaporean choral music practitioners and their artistic labour in schools in order to make sense of why the tension between the state and arts practitioners continues to develop despite the state improving the conditions for arts creation in Singapore. I use choral music practitioners as a case study to examine how they, as arts practitioners, make sense of their work in relation to the state. By doing so, I show how choral music practitioners construct their perceptions of this relationship from their lived experiences of being arts practitioners in Singapore, which in turn is shaped by the ways the state manages and utilises the arts. I use my analysis of these examples to show how the relationship between the state and arts practitioner shapes the formation and production of Singapore's aesthetic culture, and how this relationship, as perceived and performed by arts practitioners, serves as the source of tensions.

Scholarly works on the development of the arts in Singapore suggest that the state has tremendous control over the production of the arts and aesthetic culture. Some scholars have argued that Singaporean arts practitioners experience state control in multiple dimensions, ranging from the way state policies regulate the production of arts to the ways in which state policies shape and influence citizens' access to the arts (Chong 2010; Wee 2016). Scholars also suggest that the state shapes and manages both content and public sentiment of the arts via two primary instruments of control: The first being the coercive powers of the state, namely the use of censorship and the criminalization of some forms of artistic expression (Chong 2011; Koh 2015b; Tan 2013a). The second entails more 'benevolent' policies and the distribution of state resources in the form of grants, scholarships, subsidies, and employment (Ho 2017; Koh 2015b;

Lai 2015; Nanda 2015; National Arts Council 2016). These ‘benevolent’ policies also encompass educational imperatives and school policies, and I choose the policies pertaining to the Singapore Youth Festival (SYF) and its impact on schools as the primary focus of my thesis.

While scholars have focused on the instruments of governance and its effect on the production of the arts and aesthetic culture in Singapore, their works do not account for the multiple and often conflicting cultural practices, mindsets, and identities that arts practitioners deal with on a daily basis. I depart from the trajectories of other scholarly works by shifting the focus away from state enactments and positioning, instead of focusing on the subjective experiences of choral music practitioners. This shift of focus is imperative, as it allows us to better understand the nature of the ongoing tensions between the state and arts practitioners, which in turn brings to light the contrariness between the state’s need for control and the arts practitioners’ resentment towards its control over artistic production.

In the course of my research, I discovered that there is another aspect of the state and arts practitioner relationship that is underserved by previous scholarship, which is that of the state as employer and arts practitioners as employees. This relationship is situated in the lacuna of the discourse of tension – scholarly works have often focused on professional arts practices, organizations and individuals who work independently from the state but yet are recipients of state funding and resources. Yet, the bulk of state employment is situated in schools as arts teachers and arts instructors, and schools in Singapore are directly under the purview of the Ministry of Education (MOE). The artistic work of these individuals is focused on recreational and educational arts-making by students,

which is an “everyday” practice opposed to the professional arts companies and arts professionals whose artistic works are meant for public consumption.

Thus, my work, for good reason, focuses on choral music practitioners who are directly employed by the state through schools and institutions. I examine their work in schools to better understand the ongoing tensions that exist between arts practitioners and the state. Such choral music practitioners are doubly subjected by the state in two ways: Firstly, they are still beholden to abide by overarching state policies pertaining to arts content and performance. Secondly, and more interestingly, they are subjected to the needs of the schools that employ them. It is important to note that these schools are themselves subjected to state management under the auspices of MOE and are heavily regulated by the state.

Like other arts practitioners employed by the state, these choral music practitioners deliberate and enact their own agency under state-determined conditions. I look at how choral music practitioners carry out their practices as Co-Curricular instructors in local schools. The central focus of the work they do in schools is the preparation and execution of the bi-annual Singapore Youth Festival (SYF) competition, a platform organized by MOE to assess the performance quality of school choirs. The ways choral music practitioners describe their work in schools and the SYF allows us to see where and how these tensions manifest in the course of their work. There is a heterogeneous form to these manifestations; the types and intensity of these tensions are determined by the subjectivity of both the choral music practitioner as well as the schools in which they work. I have also discovered that these tensions provide the impetus for choral music practitioners to produce a series of cultural practices, mindsets,

and identities: from the ways they understand their histories, the way they socially group themselves, the way they make professional choices, and the way they make artistic decisions. These experiences collectively become part of an individual's repertory of viable strategies in dealing with the uncertainties of being employed by the schools, and by extension, in dealing with the tensions with the state. I argue that the ways in which arts practitioners form their perception of their relationship with the state from their work in schools and the SYF subsequently informs their day-to-day decisions, aesthetic choices, and ultimately how they allow themselves and their arts practices to be governed by the state.

Why does it matter that these tensions exist? They have implications for cultural formation and production, which subsequently informs us of how and why arts practitioners negotiate the daily challenges they face in life. I focus on two aspects of culture. The first refers to a set of attitudes and behaviours that are produced from the intersection between human action and structural constraint. These attitudes and behaviours are also framed by the power relations between the dominant and the subordinate in the course of everyday instances. The second refers to aesthetic practices that are embodied by artefacts, forms, and conventions in relation to aesthetic taste and consumption. I am interested in how the former aspect of culture affects the latter; where aesthetic choices become incorporated as part of the strategies used to deal with their daily work for the state. By examining the work of choral music practitioners in schools and in relation to the SYF competition, I explore how the production of culture by these choral music practitioners simultaneously determines and is determined by their relationship with the state; as individuals who, in their everyday production of

meanings and practices conform yet resist, reproduce yet seek to transform and ameliorate their daily lived experiences.

1.2 – Framing the Research Problem

What is aesthetic culture? We know scholarly works directs our understanding of the aesthetics towards not just objects of beauty, but also of social practices and behaviours that represent the very idea of how we make meaning out of our identities and our place in the world (See Becker 1982; Dissanayake 1992; Fine 1992; Todd 1981). Semantically, it is easy to take apart *aesthetics* and *culture* into two disparate but complimentary aspects, where the idea of aesthetics is subsumed under the larger umbrella of culture. The combined meaning deduced from these two words would subsequently be the culture of people who produce aesthetic products or take part in aesthetic labour.

Yet, according to Lloyd (1985),

... aesthetic culture is not to be understood merely as the cultivation of a taste for the beautiful, but as invoking a concept of man in general as producer of form, and as producer, in particular, of the forms of himself through an aesthetic labour which transcends specific economic or political determinants. That is to say, aesthetics posits the idea of the universal formal identity of the human (p.138-9)

While I largely agree to the premise of his definition of aesthetic culture, in my work, this idea of transcending “specific economic and political determinants” is problematic. I found that in Singapore the arts have been subordinated under the auspices of the pursuit of Singapore’s developmental model. Simply put, the economic and political presence and resources put up by the Singapore state not just *allows* the arts to exist, it is in many ways the *significant driver* for the arts

to be cultivated and produced in Singapore.¹ The state of the arts in Singapore is not divorced from the material and political reality of its aesthetic workers, nor does this diminish the aesthetic value of the cultural form that is produced under such authoritarian regime. Hence, my study refers to aesthetic culture as the practices of people who perform artistic labour and produce aesthetic products.

Whilst scholarly works have oriented the study of the arts in Singapore in the context of state enactments, we have yet to see how the aesthetic culture of the Singaporean arts practitioners is examined sociologically. I refer to culture as collection of attitudes and behaviours that a person draws upon when negotiating both daily decisions as well as unexpected challenges. This definition of culture is informed by Swidler (1986)'s "strategies of action". She suggests "the image of culture as a toolkit of symbols, rituals and world-views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems" (Swidler 1986:273). I seek to uncover what these "strategies of action" are for Singaporean arts practitioners – how these toolkits are formed and how they are employed by arts practitioners when dealing with issues brought about by the demands of the state. I describe and convey how arts practitioners themselves see and describe the "cultural components that are used to construct strategies of action" (Swidler 1986:273) and how this imagining can be understood through actions, activities and textual documentation. She refers to cultural components as the common body of knowledge, attitudes and meanings or "toolkits" that category members avail themselves to in order to deal with challenges they face in life (Swidler 1986:273).

¹ I discuss the relationship between the Arts and Singapore's developmental model in Chapters 2 and 3.

Turning to the study of Singaporean aesthetic culture, I look for answers to the puzzle of what the current tensions are, as well as how and why Singaporean arts practitioners continue to be at odds with the state. For this, I find culture to be a useful subject of analysis because culture provides the impetus for social action (Swidler 1986), and it produces arts forms and genres (Becker 1982; Dissanayake 1992). There have been attempts to study the relationship of the first form with the second, but these studies are more focused on explaining how the consumption of arts is facilitated by the structural relationship amongst different strata of society (See Becker 1982; Bourdieu 2000; Swidler 2010; Todd 1981). The usage of culture as a lens helps us to reveal how the repertory of actions, attitudes, strategies and interventions are in transition or are more dynamic, ever shifting and in the state of constant negotiation against the backdrop of uncertainty of dealing with everyday challenges and issues.

As a medium to explain the ongoing tensions between the state and arts practitioners, culture helps the arts practitioners mediate their perceptions to their lived reality which, in turn, orientates them to make decisions and take action. Their lived reality, in this case, is their work and the ways they enact their artistic labour in schools. Hence, I am interested in how individual Singaporean arts practitioners may draw on a *cultural toolkit* in relation to solving problems in their lived reality. I am also interested in seeing how much of this cultural toolkit will survive, persist, and change in moments of uncertainty.

In fact, a broad argument I make throughout my thesis is that I frame the policy changes and consequent structural changes as what Swidler constitutes as moments of uncertainty. I employ the concept of the cultural toolkit from Swidler (1986)'s work, where she provides a useful analytical framework for which to

study such moments of uncertainty. She terms these moments of uncertainty as “social transformation events”, and posits that

Periods of social transformation seem to provide simultaneously the best and the worst evidences for culture's influence on social action. Established cultural ends are jettisoned with apparent ease, and yet explicitly articulated cultural models, such as ideologies, play a powerful role in organizing social life. (Swidler 1986:278)

Since my puzzle concerns the ongoing tensions between the state and arts practitioners, I also need to address why arts practitioners have the perception that the state continues to put up barriers for arts-making despite the state's efforts in ameliorating the arts. These tensions exist within and across instances, and here I posit that the collectively these instances are said moments of uncertainty for the art practitioners in Singapore.

Existing scholarship suggest that the tensions between the state and arts practitioners exist despite the state being more supportive of the arts over the recent years (Chong 2010a; Tan 2013a, 2015; Tan and Hoe 2015). This is mainly due to arts practitioners being unconvinced that the state enactments are good for the arts.² They know that while the state has articulated strong support for the arts, the state has also clearly and unapologetically articulated that the arts serves merely as a strategy for nation-building at an ideological as well as an economic dimension (Chong 2010a; Tan 2013a, 2015; Tan and Hoe 2015). Furthermore, despite the differences in genres and forms mentioned earlier, the arts in its entirety is governed under the same regime and is subjected to similar instruments of rule. Even then, not all arts forms and genres are treated the same. Some arts forms such as theatre are subjected to stringent checks and requiring

² An example of these tensions include the Singapore Government's push towards having arts groups and practitioners furnishing their own audience advisory ratings in 2014. The resulting sentiments towards this government initiative can be seen in the following video: [youtube.com/watch?v=JnOw2cMri3E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnOw2cMri3E)

several permits whilst others, such as choral music, have very little oversight requirements.

Other instances of these moments of uncertainty are documented in scholarly works that focused mainly on theatre in Singapore (See Chong 2011, and also; Lee 2007b; Tan 2013b; Wong 2012). These scholarly works seem to suggest these tensions to be the result of moments in time where arts practitioners experienced a series of impositions and cultural disruptions brought about by the state through regulation and control. Evidence for these can be found within the history of the relationship between the Singapore state and the arts practitioners, which I will present and elaborate later in Chapter Three. Hence, I look at how arts forms and their practices are affected by changes in state policies so that we can see the relationship between culture and state enactments.

Finally, in order to find answers to my study, I set out to discover the ways in which these arts practitioners perceive their own relationships with the state, and if these relationships have evolved after the changes to the social and educational policies related to the arts were implemented. Knowing how arts practitioners perceive their relationship to the state sets the tone in which they interpret the rationales of state actions or enactments. The ways in which they perceive their own relationship with the state are also reflective of their own subjective understanding of the way things are with their work, especially when they deal with their work in government schools. This subjective understanding may not necessarily be reflective of the objective reality in which schools and the state operate, but rather provides each arts practitioner with a way of interpreting the actions and attitudes they observe in school and state actors. These relationships operate on the individual level between them and the state as

employer, as well as a collective level between all choral music practitioners and the state. I want to know how these perceptions inform arts practitioners of the ways in which they make life choices and aesthetic decisions. I thus look at how individuals construct meaning towards their notion of individual and collective agency, and I examine how aesthetic culture, for them, embodies the choices, decisions, and strategies for choral music practitioners.

1.3 – Positionality and Research considerations

My reading of the research problem, and the ways in which I sought to find answers to them, is deeply ingrained in my positionality as both a researcher and an arts practitioner. Coghlan and Brydon-Mille (2014) suggests that positionality is indicative of the researcher's position in relation to the subjects of study vis-à-vis "the social and political context" of the field (p. 2). For Corlett and Mavin (2018), positionality frames the ways in which a researcher understands and thinks about his or her position within the field through the lens of roles or functions, identity and power relations. More importantly, articulating these ways of understanding and thinking allows my readers to contextualise my voice as a researcher and to better explain how the puzzle is understood by me. Both these works suggest exercising self-reflexivity, where as a researcher I would need to engage "in self-referential analysis to understand how biography, place and the positioning of self and others shape the research process" (Corlett and Mavin 2018:12; see also Coghlan and Brydon-Miller 2014)

Thus, here I take this opportunity to acknowledge my own positionality, and how it informs and affects the ways in which I carry out this study. I begin with a summary of my own lived experiences, which are as follows: I am a

classically trained musician, where I read music at both the undergraduate and post graduate levels. My specialisation is in choral and orchestral conducting. Prior to my doctoral candidature, I was an Education Officer with the Ministry of Education (MOE). As a music graduate, I was assigned to teach examinable and non-examinable Music curriculum. I later held leadership positions in the schools where I was posted; my primary role was to oversee both the curricular and the co-curricular visual and performing arts programmes and organizations in school. Whilst I had very little opportunities to practice choral music making in my tenure within MOE, I spend my weekends performing the role of the artistic director of a local community choir. I thus approach this study from an intersection of being both a sociological researcher and that of an arts practitioner.

My situated knowledge, as argued by Haraway (1988), positions me as an insider within the choral music scene. This poses a set of both opportunities and challenges for me. On one hand, as I reflected on the puzzle from this positionality, I realised I embody a substantial amount of contextualised knowledge about arts making in schools, and especially the professional lives of choral music practitioners. My background and experiences not only gave me greater insight towards the nuances of the scene, but also provided channels for insider access and information which other ethnographers would not necessarily and readily have. I can also use this contextualised knowledge to identify and explain how the overarching culture of arts practitioners orientates the perceptions and subsequent performativity of the arts practitioner and state relationship. My engagement with current scholarship made me realise that the available existing studies do not engage with or acknowledge such contextualised

knowledge. I found that many of these studies forefront state enactments and policies and engage from the angle of the arts being a vehicle for political and ideological engagement.

On the other hand, I acknowledge that my position is privileged, and that there are differences in intersectionality between myself and that of the arts practitioners who are of interest to my study. I am aware that these differences need to be acknowledged and be taken into consideration as I go about doing my research. More explicitly, my past experiences and roles situate me within the sites of authority and power in relation to many of these arts practitioners who work for schools and state institutions. This is potentially problematic in two ways. Firstly, I do not have similar subjective experiences as most of my informants. This makes me cautious about making any presumptions on how the puzzle of the ongoing tensions between the state and arts practitioners plays out in their lived reality. Secondly, because of the power differentials, both perceived and actualised, between myself and most of my potential informants, my informants themselves have an imagination or perception of who I am, and by extension, whose interests I represent. I needed to clarify that I am most interested in articulating their voice in relation to the puzzle, rather than the interests of the institutions I formerly and currently represent.

Keeping my positionality in mind, I foreground the perceptions of arts practitioners in relation to the experiences of their lived realities that are beholden to the limitations produced by the state in my work. Whilst each artform doubles as sites of different situated knowledge and perspectives, they also exist in the same socio-political space that is produced and regulated by the state. At this chapter's introduction, I highlighted that the state claims that it has made

significant attempts to improve the conditions for arts making in Singapore since the 2000s, more specifically through the enactment of the RCP. Yet, as exemplified by both Haresh Sharma's speech and Ong Keng Sen's interview responses, arts practitioners do not believe that this is the case. My puzzle deals with the contradiction between the two positions. In order to find out the reasons for why the Singapore state and arts practitioner relations have become the way they are over the years; I need to first establish how arts practitioners perceive their own individual and collective relationship with the state. The relationship between arts practitioners and the state is where interactions and meaning making occurs. Consequently, I reason that the way these relationships are perceived can show us the discrepancy between what is done by the state, and what is experienced by arts practitioners.

Secondly, I need to show how these perceptions inform them in making day-to-day mundane life decisions, aesthetic choices, and ultimately how they allow themselves and their arts to be governed. These decisions and subsequent actions reveal their true perceptions of their own relationship with the state, as opposed to what and how they describe their relationship earlier. During my fieldwork, I initially had some difficulty in trying to make links between what was said by my informants and what was happening in terms of changes to the SYF policies made by MOE. In part, there is a discrepancy between what they think is the larger picture of what the state is trying to do in terms of making the arts flourish, versus what they see the state is actually doing through the enactment of policies and policy changes. In this, I am informed by the works of Cerulo (2014) and DiMaggio (2014), which acknowledges that there is a gap between what informants speak or claim to do and what they actually do.

Informants may not necessarily lie, but rather offer perspectives that are true in the context of their own situated positionality – what is true for them may not necessarily be true to others. Hence, by analysing the actions and activities of my informants, I gain a better understanding of what they meant to say.

In finding out what the tensions between the state and arts practitioners are, I first examine the arts practitioners' perceptions of their relationship with the state. That my work deals with the *perception* that arts practitioners have of the state and their relationship with the state needs further explanation. These perceptions are constructed from their own lived experiences of working in schools and institutions, as well as the tropes within which they communicate and share with one another. I have discovered that my subjects often conflate the schools, institutions, and even the government as the state. This also requires further elaboration. To think of the government and the organizations it controls as a totality is reductionist; the state is a poly-valent entity that is comprised of multiple actors and institutions working organically to reproduce the status quo. However, to my informants, the government's presence, and the control it has over the institutions they work with, is seamless and pervasive. Furthermore, since my focus is on the perceptions of arts practitioners, what I am most interested in here is how these perceptions provide arts practitioners with a subjective understanding of the state and its desires. Summarily, this subjective understanding is by no means a comprehensive, or even accurate, reflection of the state but allows us to better understand how this perception informs arts practitioners of the choices and strategies available to them. Hence, I forefront interviews primarily to gain an understanding of the boundaries of the arts world of choral music and the lived reality of its practitioners.

1.4 – Field and Subject selection: Using Choral music as a case for the Arts

In finding a suitable case for my study, I am aware that there is already considerable work showing that the ways the Singapore state governs the arts matter in the production and maintenance of the ‘high’ arts scene in Singapore (For examples, see Chang 2000, 2016; Chang and Lee 2003; Cho, Duong, and Nasution 2016; Chong 2010, 2011, 2014, 2018; Koh 1989; Kong 2000, 2009, 2012; Tan 2013; Wee 2010, 2016; Wong 2012). Yet, we know relatively little of how these state enactments affect “everyday” arts making, especially those that happen at home and in schools. The few empirical works done by scholars such as Chong (2010b, 2017) as well as Chua and Lim (2015) focus on the effectiveness of arts programmes, but not on how the arts practitioners deal with and negotiate school and educational policies. This presents a lacuna in the scholarship of the arts in Singapore, which my work seeks to contribute.

This concept of “everyday” arts making needs further elaboration. Scholars such as Bourdieu (2000), Fiske (1994) and Hall (2013) do note that the consumption of cultural products (i.e. visual arts and performances) as a cultural practice has certain class and ethnicity significances, and the state does employ culture as the means to create a desirable citizenry. In Singapore, the availability of the arts is also curated by the state through the auspices of both the arts institutions (under the banner of the Ministry of Culture, Community and the Youth) and as well as the Ministry of Education. These mass offerings are calibrated to ensure every citizen’s opportunity to participate in arts consumption (i.e. watching a concert at subsidized rates as a student, pioneer generation [senior] discounts for shows, free open-air performances, etc). That said, some

class and ethnic groups already have habits of consumption that are not cultivated by the state.

As mentioned in the opening vignette, professional arts practitioners have articulated why they are presently frustrated and discontented with the state: the state continues to police them not only in terms of artistic content but the ways in which they behave and express themselves. Furthermore, these tensions are usually present in spaces which host the public's consumption of the arts. All these issues are now framed by the state's ambitious plans to utilize the arts to transform Singapore into a successful global city, which falls under the auspices of the *Renaissance City Plans* (RCP) policy cluster. While the promise of the RCP is that Singapore would experience growth and further developments for the arts sector, arts practitioners believe that this growth does little to benefit local artists and arts groups.

For me, the empirical gap that emerges from these scholarly works comes from a disjunction of viewpoints and purposes. On one hand, while the state has rolled out policies that are targeted at developing the arts as an industry sector, the majority of these enactments do not directly affect professional artists and arts group. Instead, these enactments are directed towards building infrastructures and educational programmes targeted to the general public – especially students – with the view of preparing them for the future creative economy. The state also makes clear that arts censorship is still relevant in this current phase of the developmental model, where state-funded arts should reflect the sensibilities of the society (Chan 2015; Lai 2015). On the other hand, the resentment from arts practitioners is largely guided by a history of politically motivated state-enacted sanctions as well as their own experiences in dealings with actors who represent

state bodies. Their subjective focus is on these inter-individual experiences, rather than the ways in which the new policies and policy changes are enacted on them and the arts. Furthermore, arts practitioners are subjected to a similar group of policies and imperatives, with a few variations across genres.

From here, I see my puzzle in the lacuna of these scholarly works, particularly in these three issues; (1) that I should look at the arts practitioners dealing with the ‘everyday’ arts in schools to find what is the extent of these resentments and frustration that are embodied by arts practitioners in totality, (2) that I need to look at a type of relationship that can be observed and interrogated through everyday actions and cultural forms as opposed to the historical narrative brought about from the perceived dichotomy between the state as ruler and arts practitioners as subjects, and (3) that I need to look at a case that exists in a site where these new arts-related policies and policy changes occur and are enacted, and where both the state and the arts practitioners are present and represented by actors within that site.

For me, my positionality informs me that the choice of choral music and choral music practitioners as a case satisfies these three criteria. As both a researcher and an arts practitioner, I am aware that whilst choral music in Singapore exists within its own art-world and ecosystem, it is also historically and sociologically linked to the development of the larger arts scene and its relationship with the state. Since I endeavoured to make a sociological study of how state policies, especially those relating to the RCP and the management of the arts in Singapore inform arts practitioners of their relationship with the state, I choose a specific set of policies that oversee the SYF and how it plays out in the lives of choral music practitioners. I recognize that the SYF and the policies

that govern it play a crucial role in the development of the arts in schools. The SYF is the main impetus for schools to hire arts practitioners. The SYF itself is regulated by MOE through school and educational policies, and these policies have undergone many adjustments since its inception in the 1960s.

Instances of these changes to the SYF policies provide us with a good opportunity to discover how they affect arts practitioners and state relations, and how this subsequently influences the arts practitioners' production of the cultural toolkit. Swidler (1986) suggests that culture provides a sense of continuity for the individual. She suggests that continuity, where our understanding of culture is concerned, provides a sense of stability, especially when dealing with a spectrum of changes in a person's life. Yet, disruptions do occur in various magnitudes, and some of these disruptions may inevitably alter the ways in which a person views life, and how they approach things correspondingly.

Looking at choral music practitioners and their work in schools gives us a vantage point of what this relationship looks like on the ground, more specifically, from the perspective of artists working in school settings. I draw from sociological insights and pay attention to how these choral music practitioners imagine the state, how they respond, what their worldviews are, and what strategies they draw on. This organic process of processing meaning-making, collecting strategies and the selection of concrete actions constitutes the culture of arts practitioners – a dialectic construct that comes out of their relationship with the state and the subsequent tensions that they experience in the work.

While the choral music practitioner's work in schools may seem highly localised and divorced from the subjectivity experienced by 'high' arts

practitioners – these being exemplified by individuals such as Haresh Sharma and Ong Keng Sen whose works have a publicness that consequently undergoes intense scrutiny by the state agencies – the crux of my work engages and deals with the relationship between the arts practitioners and the state situated in work-labour rather than the overt tropes of the ruled and the ruler.³ Hence, the artistic labour provided to schools is where I locate the nexus of tensions and negotiations in the specificity of employer-employee relations.

I also note that despite each school having autonomous control of how they want to achieve their self-determined goals, the Singaporean education system, which covers curriculum, operations and administration, is highly regulated by MOE. Everyone within the system, which includes arts practitioners and the school stakeholders, are beholden to comply with the oversight by the state through MOE's policies and procedures. Following the logic of this framing, the cultural form is the outcome of the negotiation between the cultural producer and the audiences, which in this case would be the choral music practitioners and school stakeholders respectively. The syntax used in the negotiation process will reflect their respective perceptions of what the state is, and what is acceptable or unacceptable by the state rather than an explicit directive from the state. Furthermore, since each school has the autonomy to determine their own institutional goals, there is a need to re-examine the ways we understand how arts practitioners come to terms and deal with the multiple

³ On this point, I further clarify that I am in no way suggesting nor insinuating that the aesthetic quality of the artistic output by arts practitioners in school is by any means lesser or lower than those of 'high' arts practitioners. In fact, there is a fluidity in how and where the artistic endeavours of arts practitioners are being performed and consumed. An example of this would be Haresh Sharma's play *Off-Centre*, a theatrical work that was first a commissioned public performance that became a prescribed text for GCE 'O' Level English Literature. Conversely, some of the local schools' performing arts CCAs have represented the country and performed in many high-profile occasions and international arts festivals.

and often-conflicting cultural practices, mindsets and identities they face daily when working in different schools. These differences are determined by the subjectivity of the schools that employ them. In later chapters in my dissertation, I show how some schools have more resources to call upon than others and would subsequently have different ways to pursue their own goals whilst still being compliant to MOE's oversight requirements. This heterogeneity of different institutional goals and practices requires individuals to be able to create, collect and maintain a vast array of strategies of action that they can use interchangeably as and when needed.

I mentioned earlier in this section that 'everyday' arts making can be found within the boundaries of education, leisure, and social settings. Since we can find arts practitioners being employed for facilitating arts making in schools, my case thus fits the first point. On the second point, while the term "arts practitioners" is broadly defined as people who participate in arts making in a professional capacity, my case refers to a specific subset of arts practitioners who are employed by the state through schools as Co-Curricular Activity (CCA) instructors. I made this distinction because they are hired by the schools to make arts, which in this instance is choral music as well as to teach the students the necessary skills to perform and produce art. Hence, the relationship between the state and arts practitioners is more explicit, which is that of employer and employee. In relation to point three above, schools and CCAs are sites where many arts-related policies and policy changes under the auspices of the RCP are enacted. Furthermore, as mentioned in the previous section, school leaders, administrators and teachers are considered part of MOE's bureaucratic machinery, which makes them suitable proxies for the state. Thus, CCAs in

schools fits the final criterion. Hence, for the purposes of my thesis, I look at arts practitioners who are employed directly by schools as CCA instructors.

The scholarly work of Gerring and Cojocaru (2015) suggests that selecting an appropriate case for my puzzle needs to fulfil three criteria: (1) that the case “can be explored in-depth” (p.2), (2) the case allows me as the researcher to adopt diverse styles of evidence, and (3) the case has the capacity to be relatable to a broader population, albeit in a manner that is not necessarily perfect. This meant that I needed to select a group amongst the CCAs that practices an arts form that is prevalent across the boundaries of ‘everyday’ arts making. This idea of prevalence is important, for prevalence allows for a wider sampling pool of informants and ethnographic data sources across various geographical and socio-economic settings within Singapore, which aligns to both points one and two above.

Of all the performing arts offered in schools, I found choral music and choirs to be a good fit for this description. Most schools would have at least three different performing arts groups. Of all the performing arts groups that exist in schools, choirs are the most pervasive. In 2017, there were a total of 364 primary and secondary schools, pre-universities, and universities in Singapore (Ministry of Education 2018c). Of these institutions, 271 of them have choirs listed as a co-curricular activity within their schools (Ministry of Education 2018d).

One of the reasons why choirs are quite prevalent is because most choirs do not require their members to have prior musical training or additional skills other than the baseline ability to be able to sing on pitch and carry a melody. Secondly, the practice and performance of choral music itself do not require additional musical instruments or specialised tools. One notable exception would

be the use of an accompanying instrument such as a piano. When compared to other performing arts groups like theatre or dance, choirs are less expensive to maintain in terms of operational cost. The other ensembles require more funding for material requirements such as instruments, props, and costumes. This is why many school leaders and administrators choose to establish and maintain choirs for their schools (Ministry of Education 2018d; Sim and Ong 2014).

Evidently, choral music also has a large presence outside the jurisdiction of schools and MOE. This presence encompasses community choirs, school alumni choirs, choirs affiliated to religious institutions and movements, as well as choirs that form as the odd interest groups. Many of their conductors are also CCA instructors, who use these choirs to extend their craft. These choirs rely on various channels of funding; most work on a self-sustaining model of membership subscriptions and gigs. The state is also the largest source of funding for the arts in the form of grants. Like every other performing arts group, any choir not related to a religious institution can apply for grants through state bodies such as the National Arts Council (NAC) and the National Heritage Board (NHB) in order to fund their artistic endeavours. Indeed, many choral music practitioners have benefited from state funding (National Arts Council 2016).⁴

Using choral music as a case provides an opportunity to study an aspect of the state and arts practitioner relationship that is removed from the usual ideological tensions embedded in other arts forms such as theatre and literary

⁴ On that note, the ways community choirs deal with other state bodies situate the state and arts practitioner interactions that are outside the specific instances of employer and employee relations. Yet, many of these community choirs also have symbiotic relationships with the school choir ecosystem. Examining this relationship between school and community choirs allows us to (1) have a more textured insight towards how culture produced within the context of schools is practiced and applied in the community-based choral music making setting, and (2) have a deeper understanding of the relationships form amongst choral music practitioners themselves.

arts. In fact, I note that choral music has a preferential relationship with the Singapore state. This preferential relationship creates an opportunity for me to examine the veracity of my puzzle—that even despite this preferential relationship, its practitioners still perceive and experience issues and tensions with the state. When compared to other arts forms such as theatre and popular music, choral music has been given a more privileged position. Under the auspices of the Public Entertainments Act (Chapter 257), most of these arts forms require Public Entertainment License Unit (PELU) permits issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs. Yet under the Public Entertainments and Meetings (Classification of Arts Entertainments) (Exemption) Order 2005, the Schedule explicitly states that “Performances of classical music of ethnic origin, choral music, jazz music, ‘Dondang Sayang’ and ‘Dikir Barat’” are exempted from needing a PELU license”.⁵

This privileged relationship with the Singapore state is predicated on two aspects of the arts form. Firstly, I mentioned earlier there is a lower participation barrier for choral music when compared to other arts forms. Secondly, I mentioned earlier that the low personal economic cost for participation and ease of logistics facilitates mass participation. State actors, especially those within MOE, know that choral music, while not necessarily popular, is easy for anyone to participate. For these state actors, the potentiality for the arts form as a medium for national identity formation is something that needs to be harnessed. A notable example of this can be seen through the mass choir presented at every National Day Parade—a most visible and audible statement by the state in how the arts

⁵ The statutes can be found online at the Singapore Statutes Online page at the following link: <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/SL/PEA1958-S319-2005?DocDate=20190830>

form is used to evoke national identity and belonging (Chong 2010a, 2010b; Tay 1989).

Knowing choral music's privileged relationship with the Singapore state allows us to anticipate the dynamics between choral music practitioners and the state. Some arts forms, especially in theatre and literary arts are often construed as mediums of politicisation. This then makes the state particularly wary of arts forms, and this results in additional policing in terms of content through permits and censorship. In the case of choral music, the arts form is seen as benign and thus enjoys a more relaxed and privileged relationship with the state. Consequently, this primes choral music as a good case to examine if there are other reasons why my puzzle exists. Relating this back to my puzzle, where the state and arts practitioners are somewhat at odds with one another, we can surmise that if these tensions, where choral music is concerned, do exist, it is not due to the state's bias towards the cultural form.

Hence, I reiterate that choral music makes a good case for my thesis due to its pervasiveness within Singapore, especially in schools. The choice of choral music in Singapore illustrates and illuminates the larger theme because it constitutes an important variant in which arts or arts practice is closely tied to, in effect, state employment and state cultural policies cascade down into the educational spheres, and into various kinds of schools. This is translated into many choral music practitioners being employed by schools, which gives us more opportunities to explore the employer-employee relationship that I seek to explain in my work. By looking at choral music practitioners and their work in schools, we discover how the presence of the state permeates through the lives of choral music practitioners. As the state takes on many different roles in the life

of an arts practitioner, we know that the relationship between the state and arts practitioners is complex.

1.5 – Methodology

When looking for answers to my puzzle of why there are ongoing tensions between the state and the arts, I set out to understand how these choral music practitioners produce and draw upon their cultural scripts, of stories they hear about work in schools from people they know or people they interact within the course of their work, in reaction to the SYF policy changes. These cultural scripts tell us how they orientate themselves and their cultural toolkit vis-à-vis the state and provides us with a narrative of why they perceive their issues and tensions with the state exists. I use three intersecting sets of data: Interviews with choral music practitioners; participant observations; texts from available documentation that detail choral music and state policy changes, and secondary literature on the arts in Singapore.

The definition of choral music practitioner broadly encompasses anyone who participates in or facilitates the production of the arts form. These include a range of roles, from choral conductors to choir and school administrators, as well as members of community choirs. Often, many of my informants hold multiple roles across different choirs and organizations. Some may be teachers in charge of school choirs, but also happen to sing in community choirs outside curriculum time. Others may be school choir conductors, but also help other choir conductors in the capacity of accompanists or vocal tutors.

As with any research involving human subjects, I ensured that I sought informed consent, and that my respondents understood the purpose of my

research, and that their participation is voluntary and that they could refuse to answer my questions or withdraw their participation at any time. I tried my best to avoid personal biases in the phrasing of my questions and by systematically reviewing and coding the interview data. I did not collect any personal information such as home address or personal identification numbers.

To protect respondents' identities, I use pseudonyms throughout this paper. Because my respondents are from a small community of people, I have avoided using pseudonyms in ways that would allow for them to be identified by others in the community. This means that the names may not reflect their actual gender and/or ethnicity.

I started recruiting participants from my own acquaintances; arts practitioners, teachers, and administrators whom I have maintained contact through the years and even after I left MOE. After talking to them, I later used snowball sampling by asking them to contact their own friends for permission for me to approach them. Some informants became aware that I was conducting interviews and volunteered to speak to me about this project. Some potential informants made it a point to avoid engaging me, in part because of my past background as a former member of the (MOE) establishment, but also because I am not socially located within their circles of influence and interaction.⁶ Many of my former colleagues had initially offered to speak to me about this study, but later requested not to be included for various reasons.

I elicited from my informants their experiences in choral music-making, from the everyday practices and habits of actual music-making to the

⁶ I go deeper into the boundaries, or camps, of the choir members in chapters four of my thesis. By extension, this situates me in the fifth camp of the choral music scene.

administration as well as leadership of a school or a community choir. I also collected stories of real-life exchanges and incidents involving themselves personally and of others whom they know that they use as evidence to show the state is present in their lives.

In total, I have conducted forty-two interviews. Out of these forty-two informants, fifteen were women and twenty-seven were men. My respondents ranged in age from their 20s to 50s. I interviewed people in various roles and capacities: Accompanists, choral conductors, teachers, vocal coaches, as well as school administrators and leaders. Some of the teachers I interviewed are either administrators in charge of the choir, or they take on the additional duty of conducting the choir themselves.

The overall sampling of my informants is very much reflective of the demographics of the choral music scene, where there are more male than female practitioners, and the majority of choral music practitioners happen to be Chinese. I also note that the choral music scene is made up of various social groups which I label as *camps*, and I made a conscious choice to recruit across the various camps for a better representation of the scene in its entirety. Every camp is represented in my study in an almost equal distribution amongst them.

More importantly, I asked about the issues that they faced when dealing with institutions such as job loss and lack of funding. I then asked how they *felt* about these issues, and how they went about in dealing with them. Then, I asked for more details regarding how they dealt with issues; more specifically, what did they do, and how did they arrive at a decision to do such things. These questions matter, because they help us to examine how choral music practitioners

understand their own relationship with the state, as well as the strategy of actions they use when dealing with the issues that result from this relationship.

I conducted the interviews were conducted between January 2017 and May 2018. Most of the interviews lasted between two to three hours. All interviews were mostly conducted individually. The interviews were semi-structured in nature, and I made allowances for the interviewees to elaborate on their experiences. There were three interview schedule sets: one for conductors and accompanists; one for school personnel; the other for administrators of choirs and choir festivals. The questions used in the three interview schedules were built upon the following guiding questions:⁷

Q1. How do arts practitioners describe how their art is produced? Where do they position themselves in the space of cultural and arts production in Singapore?

Q2 (a). In what ways do governmental institutions and policies enact or carry out things that have an impact (both positive and negative) on the arts and on the artist(s)? What evidence do the arts practitioners use to describe these?

Q2 (b). What other influences are present in the lives of the artist(s)? In what ways do these influences have an impact (both positive and negative) on the arts and on the artist(s)?

⁷ The complete interview schedule is attached as Annex A

What specific evidences do the arts practitioners use to describe these?

Q3 (a). What spans of control do external agencies have on the arts practitioners? What are some of the possible issues or difficulties that inhibit or prevent arts practitioners from speaking or sharing freely?

Q3 (b). What sort of agency do the arts practitioners have? How do the arts allow for the practitioners to exhibit or enact agency?

From the interviews, I garnered stories about larger sociological phenomena such as bureaucratisation of the arts and arts education, the adaptation of technicism in the way their work is managed in schools, and how a general decline of the arts in Singapore emerged.⁸ These stories show that despite the additional resources and support provided by the state, arts practitioners themselves feel that the arts are in regression. As I went to collect interview data, I observed some of the choral music-making activities, such as rehearsals and performances, that occur in public spaces and are part of the performative behaviour of Singaporean choirs. I do so in order to affirm that the way my informants articulate their lived realities corroborates with actual evidence derived from my own observations of choral music activities.

⁸ I discuss the nature of these phenomena at length in Chapter Two of my thesis.

As my fieldwork progressed, I found evidence that indicated that choral music practitioners are not merely reactive to the demands set up by the state, but that they also produce an aesthetic culture in the form of a repertoire of strategies. These repertoires of strategies are examples of the actual ‘doing’ enacted by choral music practitioners as a means of dealing with issues in their work to produce choral music. The reasons for doing this is two-fold. Firstly, I use these acts of ‘doing’ to show examples of specific performative behaviours used by choral music practitioners that allowed them to access resources provided by the state, thus leading toward a successful endeavour in arts making. Examples of arts making in the case of choral music include putting up public concerts in concert halls, local and international choral competitions, as well as non-concert performances like carolling sessions in shopping malls and hotel lobbies.

Secondly, I use the examples of arts making by my informants to show how arts making can happen without state support. This is an important distinction to make in relation to my puzzle of why there is an ongoing tension between the state and arts practitioners, where we should not construe that the state has absolute control over the production of the arts. While the state does not exhibit or enact ‘outward’ support for some art-making endeavours, it implicitly allows it to happen within certain restrictive conditions and spaces without censure or sanction. These would include performing in churches, or performance of a repertoire by restricted performers to a restricted audience.

Regarding the participant observation section of my data, I also asked permission from my informants if I could observe some of the decision-making procedures that are important to both choral music practitioners as well as choirs.

By this, I refer to activities that are part of the essential non-musical day-to-day activities of the choirs and choral musicians that influence the production of choral music-making. The selection of observed activities is informed by my own experiences as both a choral music practitioner and running the aesthetics program as a Head of Department in a school. Most of these activities either involve dealing directly with government bodies that represent the state, such as the NAC and the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), or having to deal with various state requirements, like obtaining licences. My approach to finding opportunities to observe such activities also followed the snowball sampling that I used for participant interviews. These activities include working on individual and collective grant applications to the NAC, job application processes, their experiences with online government portals, annual general meetings of community choirs, choir executive committee administration meetings, meetings for ticketed public concert planning, and meetings discussing about the possibility of sourcing for paid performances, either in public or private spaces. These activities are indicative of how arts practitioners rely on culture to make decisions and take actions.

As I went about collecting data from interviews and participant observations, I often came across my informants mentioning or showing me various documents as part of their work in choirs. As they shared with me how they respond to the contents of these documents, I proceeded to identify and collect them as a source of textual data. These documents help show the manner in which the state imposes itself onto the arts practitioners. These documents include online government websites and portals that furnished information regarding social and cultural policies. I also provided government-sourced

related materials which offer information regarding administrative processes that deal with interacting with governmental bureaucracy.

I also included textual materials from non-government sources. These include correspondences and circulars that provide information regarding admin processes that deal with interacting with private entities, such as corporate bodies like shopping malls. Blogs, reviews, online e-magazines, and news articles that discuss or describe choral music and the arts in Singapore are also included as part of these set of textual materials. These documentations may not explicitly articulate state-related discourses or context, yet I chose to include these as they provide us with a descriptive overview of what is happening in Singapore and its arts scene. These would be used to compare with what my informants articulated. The table of my data sources is attached as Annex B in this thesis.

The data collection mentioned above needed to be formatted and organized in a way that allowed me to perform a more systematic analysis. I used the transcriptions of the interviews from my informants, my own personal notes from field observation of choir meetings, rehearsals and performances as the primary data set. Texts from digital communication, policy memos, newspaper articles, policy documents, and web sites form the secondary data set. I adapted the discourse-historical approach (DHA) by Wodak (2015; see also Wodak and Meyer 2001) to help me make sense of the data. Wodak (2015) suggests DHA as an interdisciplinary study that combines semiotic analysis with “historical and sociological, theoretical and methodological approaches” (p.1). In particular, DHA involves the use of “triangulation as a fundamental and constitutive methodological principle” (Wodak 2015:1), where my study incorporated “fieldwork and ethnography to explore the object under investigation (study from

the inside) as a precondition for any further analysis and theorizing” (Wodak and Meyer 2001:69).

This system of triangulation is circular, inasmuch as I apply DHA as a method of coding and analysing both my primary and secondary data sets. More specifically, I look to find and connect instances of utterances, examples and observations to policy and informational material that forms the bulk of my secondary data and vice versa.⁹ These groupings are coded, then after which these codes are coded again into two distinct tiers. The first tier is a binary grouping; one group is termed *common vicissitudes*, and the other group is termed *outliers and exceptions*. ‘Common vicissitudes’ refer to the changes to circumstances that happened in the lives of my informants, and how these changes are also present or encapsulated in other data sources. ‘Outliers and exceptions’ are unique instances which occur in the lives of my informants that are not mirrored anywhere else in the primary data set. This first tier helps us to establish relationships between the interview and observation data sources, and how these data help explain how the experiences and stories of my informants are connected within the arts world of choral music.

The second tier of coding highlights and groups my informants’ responses as to how they see their own repertory of actions, attitudes and behaviours as strategies for achieving their own personal goals. From here, I identified and sieved out from both data sets any explicit articulation of instances and events that represent the desired outcome by the state. I did this in order to ascertain that both the information my participants shared with me, and the actions I have observed them perform, are rooted in the documentation as specified in my

⁹ Details of my primary and secondary data sets can be found in Annex B

secondary data set (See also Cerulo 2014 and DiMaggio 2014). These articulations are used as examples in the empirical chapters to reflect how my informants perceive the state's desired outcomes through the implementation of changes to MOE policies.

From here, I compared my findings against existing scholarly work that deals with similar theoretical issues or phenomena. This allowed me to interrogate the existing literature of Singapore and the arts, and then create a categorization process that is informed by three leading questions, namely: (1) 'Where are the arts practitioners situated in the policy?', (2) 'What does the state expect them to do/achieve?' and (3) 'What are they doing instead, and why?'. The comparison of findings with scholarly works sets the context and the narrative for my puzzle's explanation.

1.6 – Outlining the Argument

How can we understand the frustrations of the arts practitioners from a cultural perspective? I provide a brief outline of my argument, which is that my work shows how aesthetic culture contains strategies for survival when working in Singapore, and this makes explicit how arts practitioners allow themselves and the arts to be governed by the state. The larger argument will emerge in the following chapters.

Chapter Two is where I present my literature review and contextualise the larger theoretical framework of my thesis. Here, I look at existing scholarly work that deals with the sociological phenomena of bureaucratization and technicism to help us better understand why ongoing tensions continue to exist in the current developmental model stage in Singapore. I do so by first engaging with the works

of scholars that deal with state and society relations. I employ these works as a point of departure for the theoretical and empirical framing of how and why state and arts practitioner relations have become the way they are in Singapore. Next, I look at scholarly work that examines how these relationships between state and society are reproduced through the state's instruments of rule. I engage with how these instruments of rule facilitate the production of the arts in Singapore, and by doing so, determine the implicit and explicit forms of control that arts practitioners contend within their daily lives. Finally, I examine scholarly work related to Singapore as a space of ideological production and resistance. I determine that ideology plays an important role in determining the way arts practitioners perceive the state to be present in their lives.

Chapter Three begins the empirical explanation of my puzzle: that these tensions are result of the history between the state and arts practitioners. Using a historical perspective, I trace the development of the relations between the state and arts practitioners since Singapore's independence in 1965. I also describe at length the SYF: its origins, and how it has become a linchpin in the production of everyday arts making in Singapore. I set to show how the relationship between the state and arts practitioners evolves in tandem with the nation's developmental model and leads us to where we are today, and why examining the source of the ongoing tensions today will give us deeper insight into the multi-faceted relationship between the state and the arts practitioners from the ruler and the ruled, to the employer and the employees.

In Chapter Four, I explain how choral music practitioners have allowed themselves to be governed by the state by describing how arts practitioners determine how the state affects the way they think about and organize

themselves. I use a social map of the choral music scene as a means of showing how choral music practitioners position themselves in relation to one another vis-à-vis the state: that this social ordering is perceived as an extension of state produced structures, specifically how schools and the SYF competition facilitate the creation of divisions and phantom hierarchies within the choral music scene.

Chapter Five continues the argument laid out in Chapter Four, in that choral music practitioners have allowed themselves to be governed by the state. Here, I make explicit the employer-employee relationship of the state and arts practitioners, how each choral music practitioner manages the resultant dynamics through dealing with state-determined school requirements in their work. By focusing operational aspects of the work and its focus on the SYF, I show how the relationship between the state and arts practitioners plays out in the life of the individual choral music practitioners through examples of how they make sense of the external realities of the demographics, state policies and bureaucratic practices. I then discuss they make their work-related-decisions based on this understanding of the way the state works, and ultimately how they create a repertory of strategies when it comes to finding and maintaining employment. I then present how choral music practitioners utilize their own networks to create a repertoire of strategies, and how these strategies evolved in the midst of policy changes.

Chapter Six is the final empirical chapter. Here, I determine how the ongoing tensions between the state and arts practitioners can be explained by the ways in which the state influences the aesthetic choices that form the basis of the work of arts practitioners. I show how choral music practitioners deliberate on aesthetic choices based on their understanding of what the schools desire. This

understanding is also influenced by how they imagine the state's unspoken boundaries of what is permissible or not, which is rationalised to be the product of the state's multicultural and multi-religious ideologies.

Chapter Seven is the summation of my thesis, where I discuss how my puzzle is explained through the perceptions and experiences of the arts practitioners. I also discuss how my work is situated amongst existing scholarly works, the future trajectories of where this research can explore further, and my own autobiographical reflection of my journey in researching this thesis.

CHAPTER TWO:

The Singapore State and the Production of Culture

2.1 – Introduction

This chapter serves as a review of literature and a summation of my dissertation's theoretical framework. My work looks at the subjective experience of the arts practitioners in relation to their work vis-à-vis the state, where through these very experiences, dominant ideas are constantly and inexplicitly reproduced not in any sense “automatically” through coercion, but rather through organisational and personal decision-making. Hence, I am interested in how the works of other scholars discuss the Singapore state and state-society relations as an extension of the discussion on the Singapore state and the arts.

These scholarly works tend to describe Singapore as a case of successful nation-building despite differences in opinions on the island-nation's adaptation of an authoritarian form of governance. To the government, Singapore *works* not because of the effectiveness of implementing the rule of law, but in the way it reproduces the normative dimensions of its citizenry by *delivering* predictability, efficiency, reliability, and regularity of its public goods as part of honouring the social compact between the state and its citizens (See also Ritzer 2013). These normative dimensions include the establishment of institutions, in which schools are of specific interest to me and my work, and the bureaucracies that facilitate the interactions between the state and the citizenry.

In orientating the discourse of Singapore state scholarship to my puzzle of why there are ongoing tensions between the state and the arts practitioners, I

am interested in two things. Firstly, I look at scholars who explain how the state, through these institutions and bureaucracies, shapes the goals and social norms of arts practitioners. This orientation of the state being in control over the production of culture is reflective of the unequal power relations the state has with regards to its citizens. Secondly, I turn to scholarly work that examines how the rationalities of rule become translated into cultural logics for both the state as well as arts practitioners. These resultant cultural logics help us to better understand how both state actors and arts practitioners make decisions in dealing with day to day issues and to show that culture is then used as a means of directing them towards achieving the state's goals.

2.2 – Producing Singaporean Arts practitioners

If we are to better understand the tensions between the state and the arts practitioners, we should best begin by understanding the nature of their relationship. First and foremost, arts practitioners are subject-citizens under the rule of the state. Scholarship pertaining to the state has indicated that the primary business of statehood is to reproduce its legitimacy to rule over its citizenry. This reproduction of legitimacy is deeply rooted in the Foucauldian concept of instilling behaviours and attitudes in its subject-citizens so that their autoregulation facilitates the ease of rule for the state (Bröckling, Krasmann, and Lemke 2011; Smart 1983).

In the case of Singapore and its arts practitioners, these behaviours and attitudes are instilled using both coercive and benevolent instruments of rule I mentioned earlier in Chapter One. Following this framing, I look to the works of Singapore scholars of the state to determine if the production of attitudes and

behaviours inhibits or acerbates the existing tensions between the Singapore state and arts practitioners. I first begin with the work of Teo You Yenn (2011), whose works look at how family and housing policies are used to produce a national political culture that informs Singapore citizens of how they relate to each other vis-a-vis the state. A key takeaway for me is Teo's (2011) reflections on the subjective understanding of Singaporeans regarding the reality of how the state governs them. Using the perceptions of Singapore citizens regarding the state's family policies, she discusses how the Foucauldian conceptions of "government" in Singapore are reflected in the regulation of a wide range of individual conduct in various domains of society. However, this notion of regulation is not necessarily consistent across these various domains – whilst the state is regarded to have almost complete control over the minutiae of the lives of the citizens, the state often neither has the capacity nor the resources to maintain such a wide span of control. Hence, this Foucauldian relationship between the state and citizenry is attributed to the idea of culture, where culture, in the form of reproducible attitudes and behaviours, aids the state in maintaining its span of control.

I find this aspect of her work to be very useful in my own thesis in two ways: Firstly, her work informs me that I need to anticipate the subjective understanding of my own informants when looking for answers pertaining to why the ongoing tensions between the state and arts practitioner exist. They may be quite familiar with the 'social games' they play amongst themselves and with state actors, but quite often they only see the issue from their own positionality of arts practitioners whose works are mostly confined within a state institution. This informs me that their own views may not necessarily capture the complete picture of how their relationship with the state works. Secondly, this idea of how

they articulate control and autonomy vis-à-vis the state shows how they allow themselves to be frustrated by, yet also ruled by, the structures produced by the state. She illustrates this clearly in her work, in which she says:

Singaporeans think sociologically in important ways: in interviews, I was struck by their sophistication in situating themselves in the broader social context, their capacity for accounting for their circumstances through narrations of structural constraints. Yet, there was an important limit to their sociological thinking. For most of the people I spoke with, critiques of the state concluded with insistence on the limits of its influence, and the proclamation that people should take ultimate responsibility for their own families. Although people think of their actions as oriented toward society, and informed by society, they see their own “problems” through the lens of their individual families—as problems that ought to be resolved through the gumption, skills, and resources of individual families, rather than through some broader social action. In other words, their broad orientation dovetailed with the Singapore state’s insistence on the dangers of a more comprehensive welfare system (Teo 2011:13).

Within any relationship, there are both spoken and unspoken expectations. When trying to determine how the tensions between the state and arts practitioners came to be, it would be useful to discover how scholarship pertaining to the state construe these expectations vis-à-vis each other and how these expectations inform one another of their actions and attitudes. From the state’s perspective, the expectations of the citizens inform the state of how they can fulfil the social contract and reproduce its legitimacy to rule (Anter 2014; Moore 2008; O’Neill 1986; Ritzer 2013). The state also utilizes ideology to influence the expectations of the citizens. If ideology is “a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (Althusser 1971:162), these ‘representations’ inform both the state and the arts practitioners of how they are related to one another vis-à-vis the reality of the arts worlds. We can examine where the current tensions can be found from how the

state produces the ways in which their subjects think about themselves and the way they see the world.

One of the key tenants that make up the ideology driven by the Singapore state is the idea of “pragmatism”. For Chua (1995), pragmatism is “governed by ad hoc contextual rationality that seeks to achieve specific gains at particular points in time and pays scant attention to systematicity and coherence as necessary rational criteria for action; whereas utopian rationality emphasizes the whole and at times sacrifices the contextual gains to preserve it, if necessary.” (p.58) We know from Chua’s work that pragmatism strongly influences the actions of Singaporeans, where each deliberates on how they can be strategic and instrumental when making daily decisions that affect their life goals. Many Singaporeans do embrace pragmatism as a greater public good (*The Straits Times* 2015); the ways in which the state practices pragmatism are “selective, strategic and instrumental” which “overriding goal” is “continuous economic growth” (Chua 1995:73,68).

Building on Chua’s (1995) work, Tan (2012) argues that the Singapore state’s portrayal of itself being logical and pragmatic has allowed it to disguise “its ideological work and political nature through an assertion of the absence of ideology and politics” (p.68). The portrayal of such is disseminated through the educational system via schools as well as other state institutions such as museums and libraries and has allowed the state to reproduce its dominant position and hegemonic control of the nation and its peoples.

I tie pragmatism with the notion of technicism, where the state induces its bureaucratic bodies to account, measure, and track any and all expenditures of state resources. I am informed by the work of Gopinathan and Sharpe (2002),

who suggest that while technicism is rationality, pragmatism is the belief that drives these attitudes and behaviours of the state. Tupas (2015), citing Tan (2012), argues that while pragmatic decision-making superficially appears to be arbitrary, nevertheless the practice is “ideologically systematic and coherent” (p.97) due to the state’s technicist framing within the political economy paradigm. Tupas (2015) further argues that if a state action or decision makes economic sense, then it is regarded as pragmatic; it is a strategy of adopting “any means as long as the ends are successfully achieved through these means” (Tan 2012:79).

The national and political narratives of Singapore contain many instances of pragmatism, in part to substantiate the legitimacy of its reproduction. Yao (2007) suggests that “pragmatism quite naturally came to galvanize the political thinking: that economic security was the highest priority, and moral self-scrutiny an ill-affordable luxury” (p.181). He alludes to how the governing party adopted hard-lined and authoritative measures during its early years as an essential measure for successful nation-building; hard times made for hard choices. Yet, Yao (2007) is critical of how the state continues to practice “an outmoded model of economic practicality” (p.182) even to this day.

Relating this discussion back to the framing of why ongoing tensions exist between the state and arts practitioners, we can see that the tensions exist at an ideological level. As ideologies go, the sensibilities of the people regarding the arts and humanities do reflect the beliefs of the PAP-led government, which historically has “very little patience for philosophy, theory, or finely nuanced and elaborate arguments that circulate in academia” (Tan 2018:17). The psyche of the citizenry is structured around these ideals, which consequently inform them

of the ways in which they as a society view the arts and humanities. In the case of the humanities and the arts in our education system, scholars such as Noor (2015), Tupas (2015), and Poon (2010) have raised concerns over how the overtly pragmatic outlook towards educational results have inadvertently made students and schools averse to taking subjects within the realm of the arts and humanities. The rationale for this is twofold; arts and humanities subjects prove more difficult to produce 'good' grades, and that these subjects do not provide access to educational pathways that would lead to desirable high paying careers.

Since ideology drives the actions and attitudes of both the state and its citizenry, logically we will find that tensions that exist at the ideological level will manifest into concrete action and instances. If ideology is the way in which individuals relate to others and their material reality, then how does the state's production of ideology inform arts practitioners of the ways they make themselves visible to others, and especially the state? Scott (1998) suggests that the state instils the idea of legibility, that is to say, the categories of the ruled, in its citizens. This idea of legibility expands into a syntax of what is desirable or undesirable to the state and to society. In the case of Singapore, the production of categories has been inbuilt into social policies that range from housing to education (Chua 2002; Purushotam 1989; Siddique 1989, 1990). Such categories go beyond just identity politics and the resultant reproduction of legitimacy; these categorical markers can be readily seen through social policies in relating to public goods such as health care, education and housing (Chua 2002; Gopinathan 2007; Tan 2010a; Teo 2014, 2015).

Earlier I made a claim that the state requires arts practitioners to perform and behave in specific ways in order to gain access to opportunities and resources.

If we construe the opportunities and resources given by the state to indeed be public goods, we can also see that there are other requirements to be fulfilled for arts practitioners to gain such access. In Singapore, access to public goods is never regarded as a universal right of a citizen. The way the state sets up how public goods are accessed is also part of its ideological framing based on communitarianism (See Chua 1995, 2002, 2004). This is closely tied to how we understand this transaction between the state and the arts practitioners as subject citizens. In order for a citizen to have access to public goods, they are required to show a sense of “deservedness”. Teo (2015) argues that in Singapore, public goods are things framed as needing to be earned through performing being “deserving.” The notion of “deservedness” carries a moral valence, where people have to show that they “deserve” something through some performance of morality in order for the state to allow them access to public goods.

This idea of public goods and moral valence occupies a contrary position in explaining why the ongoing tensions between the state and arts practitioners exist. The Singapore state considers the opportunities, grants and infrastructural resources as public goods. In order to access these public goods, arts practitioners are required to produce attractiveness that would position them to be worthy of receiving these resources. Hence, I largely agree with Teo’s work, especially the notion of the production of *attractiveness* by the subject-citizens as through the performance of moral valence.

Yet, the notion of the performance of morality is heterogeneous and idiosyncratic across different aspects of the state. As we saw from the opening vignette of Chapter One, the idiosyncrasy of sometimes conflicting requirements by the state becomes a point of umbrage for the arts practitioners. Not only do

the arts practitioners need to produce attractiveness via the performativity of moral valence, but their artwork is also subjected to similar forms of scrutiny. If the artist wants to receive public goods from the state, they need to ensure that both their person and their arts are *attractive* to the state.

Two forms of Bourdieu's (2002) capital ties in closely in this discussion of attractiveness. The first is *Cultural capital*. According to Bourdieu,

Cultural capital can exist in three forms: in the embodied state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the objectified state, in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.), which are the trace or realization of theories or critiques of these theories, problematics, etc.; and in the institutionalized state, a form of objectification which must be set apart because, as will be seen in the case of educational qualifications, it confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee (p.17).

The other is *Social capital*. He defines it as

... the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a “credential” which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word. These relationships may exist only in the practical state, in material and/or symbolic exchanges which help to maintain them. They may also be socially instituted and guaranteed by the application of a common name (the name of a family, a class, or a tribe or of a school, a party, etc.) and by a whole set of instituting act designed simultaneously to form and inform those who undergo them; in this case, they are more or less really enacted and so maintained and reinforced, in exchanges. Being based on indissolubly material and symbolic exchanges, the establishment and maintenance of which presuppose re-acknowledgement of proximity, they are also partially irreducible to objective relations of proximity in physical (geographical) space or even in economic and social space (p.21).

Informed by Bourdieu, I posit that attractiveness is quantifiably and tangibly produced in terms of objectified and institutional cultural capital in the form

accolades, awards, and qualifications. I qualify this to be institutional cultural capital because many of the accolades and awards are derived from the SYF competitions. Evidence of this can be found at the grant requirement sent forth by funding bodies such as the NAC, where the assessment of their artistic work is dependent on how economically and commercially viable the artistic product is, as well as how the works reflect the social mores of more conservative sectors of the Singaporean society (National Arts Council 2016). Considerations for moral valency are situated in the arts form, but only after the artist and the artwork can fulfil the technocratic and economic requirements set out by the state.

There also have been instances where the state withdrew funding after having awarded them (Lingam 2011; Neo 2016; Tan and Sasitharan 2015; Yong 2015). Often, this happens when there is an adverse reaction to the artistic work from the larger public or some of the senior leadership of the state. This adds to the frustration experienced by arts practitioners, because even if they have deemed themselves to have sufficiently performed the appropriate measure of attractiveness, they are still subjected to the uncertainty of having to deal with social mores as well as the sensitivities of a vocal and conservative audience.

That said, we also know that the state plays an important role in determining what these social mores are. In fact, scholarship on the state has found a relationship between the state's ideologies and the social mores of the nation's society. These ideologies not only reflect an individual citizen's relationship with the conditions of their lived reality, but also determines the manners in which they understand how the state creates categorical divisions amongst society, and what are the expected norms that come out of these divisions. In the case of Singapore, Siddique (1989) explains how the ideological

concept of multiracialism, alongside the concepts of multilingualism, multiculturalism, and multireligiosity were integral to the way in which the state governed its people in the early days of independence. She outlines multiracialism as follows:

‘Multiracialism’ as a concept acknowledges social heterogeneity – that the populace is composed of separate, distinct, races... Multiracialism also implies that these races are intrinsically equal – that none has any inherently superior status (Siddique 1989:564).

She argued that multiracialism and meritocracy are intrinsically linked; a social reality built on the principles of racial equality would allow “merit and performance” to determine whether an individual participates in social mobility (Siddique 1989:564). The state declared this claim as the bedrock of national stability and prosperity, and have used iterations of this as a means to categorize social groups into legible units to be ruled. (See also Willmott 1989). Under the auspices of the CMIO Model, every race is allowed to continue practising their ethicized mother tongue and cultural practices. Siddique (1989) problematizes this assumption in her work, as the state has artificially declared the race constructs of Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others as monolithic identities. These categorizations took to effect despite evidence to the contrary that within each racial marker exists multiple ethnicities, with each ethnicity having their own language and cultural traditions. Her work informs us of how the intersection between multiracialism, religious practices as well as cultural and aesthetic practices, is managed by the state with the purpose of governing Singapore and the arts.

Relating her work back to my examination of the tensions between the state and arts practitioners, we understand that the cultural form is located the

intersection of class, ethnicity and religiosity. Often, the cultural form becomes the focus of differences that arise within these larger domains. Siddique suggests that the state is the final arbiter of which intersections are legitimate and visible, and which aspects of the intersection are obscured, buried or declared out of bounds within the realm of public discourse and consumption. Often, arts practitioners expend tremendous amounts of effort in second-guessing what these boundaries are, whilst trying to resist the urge to self-censor their own artistic works. This contestation is especially visible in my selected case study of choral music – where quite often the arts form's origins, coming out of the Judaeo-Christian ritualistic practices (Tan 2014), are obscured by the state in favour of presenting it as a unifying platform for multiculturalism, national identity, and belonging.

It bears mentioning that the ideological state apparatus is part of the state's instruments of rule. Althusser (1971b) suggests that ideology espoused by the state is in part reproduced by the cultural and educational institutions made accessible to the public. Scholars such as Purushotam (1989), Tham (1989), as well as Yip and Sim (1990) also have noted that education is the most visible stage in which racial differences are carefully managed by the state in a conservative fashion. The ways in which these differences are managed are visible in state institutions, especially schools. The vernacular schools have been constantly subjected to state scrutiny in the name of meritocracy and progress, but also to ensure that only state-endorsed ideologies are being reproduced in these institutions (Doraisamy 1969; Ho 2016; Lee 2006).

One example to be had regarding the state's management of racial and religious differences can be found in the *madrassahs* of Singapore. These

madrasahs, or Malay vernacular schools, occupy a hybrid position within the social and educational landscape; they offer similar subject offerings as mainstream government schools as well as religious vocational training. Abu Bakar (2006), who examined the development of the *madrasah* as a nexus of citizen rights and state interests, argued that the state is constantly policing the pedagogical philosophies and outcomes of these institutions.

The state's main issue with the *madrasahs* is the premise that their existence is ideologically contrary to the state's own educational goals on two counts. The first being the perception of the *madrasah's* ineffectiveness in producing a citizenry that is capable of participating in the state's current and future economy, and the second being that they are regarded as bastions of ethnic enclaves that do not socially integrate with the larger society (Abu Bakar 2006). Abu Bakar (2006) comments that the state does not see their critique as an imposition on citizen rights and religious freedom vis-à-vis multiracialism, but rather as a means to facilitate the positionality of the Malay-Muslims as an integral part of Singapore's nation-building endeavours. Thus, while the state ensures that the ethno-religious framework allows for institutions such as the *madrasah* to exist, it seeks to maintain social cohesion by downplaying religious and ethnic divides in terms of removing barriers for economic participation.

Religiosity as a cultural practice is nestled within the boundaries of race and ethnicity. Yet, religiosity's presence and practice in Singapore vacillates between realms of being state-tolerated to being state-regulated. Sinha (2016) argues that while the state makes neat and legible lines regarding the practices of religion and culture, the reality of managing spaces and sensibilities of the people regarding religion is far removed from simple dichotomies and parochial modes

of governance. Despite facing such difficulties, the state continues to manage and reiterate the distinct lines between secular, modernist enactments vis-à-vis national development, and individual religious practices within private or designated spaces. This paternalistic management of Singapore society allowed the state to justify the ways it has structured Singapore's housing, education, and religious policies and spaces, all in the name of building a national identity, as well as to prevent possible volatile tensions between the races (Trocki 2006).

However, the state is far from being successful in eliminating racial or ethnic aggression and discrimination in Singapore. In part, the racial profiling tropes that sit in the imagining of the people are partially reproduced through generations of internal prejudice and is quite difficult to eradicate fully especially when these tropes are reproduced in private spaces (Velayutham 2009). These tropes often do manifest in public spheres as casual racism and are still causes for concern amongst the minority ethnic groups (Velayutham 2009). The flip side of this is that these tropes of racial profiling also inform individuals on how to avoid offending the sensibilities of others, but in many ways, their imagining of potential offence can give rise to other unforeseen consequences (Khoo and Ming 2004). This is an important consideration for my own work when I examine the decisions school leaders and administrators make when navigating through potential conflicts arising from ethnicity and religiosity in dealing with arts content. This, in turn, brings the arts practitioners into potential conflict with school leaders or administrators; another source of tension due to having to negotiate the differences of what each person imagines to be acceptable cultural content.

In the case of Singapore, Lee (2010) opines that the “cultural maintenance as the task of imagining and documenting the primordial identities and values of a glorious past has been well etched onto socio-cultural and political discourses such as the ‘4Ms’ (multiracialism or multi-ethnicity, multiculturalism, multilingualism, and multireligiosity) and the political rhetoric about pragmatism and ‘ruggedness’” (p. 42-43). He further opines that the pervasive presence of these ideologies is present at every level of education, embedded in textbooks and other teaching materials. The saturation of their presence hides a strange contradiction that is consciously reproduced by the state, yet their practices are obfuscated by the mechanisms of state bureaucracy and governmental policies.

While the state produces the boundaries of what is or is not acceptable in relation to religious and ethnic sensitivities, where *exactly* these boundaries lie in the imagination of both state actors and arts practitioners. I refer to the values of multireligiosity, and how the state makes multireligiosity happen by suppressing the visible practices and public discourses. This is reflected through the teachings of both public and educational institutions, with the notable exceptions of faith-based government-aided schools and *madrasahs*. We find that these exceptional institutions are also not without their own dialectical tensions with the state, and they often find themselves vacillating between conforming to extant state requirements and what is imagined to be out of bounds in relation to what they imagine the state allows.

In orienting the discussion back to the tensions between the state and the arts, this intersection between downplaying racial differences, managing religious sensitivities, as well as the practice of racial profiling comes to a head when the arts take on religious connotations. In her study of the Sin Hoe Ping

Puppet Troupe, Chia (2017) observed that in order for arts practitioners to carry out artistic practices that are laden with religious meaning and value, the arts form and the practice “need to be accommodated within state policies based on the ‘harmonization’ of racial and religious differences” (p.117). She argued that the arts practitioners themselves would need to toggle between the boundaries of the state-related realm and the state-tolerated realm when dealing with decision-makers and bureaucrats that could either aid or hinder the production of the arts form (See also Chong 2014a). From her work, we understand that both state actors, as well as arts practitioners, are aware of the milieu of racial and religious sensitivities in Singapore. In most instances, state actors often tend to be overly cautious about not crossing these imagined boundaries, which adds to the difficulties experienced by arts practitioners when fielding their artistic content and output.

Relating these discussions back to my examination of the current tensions between the state and arts practitioners, I largely agree with existing Singaporean scholarship pertaining to the study of the state that the ideological praxis is situated in the imagining of the state bureaucrats, where the negotiation of what is tolerable and what is manageable for public consumption becomes a key determining factor of whether the arts are allowed or disallowed to be produced (Chia 2017; Chong 2014a). The issue arising out of the tensions between the state and arts practitioners is that while different arts forms have variable degrees of association with religion and religious practices, the lines are blurred when the impetus to allow or deny is not predicated on the intent or purpose of the performance, but on whom the performance is targeted towards.

What becomes increasingly problematic for arts practitioners is that these boundaries are constantly shifting; each state institution has its own unspoken boundaries of what is allowed and what is disallowed. Without what state institutions deem as consistent in the form of official guidelines, arts practitioners are always at risk of offending the sensibilities of the state actors, which often result in censure and being officially reprimanded. Yet, the sensibilities of state actors are products of imagined desires rather than the actual desires of the state. Each state actor is informed by their own subjective understanding of their own roles and their own personal convictions. The potential issues that arise from this are how each of these state actors heterogeneously interpret the acceptable boundaries of what is or is not acceptable in terms of content. This means that arts practitioners would have to deal with an additional layer of sensibilities, and one that can be a contractor from one institution to another. Hence, here lies another part of the puzzle of why there are ongoing tensions between the state and arts practitioners – how much of the attitudes and behaviours of state actors can be construed to be truly reflective of the state?

Scholarship pertaining to the study of the Singaporean state also suggests that state bureaucrats speak and think in technical-operational jargon (See also Gopinathan and Sharpe 2002; Hall 1988; Lee 1989). After all, the nation-state has been very vocal about achieving recognition for having a consistent sense of rhythm and efficiency to its governance (Tan 2010b, 2018). This practice of speaking in technical-operational jargon is an aspect of technicism, in which scholars define the socio-economic practices that regard technology and technical knowledge as a structuring force that shapes the lived practices of a society

(Gopinathan 2007; Gopinathan and Sharpe 2002; Granovetter 1985; Hall 1988; Wee 2010).

This idea of technicism features very prominently in the works of many Singaporean Scholars of the state. For scholars such as Chong, Gopinathan and Wee, their works suggest that the proclivity for Singapore's practice of technicism is informed by the history of the expansion of the Singaporean civil service, where most of the rank and file bureaucrats were recruited from the fields of engineering, law, and architecture, and that this rationality and its consequent mode of articulation still persists today (Chong 2014a; Gopinathan and Sharpe 2002; Lee 1989; Wee 2003). The resultant effect of technicism is made manifest through the need to measure, account, and rank every aspect of citizen life, and this information is translated into an idiosyncratic bureaucratic process that becomes another technology of rule (Gopinathan and Sharpe 2002; Hibou 2015). Scholarly work on Singapore and governance also collectively suggest that the tenor and tone adopted by Singapore's bureaucrats belie an overarching rationality that is framed along the lines of needing to measure and account for things in order to exhibit a sense of performance legitimacy (Gopinathan 2007; Lee 1989, 2007a; Wee 2010). This rationality is a highly visible manifestation of governmentality, especially when the spaces of its production are located within the entirety of the bureaucracy of state institutions. These spaces include the schools and institutions that hire arts practitioners. As employees, the arts practitioners are also subjected to this technicist rationality, imposed on them by the school administrators and institutional structures. When arts practitioners speak to state actors in these institutions, they are disciplined to speak about their work and their arts in the bureaucratic language (See Jagdish 2015).

Of the works that deal with these technocratic rationalities and resultant policy outcomes of Singapore, I find Gopinathan (2007)'s work on how technicism as state rationality shapes the ways in how the state bureaucracies behave as an important feature in my puzzle's explanation. In looking at how school actors, as proxies of the state, become instrumental in their actions, I find his work useful to examine how the state's technicist rationality and practices inevitably shape the ways the dependents of state resources behave and perform publicly and privately.

This idea of technicism being an instrument of rule to produce culture requires further elaboration in relation to my puzzle of why there are ongoing tensions between the state and arts practitioners. We know that Singaporean arts practitioners are examples of such dependents since they heavily rely on the state for both resources and employment. For dependents to be awarded state resources, they would need to perform, both in terms of behaviour as well as artistic output, in ways that allow them to be legible to the state and thus be seen as worthy to receive such resources. The interactions between state bureaucrats and arts practitioners are reified by the practice of arts administration that on one hand, makes sense in the eyes of the state, but on the other hand, creates additional barriers to arts making for the arts practitioners. This bureaucratisation of the arts produces additional divisions of labour within arts making, and a sizeable amount of resources are channelled to the management of the arts and not to actual arts making itself (Segers, Schramme, and Devriendt 2010).

I use this dilemma as a means to further explain the tensions between the state and arts practitioners – that if the arts practitioners understand that they are being dominated to produce work in forms that are legible to the state, why is it

that they are complicit in reproducing attitudes and behaviours that benefit the state and not the artists themselves? While it is easy to vilify the state when it dominates its citizenry to perform specific behaviours and attitudes, we need to consider that not all outcomes are conscientiously intended by the state.

Linking the issues between rationality and practices of legibility, the works of both Scott (1998) and Segers et al (2010) provide a conceptual basis of how well-meaning policies can result in unintended consequences that can have an opposite and adverse effect than what was originally intended. That said, the works of the scholars mentioned in this section refines the orientation of the reasons to why the ongoing tensions exist between the state and arts practitioners to the domain of culture, and how culture is also linked to the material reality of which the state and arts practitioners exist. These works also move the focus of the state and arts practitioners away from an ideological perspective, and into a more explicit perspective of the economic cycle of production and consumption.

2.3 – Rationalities of rule and the production of culture

The mutual assumption of particular cultural ideas provides human groups with common premises for predictably convergent inferential processes. This process of people collectively using effectively identical assumptions in interpreting each other's actions—i.e. hypothesizing as to each other's motivations and intentions—may be termed cultural logic. This logic relies on the establishment of stereotypes and other kinds of precedents, catalogued in individuals' personal libraries, as models and scenarios which may serve as reference in inferring and attributing motivations behind people's actions, and behind other mysterious phenomena. This process of establishing conceptual convention depends directly on semiotics, since groups of individuals rely on external signs as material for common focus and, thereby, agreement (Enfield 2000:35).

This section looks at how scholars explain the broader relationship between the rationalities of rule and cultural logics for both the state as well as the arts practitioners. These resultant cultural logics help us to better understand how both state actors and arts practitioners make decisions in dealing with day to day issues and to show that culture is then used as a means of directing them towards achieving the state's goals. I refer to the modes of rationality as the ways in which the state thinks of and about its subjects of rule, as well as the ways of formulating categories for the ruled to be more legible in applying differentiated instruments of rule (Ong 2006; Scott 1998; Teo 2011). From these works, I discovered that states think categorically, which is to say in terms of groups, of boundaries, and criteria, for inclusion and exclusion with respect to itself and its enactments. While these works do inform us of *why* states think the way they do, a closer reading of *how* they think will give us a better understanding of how these thoughts are translated into action.

The first mode of rationality relevant to my work is governmentality. Foucault defined governmentality to mean “a range of forms of action and fields of practice aimed in a complex way at steering individuals and collectives”

(Bröckling et al. 2011:1). Current scholarship suggests that this Foucauldian concept can be used as a means of discussing not only the modes of rationality for governance, but also the ways in which the state produces the dimensions of thought and of attitudes (Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Foucault 1991; Gordon 1991). However, there are two aspects that are partially unaddressed by current scholarship on governmentality: The first aspect is how the state produces what is thinkable and unthinkable in the mindsets of the governed, especially for arts practitioners and their understanding of attractiveness for themselves and the arts they produce.¹⁰ The second aspect is the ways in which an individual perceives the state's modes of rationality to inform them of their own personal and collective decision-making repertoire. By using these two aspects to help understand why there are ongoing tensions between the state and arts practitioners, I hope to show that governmentality does not necessarily limit the agency of individuals despite structural limitations, but instead allows individuals such as arts practitioners to draw upon strategies and interventions of which they can pick and choose from to deal with the uncertainties they come across in their professional lives. Subsequently, my thesis addresses the disjunction between how the state imagines the production of the arts, and how arts practitioners operationalize the production of the arts through the mechanics of policies and structures.

The scholarship of governmentality concerns itself with the production of rationales and subsequent actions to bring about the reproduction of the state. Yet, these studies are often construed from the position of power and coercion by

¹⁰ The notion of attractiveness stemmed out of the discussion on deservedness in the previous section.

the state, and leave very little space for the discussion of individuals' ability for self-actualization within the confines of the state. For my work at least, the possibility of a false dichotomy emerges – that in the grand scheme of governmentality, you are either complicit with the state, or explicitly resistant to its exertion of power and domination. This false dichotomy precludes individuals from the alternatives to pursue life goals and the ability to make choices that are contrary to the state's desires. While governmentality provides a framework for us to examine the relationship between the state and the ruled in the context of power relations, it does not capture the extent of the nature of the relationship. To be the subject of rule is one thing, but what happens when one works for the state, or works with those who run its bureaucratic machinery?

A theoretical response to the issues of this false dichotomy can be found in the work of Aihwa Ong. For Ong (2006), governmentality also refers to a repertory of ideas and strategies that deal with the systemic reproduction of everyday behaviours and attitudes, not only in terms of behaving in public spheres, but also in the ways each individual deal with one another. By observing existing social categorizations propagated by the state, we can observe the reproduction of governmentality within daily behaviours and attitudes. These acts of categorization, in turn, informs these individuals and groups of how they should interact with one another. The implication here is that the individual's relationship with one another is vis-à-vis where they are positioned by the state. This framing does allow some semblance of autonomy, albeit in relation to relative positionality. However, this framing is still predicated on the dimensions of power relations vis-à-vis the state and seems to suggest that their repertory of attitudes and behaviours are still engendered by the state.

What is Singapore's brand of governmentality, and how does this inform us about the ongoing tensions between the state and arts practitioners? Scholarship on the Singapore state and the arts have indicated that Singapore practices a form of neoliberal governmentality that has seeped into the ways in which arts is produced. David Harvey (2005) defined neoliberalism as an ideology of a free market capitalist enterprise and its resultant logics framed within a global-local context. These logics are often employed by the state to take advantage of global market forces (Harvey 2005). There are two features of neoliberalism I intend to use for my thesis: (1) that neoliberalism works under the assumption that the state as regulator is absent from the market, and (2) that the free market forces determine the outcomes of the interaction between the state and market participants (Harvey 2005).

Neoliberalism as a concept also includes state rationality as well as state and society relations under its purview. Scholars from different disciplines have acknowledged that the term 'neoliberalism' is commonly used within each discipline, but is often discussed without making references to how different fields operationalize the concept despite the apparent overlap in utility (Fine and Saad-Filho 2017; Mudge 2008, see also Cotoi 2011; Flew 2014; Ong 2006; Wong 2016). This ambiguity bears mentioning, and here I outline various scholarly works that provide a framing of why I think neoliberalism is useful as an analytical concept towards how the state governs the arts and arts practitioners.

Scholars noted that neoliberalism later became synonymous with economic and social structural changes within the lens of political economy, which looks at the state's rationality and use of market instruments in dealing with cultural and economic issues (Wong 2016, see Fine and Saad-Filho 2017;

Gamble 2001; Mudge 2008). That said, neoliberalism can take on many different forms: both as a structure, as well as a structuring force or power. Wong (2016) describes neoliberal power as being situated in the “productive forces through the investment of skill, overt valuation of labour and knowledge in ways which the state highlights are crucial to its survival” (p.15). He further posits neoliberalism can shape the manner in which institutions structure themselves in terms of how they work and how they interact with others along the lines of a Foucauldian framework.

So how does neoliberalism manifest in the field of arts in Singapore, and how does neoliberal governmentality inform us of the ongoing tensions between the state and arts practitioner? I again turn to the works of Flew (2014), Ong (2006,2007), and Wong (2016), as well as other scholars in order to reconceptualise how neoliberalism is present in the lives of the Singaporean arts practitioners. Cotoi (2011) suggests that the boundaries of “state, market and social society are created by governmentality, and not the other way around” (p.111). We know from the aforementioned works that Singapore does practice its own variation of neoliberalism as a form of governmentality, which has been very much influenced by other successful western rational polities and urban spaces, especially London and the ‘Cool Britannia’ movement which represented a period of economic success and greater pride that was inspired by pop culture (Chong 2014a; Ong 2007; Tay 2005; Wee 2010).

The scholarly works cited above suggest that neoliberalism allows the state to position itself to dominate others indirectly through the auspices of economic participation. After all, the constellation of powers and institutions within the state seeks only to reproduce the status quo and the continued existence

of the state, and the idea of the free market confounds the power structures of institutions and powers (Hall 1996; Kawasaki 2004). On this, I would counter-argue that neoliberalism, as practiced within the arts market in Singapore, reproduces the hegemonic structures of state domination. Thus, from the works of these scholars, I surmise that the notion of neoliberal governmentality implies deep governance of the subject, from the inside, through self-regulation and the subject's own imagining of their selves.

That said, we find inherent contradictions to neoliberalism and neoliberal governmentality when we examine the arts ecosystem in Singapore. Firstly, much of the arts ecosystem is unsustainable without the financial support of the government. Furthermore, we also know that Singapore practices an illiberal form of an arts free-market enterprise: this is made manifest where jobs and the job market for the arts are concerned since they are the largest employers of arts practitioners. The neoliberal practice of the free-market enterprise, in theory, promises greater mobility and flexibility for all participants, and this includes the arts and arts practitioners.

I found that in the case of Singapore, this practice creates an opposite and unintended effect. A significant part of this issue is that the state plays the role of a market participant rather than that of a regulator, which is exacerbated by the fact that the state dominates the market through sheer capital and virtual monopolization of arts production in Singapore (Chong 2014a; National Arts Council 2012). It bears mentioning that scholarly works on Singapore's cultural policies have alluded that the state shapes the ways in which we imagine culture at the national level as stemming from two desired trajectories. The first trajectory is the state's deep obsession on having to produce multiplier effects on

any investment it makes on the arts, especially in the realm of economic growth (See Chang and Mahadevan 2014; Chong 2005; Chung 2008; Kong 2000; Tan and Hoe 2015). The second trajectory is that there is still a fixation on how cultural policies encourage the performance of moral valency espoused by national values and nation building (See Chang 2000; Chong 2010b, 2017, 2018; Chua and Lim 2015; Kuo 1999; National Arts Council 2018).

Why are the arts practitioners deeply cynical of these policy trajectories?

The late Mr Kuo Pao Kun, a well-loved dramaturg and doyen for both English and Chinese speaking theatre, summarised the arts practitioner's scepticism towards the state's neoliberal attitude towards the arts:

The apologists of this regime claim that this mighty machinery is primarily conducive to the arts development. While it is true that such infrastructures do provide opportunities, state management has been generally suffocating in spirit and political in orientation because their allegiance requires them to be subservient to government politics. Instead, the arts, as a dimension functionally distinct from politics and economics, deserves its own autonomous space above institutional politics because original and creative expressions always shoot up from the ground and are inclined to evoke longer philosophic vision, larger intellectual perspectives and more radical aesthetics venturing beyond the status quo. (Kuo 1999:20)

It seems that the arts practitioners' primary criticism of the state is that it continues to curtail the creative output and development of the arts despite promises by the state to focus on arts development. Subsequently, arts practitioners have attempted to respond to the impositions by the state's cultural policies, which in itself is a source of tension between the state and arts practitioners, through various overt and subvert acts of resistance that range from a refusal to apply for state funding to staging works-in-protests. The most public of these acts of resistance would be "a manifesto for the Arts" tabled by

ArtsEngage, a collective of arts practitioners and researchers.¹¹ Subsequently, the neoliberal practices of the state create yet another layer of power differentiation between the state and the arts practitioners, thus paradoxically giving the state greater opportunities to regulate and control the production of the arts in Singapore despite not performing as a regulator in the arts market. I discuss the implications of this in Chapter Five of my thesis, where I examine how neoliberal practices by schools create a more intense atmosphere of competition and one-upmanship amongst choral music practitioners.

Given that arts practitioners claimed to have reaped limited benefits from the state's cultural policies (See also Gerard 2015; Segers et al. 2010; Tan 2013a; Wee 2016), why does the state (1) not address the concerns of arts practitioners, and (2) continue in this trajectory of providing resources in developing the arts in Singapore? My own explanation to this lies in how the state's neoliberal practices in regulating the arts is reminiscent to the positions of Ong (2006) and Cotoi (2011), who collectively argue that the spectrum of which an individual experiences neoliberalism should be examined at the level of everyday lived realities of those subjected to the neoliberal 'technologies of rule'. This is to say, I look beyond the explicit state-driven policies and its desired effects, and into how individual subjectivities of both individual state actors and arts practitioners inform them of how policies are interpreted and enacted. What may seem to be problematic to the arts practitioners is certainly not so by the state body bureaucrats, as exemplified by my opening vignette in Chapter 1. Subsequently, I look at how these subjectivities play out in the day to day experience of working

¹¹ The details of the manifesto can be found here: <https://sites.google.com/site/amanifestoforthearts/the-petition/in-english>

in schools: the resultant politicking and tensions that come about from the imagining of the existing political economy.

These discussions on neoliberalism dovetail into how other scholars discussed the ideas of legibility and attractiveness in the previous section, where attractiveness is produced in order to access the public goods of job opportunities and grants. Meritocracy is another ideological concept practised by the Singapore state. Existing scholarly works provide a framing of meritocracy that allows us to better understand how Singaporean arts groups and arts institutions co-exist vis-à-vis the state. As an ideological trope, meritocracy mirrors that of pragmatism. At the centre of this ideology is the construction of deservedness in the eyes of the state, and how the allocation of state resources are geared towards benefitting the imagined greater good. Tan (2010) describes meritocracy as “a system of selection that is blind to race, gender, sexuality, age, or class differences where these attributes do not matter” (p.274), but is determined by individual merit and the ability to achieve or perform. He argues that the Singapore state has inculcated two governance practices in relation to meritocracy. First is the efficient allocation of resources, with emphasis on “revealing the best person for the job, rather than giving people equal opportunities” (Tan 2010:275). The second is the utilization of competition(s) and high stakes examinations, in hopes that this will encourage “talented people to compete with one another for position, reward, and prestige, and in that way to try harder than they otherwise would” (Tan 2010:276).

These practices reflect a cost-benefit rationality of the state, of which Singaporeans euphemistically describe as ‘*wanting it cheap but good*’. Any allocation of state resources is channelled to those whom the state qualifies as

deserving, which can be construed as awarding resources to the best option offered in order to maximize the potential outcome of any endeavour enacted or supported by the state. Tan (2010) posits that ideally, "meritocracy is a desirable practise that brings together the egalitarian concerns (associated with traditional socialism) with concerns about efficiency, competition, and reward (associated with traditional capitalism)." (p.285) However, Singapore's application of this ideological turn took on a life of its own.

Meritocracy is a finely balanced system that brings together contradictory aspects, including an equal opportunities dimension and a reward dimension. [However,] [e]litism often sets in when the balance shifts significantly in favour of rewards, particularly when the winners, fearful of competition, will try to set the rules of the game in their favour so that they can continue winning and make the winner's circle more exclusive. (Tan 2010:279)

Here, Tan (2010) makes references to how Singapore's political elites use existing social structures for the purposes of elite formation, and more importantly, to replenish their own ranks. Many Singaporeans have conflicting views regarding the practice of meritocracy, especially in the education system. In recent history, meritocracy provided the necessary advantage for deserving students from poor socio-economic backgrounds to gain access to scholarships and bursaries that would enable them to pursue higher education. These scholars were then channelled to serve in government sectors, thus allowing these individuals to reciprocate the allocation of resources to them with their service and expertise to the nation.

The state continues to defend the practice of meritocracy despite changes in demographic data which clearly indicate an uneven distribution of scholarships and awards. In a speech made in parliament, Mr Ong Ye Kung, the current

Minister for Education, acknowledges a growing inequality in education (Ong 2018). He says,

I stress there is no contradiction between meritocracy and fairness, nor reducing inequality and raising our collective standards. Instead, we should double up on meritocracy, by broadening its definition to embrace various talents and skills. We should not cap achievement at the top, but try harder, work harder to lift the bottom. I wanted to set out these fundamentals because it is important to have broad agreement around them. If we have, we are in a much better position to develop the education system to better prepare our children for the future. (Ong 2018)

He explains that the state, through MOE, has been actively calibrating its policies in order to address the growing inequality reproduced by the education system. These changes include broadening educational pathways and differentiated outcomes for abilities-driven curriculum (Ong 2018). As a long-standing observer and critic of Singapore's education, Gopinathan (2015) opines that "policy choices and applications in Singapore's education system are dominated less by ideological dogma but more by the pragmatic analysis of consequences." (p.54)

However, these policy changes take time and often result in additional unintended consequences (See Scott 1998).¹² Together with the notion of pragmatism, these concepts suggest that the central activity of choirs (and to an extent, other arts groups in Singapore) is to work on gaining legibility and accreditation in the hopes that they will be recognized by the state as worthy of receiving state funding.

¹² As mentioned in the introductory chapter, this thesis explores the unintended consequences affecting the lives of arts practitioners from two of these policy changes, namely the changes to the School Excellence Model, and the changes to the Singapore Youth Festival.

2.4 – Addressing the gaps

The discussions in this chapter inform my own work in the following ways: Firstly, existing literature orientates the production of culture by arts practitioners as an extension of the state's ideology in practice but have not fully addressed how cultural production is a strategic intervention, rather than a reaction to ideology, on the part of arts practitioners. Secondly, I would argue that some scholars see culture as a mediated outcome between the arts practitioners and the state, albeit cultural practices being an incoherent spectrum between negotiating consent and dissent as well as adherence and resistance. Ultimately, these are the gaps in the literature that I seek to address.

From the survey of the literature I curated, I came to realise four main issues:

(1) Most of the scholarly work I have examined comes across as state-centric. These studies are positioned as critiques of the state's role in the production of the arts and culture in Singapore. While there is objective truth to the state being pervasive and controlling, most of these studies do not explore the agency of other non-state actors within the country. Furthermore, existing studies do make references to state policies affecting arts and arts production, but very few studies have looked at how these policies have informed the perceptions of arts practitioners towards the arts and their relationship with the state.

(2) Scholarly works pertaining to aesthetic cultural production in Singapore tend to focus on the daily practices and struggles of arts practitioners, but there are not many works that explore these aesthetic practices in an in-depth manner.

(3) As a sociologist who studies culture, I have observed that there are few attempts from scholarly works to engage both aspects of culture (by which I refer culture as both daily mundane practices as well as aesthetic choices) simultaneously within the same social spaces, and the lived realities of arts practitioners. Most of these scholarly works tend to focus on the consumption of the arts vis-à-vis taste and class boundaries, but they fail to talk about the production of the arts in itself.

(4) Current studies have neither fully engaged with how state policies maintain different degrees of influence on arts practitioners from the same arts form, nor have they sought to account for and explain the reasons for these differences.

In attempting to address these gaps, I would thus argue as follows: that arts practitioners' perceptions of their relationship with the state inform them of how they socially organize themselves, and make professional decisions and artistic choices. Instances within these three processes indicate how the arts practitioners allow themselves and the arts to be governed. Thus, my thesis sets in the following ways:

The first empirical chapter draws out the historical background and then explains why the latest stage requires further exploration to fully understand the implications of this shift of arts management into the school setting. In examining this stage, I point to how the mode of governance employed by the state has shifted to a more subtle form, creating a new manner in which state power is exercised.

The second empirical chapter uses choral music practitioners as a case for how arts practitioners orientate and perform their own social groups based on

their imagined selves vis-à-vis the state. Here I argue that (1) the ways in which arts practitioners group themselves and fellow practitioners in both large and small social groups are greatly influenced by structures enacted by the state through existing procedural practices and policies, as well as subsequent policy changes. (2) The ways that arts practitioners create cultural practices and norms, both within groups and across the entire choral music scene, are similarly influenced by the state. By cultural practices and norms, I refer to the repertory of actions, attitudes and behaviours curated and employed interchangeably by arts practitioners in social and professional settings.

The third empirical chapter presents a discussion on how arts practitioners perceive their relationships with the state. Here, the discussion centres on how these perceptions influence the ways they make mundane professional choices. I argue that the ways in which arts practitioners produce professional practices and norms are informed by the state through the procedural and policy practices enacted by schools and institutions. These procedural and policy practices are also evidence that arts practitioners use to describe the larger ideological praxis at play—technicism and meritocracy as a practice of hiring and of maintaining contracts. I describe and explain the chronological stages of a choral music practitioner's professional life: from the hiring processes to the point of exit from a school contract, to reflect how they perceive the state's role vis-à-vis their profession. I posit that choral music practitioners draw their perceptions of the state as employees from two sources, namely (1) their individual experiences of working in schools, and (2) tropes of these similar experiences shared by other fellow practitioners. These perceptions critically inform them of the ways in

which they develop their decision-making processes when it comes to employment.

The final empirical chapter discusses how arts practitioners perform artistic labour and curate artistic choices based on their perceptions as employees of the state. I examine the production of artistic labour by CCA instructors and focus on choral music as the subject of study. I argue here that choral music practitioners produce arts in accordance with the needs and requirements of both schools and institutions, rather than as a purely aesthetic pursuit. I will demonstrate that while each choral music practitioner experiences artistic autonomy differently, the data I collected shows that their autonomy is tempered by their perceptions of cultural and religious sensitivities that may exist in both state and school administrations. On another level, my data shows that the school administrators either support or reject these artistic choices based on (1) what they perceive to be desired by the state, and (2) how they imagine the reactions and responses of school stakeholders (such as students and parents) would be in relation to artistic work. Thus, I argue that choral music practitioners are compelled to deal with bureaucracy, and when they do, decisions are made on instrumental rather than artistic terms. My findings suggest that arts practitioners not only make artistic decisions based on institutional requirements and preferences, but they also utilize artistic choices as a strategy to produce their own relevancy and value to institutional stakeholders. Furthermore, institutional requirements and preferences vary across institutions, and arts practitioners are required to navigate these differences when negotiating the selection and production of creative work outputs.

CHAPTER THREE:

A brief history of the arts in Singapore's Development Model

3.1 – Introduction

Every relationship has a history, and each side of a relationship has its own version of this history. I argue that the ongoing tensions between the state and the arts practitioners are rooted in their history, and the reasons for these tensions can be found in two sources: The first lies in historical events that have shaped the nation, where we can see how the state has re-calibrated its attitude towards the arts in accordance with adjustments to its developmental model. These adjustments are made apparent to arts practitioners in how the state utilizes the arts in its social and economic projects, which sets the dynamics of their relationship with one another. Secondly, the answers lie in examining the ways arts practitioners endeavour to make sense of their work here in Singapore. Arts practitioners rely on tropes of successes and failures from other arts practitioners to inform them in deciding what actions and attitudes to take on when dealing with their work in schools. The processes of perception, decision-making and action become the production of culture—which is central to my thesis.

This chapter focuses on the first source of the answers, where I look at certain historical events related to the state's utilization of the arts as aspects of its developmental model, to further interrogate what we have come to understand as the complex relationship between the state and the arts practitioners. Before I begin, let me first define what I mean by the relationship between the state and arts practitioners. On the surface, the notion of state and arts practitioners suggests a binary relation between two types of actors – one being the state and

the other being the people that make up arts practitioners. However, this presumption is in itself a reductionist notion. Rather, there are a myriad of personalities and positions at play, and there are times that arts practitioners themselves double up as state actors in their own capacity of working for state institutions. Whilst the state takes on an ideal type entity within the consciousness of the individual arts practitioner, their understanding of their own relationship becomes centred on where they see themselves in relation to the state's interest, and which bureaucratic personalities and entities that they have to deal with on a regular basis.

Scholarship of the state suggest that there is an organized rationale in all these acts of producing legibility and boundaries for social groups within the state. I focus on the production of the rationalities of rule to orientate my thesis towards understanding two aspects of state and arts practitioner relations – (1) why does the state organize itself the way it does, and (2) how does organizing arts practitioners help the state to reproduce its own legitimacy to exist and to rule. These two aspects are important to my thesis because it allows us to know how other scholars have explained the ways in which the state makes legible the arts and arts practitioners, and how the state subsequently utilizes the arts and arts practitioners to achieve its own ends.

3.2 – The arts and the Singapore State

The history of the early days of Singapore's independence contain several examples of the uneasy relationship between the state and arts practitioners. Earlier in chapters 1 and 2, we discussed how Singapore's developmental model underwent many adjustments to respond to the needs of the state vis-à-vis the

realities of world events as well as fluctuations in the global and regional markets. In chapter 2, I discussed how the nation's developmental model reflects the rationale of the ways state actors perform their roles and functions. Subsequently, the developmental model also informs state actors of the ways they deal with, amongst others, the arts and arts practitioners, and is anchored in how the state has changed its attitude towards the arts over the years.

I find that there are several instances during the earlier years of Singapore as an independent sovereign state and its pursuit of its developmental model sets the tone for the current relationship between the state and its arts practitioners. Some scholars have pointed out that the tensions between the state and arts practitioners came into our collective consciousness when a speech by Lee Kuan Yew, who was then the Prime Minister of Singapore, was given at the University of Singapore in 1968. He declared that “poetry is a luxury that we [Singaporeans] cannot afford” (Lim 1989:528, citing Lee (1998)). This speech inadvertently set the tone of the discourse on the Singapore state's view of the arts at the beginning of Singapore's nation-building (Lim 1989; Poon 2010). The historical context of this speech allows for a better understanding of how this declaration reflects an economic and political rationale of the state, as well as how this was translated into state enactments which consequently paved the way for the tense relations between the state and arts practitioners to become established.¹³

The early years of nationhood proved to be both economically and politically difficult for Singapore. Since gaining independence from the Malaysian federation in 1965, Singapore has had to deal with a fast-growing

¹³ In Chapter 1, I outlined the tension between the state and the arts practitioners to be (1) the way the state polices content creation and sentiment expression, and (2) how the state imposes a narrative on the arts that often is contrary to the truths and tropes articulated by the arts practitioners through their works.

population, limited land space, and a lack of natural resources (Lee 2007a). In 1967, the British withdrew their armed forces from the island. Their withdrawal placed Singapore in an economically precarious situation as the military bases gave employment to “one-sixth of Singapore’s labour force” (Lim 2018:44). The withdrawal subsequently caused a significant increase in unemployment. On top of economic uncertainty, Singapore had to deal with two significant events as it underwent the process of un-colonization, merger and then subsequent independence. The first was the threat of a communist insurgency, a proxy guerrilla battle of the Cold war that was waged between the Communist states and the Global North (Leong 2010). Understandably, the threat to state stability was further exacerbated by the withdrawal of the British armed forces in 1967 that placed Singapore in a more vulnerable defensive position. This was a period marked by several acts of violence carried out by the communists on the locals, which consequently disrupted civic life in Singapore (Chua 2017a). The second event was the *konfrontasi* affair, which lasted from 1963 to 1966. The event started off when Indonesia challenged the British-led un-colonization process of the Malayan federation. After several failed attempts in negotiating a peaceful resolution, Indonesia began conducting raids and terrorist attacks in both Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore (*The National Library Board* 2016).

Given that this was the economic and political reality the nation faced, Lee Kuan Yew marshalled all the resources of the nascent nation to ensure that Singapore had an economy that would be able to support current and future populations. He argued that the state must adopt pragmatic sensibilities and focus on “bread and butter issues” first rather than cultivate aesthetic sensibilities during the early days of independence (Koh 1980, 1989). As the then Prime

Minister of Singapore, Lee (1998) surmised that if the nation was to survive, citizens had to be united in dealing with the challenges of the day. As such, any deviation to this vision needed to be addressed swiftly and decisively.

Given how cultural forms can be used to propagate ideological beliefs that are contrary to the interest of the newly formed state, culture was construed to be “a security issue” (Lim 2018:38) for Singapore. Thus, the current events of that time led the then government to be cautious of the various forms of cultural practices which did not explicitly align to its interests (Chua 2017a; Kwok 2003; Leong 2010; Lim 2018). The notion of culture was further problematized when Lee Kuan Yew identified certain forms of cultural expression as “yellow culture” or “decadent and degenerate behaviour” (Lim 2018:33, see also Lee 1998). For him, “yellow culture” was synonymous with cultural forms such as pop music that promulgated a western and liberal hedonistic lifestyle (Lee 1998). This lifestyle was deemed as undesirable for Singapore, as it would detract the younger generation of Singaporeans from contributing to nation-building. The government began to police certain cultural forms, especially theatre, which resulted in a ban on several western popular music, comic books, films and other literary publications in the 1960s (Lim 2018).

The tensions between the state and the arts practitioners came to a head in 1968 when the Singapore government declared a ‘Second Emergency’ in response to a new communist resurgence (Ong and Ramakrishna 2013). Whilst there was a genuine threat to national security from the communists, the government also took the opportunity to go after individuals who were critics of the state. Many amongst these critics were prominent arts practitioners (Chong 2011; Kuo 1999; Kwok 2003; Tan 2013a). These arts practitioners were accused

of being part of a Marxist conspiracy in the 1970s by the state and were subsequently detained and imprisoned without trial (Kwok 2003). Amongst these arts practitioners were Kuo Pao Kun. A summary of his experiences is as follows:

Between March 1976 and October 1980, he [Kuo Pao Kun] was imprisoned without trial by the Singapore government under the Internal Security Act for allegedly propagating “leftist dance and drama” in collaboration with his wife Goh Lay Kuan (the dancer and choreographer who also trained in Australia). In 1977, he was also stripped of his Singapore citizenship (which was reinstated, mysteriously, only in 1992, two years after he was awarded the Cultural Medallion by the Singapore government). (Kwok 2003:194)

During this period, the threat of being arrested under the Internal Security Act for being too critical of the state burdened the minds of arts practitioners. Furthermore, this period also saw many arts groups facing issues with making their practices economically sustainable (Chua 1976). The difficulties faced by arts practitioners during this time were succinctly captured by the nomenclature of Singapore being “the cultural desert” as published on the Straits Times in 16th December 1976 (Chua 1976).

At this juncture, I turn to Koh (1989)’s work as a means of summarizing the events in the 1960s and 1970s. She mentioned that during this time, the state had a fluid definition of culture which includes both a way of life, as well as the arts or ‘high’ culture. These different iterations of culture were used almost interchangeably to suit the needs of the state. The state deployed culture as a strategy for nation-building and producing a national identity. She clarifies:

In my earlier discussion of cultural development in Singapore, I had noted that at that point in time [1979] it [culture] seemed dictated by socio-political ends, but mainly by the practical aims and purposes of ambitious economic development. However, even then there appear signs of a desire to mitigate through culture, as expressed in the arts and ‘gracious living’... It is a measure of the government’s thorough involvement in the life of Singaporeans that it has never been content with addressing its

efforts to economic development and the social welfare alone; it has also vigorously taken the initiative to achieve something often describe as the quality of life, connected sometimes with the 'finer things in life' (Koh 1989:712–13).

Koh's work informs us that the Singapore state has always viewed culture and the arts as an ongoing project stemming from the developmental model. This view has not substantially changed, even with the enactment of new policies and policy changes taking place. Her work also informs us that the ways in which the state instrumentalizes the arts are contingent upon what the state needs at a specific juncture in time. As goals and needs change, so too do the ways in which culture and the arts are used.

Relating this back to how historical events help us better understand the ongoing tensions between the state and arts practitioners, Koh's work informs me of two issues at play. On one hand, there is a consistency in the way the state has unapologetically instrumentalized culture and the arts to pursue their own developmental goals. This becomes problematic for arts practitioners as the state controls the production of meaning for culture and the arts in public discourse; any artistic endeavour outside the premise of state produced meanings can potentially be positioned or accused as anti-state, and therefore subject to state scrutiny and subsequent sanction.

Secondly, different actors experience changes in meanings to culture and the arts at different time frames, and this almost always disadvantages arts practitioners. Whilst policy changes can be quickly executed by well-calibrated state bodies, arts practitioners find out about how these changes affect the ways they produce their work only belatedly. Potentially, whatever strategies that may have worked in the past may become quickly obsolete whenever new policies are implemented or when policy changes happen. When this happens, arts

practitioners would have to find new strategies of success, and not many arts practitioners have the required capital to do so.

The arts practitioners' uneasiness towards culture being instrumentalised by the state carried over into the 1980s and 1990s. As tensions grew, views towards the arts became increasingly polarised. On one hand were actors that represented the state, namely an assembly of "senior leadership who may share a fundamental ideological orientation, but who do not necessarily share the exact same political opinions, much less share a fixed view on an area as amorphous as the 'arts and culture'" (Wee 2016:232). The arts practitioners, on the other hand, were by no means a coherent and organized body with a single unifying socio-political agenda. Rather, most of them were trying to come to terms with developing their discipline within the confines set up by the city-state (Kwok 2003), and with varying degrees of success (Wee 2007, 2016).

However, it should not be construed that there were no sympathisers within the ranks of the 'senior leadership'. The few, like Professor Tommy Koh, did what he could when the state's ire was directed towards certain arts practitioners. He recalls the following:

When an attempt was mounted to demonize The Necessary Stage [a drama company that brought Marxist-inspired Forum Theatre into Singapore], I rose to its defence and the attack fizzled out. I could not, however, defend Josef Ng [a performance artist who performed a controversial work that involved cutting his pubic hair at an arts space named 5th Passage located in the Parkway Parade Shopping Mall in Singapore] from the wrath of some ultra-conservative elements in the government. Kuo Pao Kun and the other members of the artistic community were very disappointed with me for not preventing the police from taking action against Josef Ng. Alas, I have no such power. Singapore was a very different society in the early 1990s than it is today. At that time, forum theatre and performance arts were viewed with suspicion. (Koh 2015b:11)

If the ongoing tension during these years was used as a trajectory of the state's relationship with the arts practitioners, it goes without saying that the arts practitioners did have substantial cause for being antagonistic towards the state. Yet, the state's attitude towards the arts has softened considerably as the years progressed, especially since the 1990s. This rationale behind this change of attitude, and how this attitude is translated into actual policies and state enactments, sets up the apriorism of why my puzzle requires examining and explaining.

The state's change of attitude towards the arts is rooted in Singapore adjustments of its developmental model. In the 1970s and 1980s, Singapore's economy was heavily dependent on the manufacturing sector. In the 1980s, the nation began experiencing stiff competition from other countries around the region such as Vietnam, Thailand, and Indonesia. Seeing that this competition with other countries in the region was neither viable nor sustainable in the long term, the Singapore state had to re-evaluate its economic trajectories and find new ways to diversify its pathways towards achieving overall economic growth. Singapore's response to these challenges was to shift its economic focus away from manufacturing and towards the knowledge and financial industry sectors and develop Singapore's creative economy.

To prime Singapore's creative industry, the government had to come up with new strategies to ensure that such an expansion could be possible. Using successful global cities like London, New York, and Sydney as benchmarks, the government decided Singapore needed to be re-imagined as a creative global city. In a speech made in Parliament, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said the following:

A culturally vibrant city attracts global creative talent. Creative people are highly mobile. They do not slavishly go to where the jobs are. They choose where they want to work based on their lifestyle interests, and the jobs and prosperity follow them. (Goh 2002).

The government saw how the arts contributed to the branding of creative global cities around the world (Tan 2015; Tay 2005). These global cities have utilized the arts as a strategy to rebrand their urban spaces as places where the elite ‘global citizens of the world’ come to work, play, and stay (Tay 2005). Furthermore, Goh was clear in articulating that where talent congregates, so too does foreign capital and economic success.

With that goal in mind, the government came up with the RCP, a policy cluster that laid out plans for Singapore to become a creative global city and a veritable hub for the arts. This policy cluster contained state-wide actions that deploy the arts as part of a state-wide economic strategy to transform the island-nation into a global city. For the state, the arts became more than a form of aesthetic pursuit and the production of individual and communal identities; the arts are seen as both an industry that serves the economic development needs of the state, as well as a strategy to attract foreign talent and capital to come and take root in Singapore.

The RCP was officially launched in 2000. The totality of these state enactments is embodied by the RCP policy cluster, with joint and co-ordinated efforts between government bodies such as Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI), Ministry of Education (MOE), Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY), the National Arts Council (NAC), Economic Development Board (EDB), Singapore Tourism Board (STB) and the National Heritage Board (NHB) (Chang 2000; Chang and Lee 2003; Ministry of Information,

Communications and the Arts 2008; Wong 2017). According to MTI, the collective goal was to

develop a vibrant and sustainable creative cluster to propel the growth of Singapore's Creative Economy. The creative cluster not only generates economic value directly, it is also an economy-wide enabler that helps to drive innovation and differentiate our products and services (Ministry of Trade and Industry 2002).

This declaration and the subsequent implementation of the RCP makes clear why the state had begun to place more emphasis on the arts (Chong 2011; Wee 2003, 2010).

Subsequent scholarly works that examined the RCP in the 1990s and 2000s built on Koh's work and explored other instances of state-initiated arts and arts policy enactments. Wee (2010)'s work looks at the RCP policy cluster as one of these arts projects that came out of the state's developmental model. He concurs with Koh's work in saying that

in its pursuit of economic growth and development, [Singapore] forsook not only many of the political dimensions of democratic life but also its cultural dimensions, taken in both the "High Culture" and "way-of-life" senses. An industrial and commercial understanding of culture was left, and manufacturing and productive institutions became the collective basis of social life (Wee 2010:489).

Wee frames the state enactments as a consolidation of effort and resources to tap on the potentiality of the arts in contributing directly and indirectly to state endeavours, specifically to the nation's economic growth. Subsequently, the RCP informs each participating state body to engage and operationalize culture and the arts in their own organizational goals and objectives.

Wee's work informs us of a specific instance of the state's role in the production of culture and the arts. He makes clear that the state's intentions of allocating additional funding and resources towards the production of the arts in

Singapore are to develop the economic capabilities of the state. Furthermore, the involvement of multiple state bodies in enacting the RCP signals to how the policy cluster is the state's largest arts endeavour to date. This includes MOE and the schools under their purview, which is why they are of significant interest to my work. This articulation of intent by the state and its subsequent actions via policy enactments helps us to have a clearer understanding of where the state is positioned in my puzzle; that whatever approach the state takes towards managing the arts in Singapore, it does so from a place of domination.

Firstly, the state is highly concerned about presenting the optics of Singapore being a cultural "hub", as evidenced by its building projects such as the Esplanade and Marina Bay Sands (MBS). Secondly, the RCP's stipulated outcomes seem to suggest more work possibilities and potential funding for arts practitioners, as long as their works are aligned with the objectives of the RCP. Hence, Wee's work informs me that within my puzzle, the state is keen to be regarded as a purveyor and champion of the arts so that it can satisfy its own imagination of being a global city. The discrepancy here lies in the type of arts that the state seeks to champion. In this new vision of the global city, the state will be more inclined to support artistic works that are economically and commercially viable on their own merit.

The state's positioning as a champion of the arts is regarded as a contradiction by arts practitioners and arts critics, who have construed Singapore as an oppressive environment for the arts since the 1970s. Both scholarly works mentioned earlier suggest that this contrariness has existed throughout the history of the Singapore state and arts relations. Other scholars such as Willmott (1989) and Lee (2007a) argued that the state embraces these contradictions to create a

central national narrative that sought to codify and preserve state enactments as the primary ameliorating force for the people of Singapore. Furthermore, the creation of this narrative also draws the lines of legibility on which arts are supported by, and thus in return supports the state. This narrative is an important foundation for the production of national identity and lays out the parameters of what the state desires as thinkable and unthinkable with respect to the cultural forms of expressing national identity (Chong 2010a; Chua 1995; Willmott 1989).

The issue articulated by previous scholarship is that while the state does not deny the presence of arts and arts practitioners in the nation's earlier history, it positions them to be either at the peripheries embedded in small localized practices (Chua 2017b; Koh 1989; Kuo 1999; Lee 2007b), or at worst, as subversive and anti-state (Chong 2011; Koh 1989, 2015b; Kwok 2003; Tan 2013a). However, this narrative experienced a significant shift in the 1960s when the arts became an instrument in the production of national identity, particularly in the SYF (Chong 2010a; Chua 1995). The state argues that using the arts to produce national identity was key to the nation's survival and longevity; different ethnicities and religious practices of its citizens could potentially set off internal conflicts if not 'socially engineered' properly (Chong 2010a; Meisenbach and Kramer 2014; Siddique 1989).¹⁴

Predictably, many arts practitioners are uncomfortable coming to terms with the ways in which the state has instrumentalized the arts for economic development (Kuo 1999; Tan 2013a; Tan and Sasitharan 2015; Wee 2016). Despite the state's new focus towards facilitating the growth of the arts sector,

¹⁴ I use the term 'socially engineered' in deference to the works of Chong (2010), Chua (1989, 2002) and Teo (2011), amongst other scholars who have argued that this rationality for national identity is constructed and manufactured in order to fulfill the desires of the state in its pursuit of reproducing its legitimacy to rule.

many arts practitioners remain sceptical of the state. The essence of the arts practitioners' sentiments and concerns were captured in an interview with dramaturge and former Artistic Director of the Singapore International Arts Festival, Mr Ong Keng Sen, conducted by Bharati Jagdish (2015). Here, he said that the state's control over the arts in Singapore continues to be suffocating, even after the RCP was launched. He argued that for an arts practitioner to get either funding or work, they need to use the language syntax practised by the bureaucratic structure in order to successfully engage the state bureaucrats who control these resources. This syntax requires the use of technical-operational jargon such as key performance indicators, budgets and project plans – dimensions of production that many arts practitioners find at odds with their own creative practices.

In a different interview featured in *The Guardian*, Ong Keng Sen said that many arts practitioners in Singapore have consciously and willingly conformed to the state's prescription for the arts. He argued that in Singapore, the state is the largest provider of employment, funding, and resources. Without the support of the state, arts making in Singapore is difficult to sustain economically (Harmon 2017). Ong suggests that the transactional interface between arts practitioners and the state bureaucracies can show us how arts practitioners are beholden to engage the bureaucracy in prescribed forms and syntax that seems almost ritualistic in nature. This adherence to the formulaic communication, ala *burueaucrat-ese*, adds to the difficulties faced by the arts practitioners. Arts practitioners need to understand not only the lingua franca of bureaucratise but also the “unarticulated desires” of the bureaucracies that also reflect the desires of the state. These “unarticulated desires” include having arts projects that are

economically sustainable, as well as the capacity to collate and process arts consumer data that can be used to justify the cost-effectiveness of state monies and resources. As many arts practitioners struggle to finance their practices, they remain very much dependent on the grants awarded by the state. The bureaucratic requirements for grants coerce arts practitioners to produce reports and additional administrative work. This is problematic as not many arts practitioners have the capacity or resources to produce such reports. Moreover, producing reports takes precious time away from actual arts making.

From the overview above, we can see how the Singapore state and arts practitioners have had a tenuous and strained relationship since the beginning of Singapore's nationhood. These examples inform us that from the 1960s to 1980s, the Singapore government regarded culture and the arts to be peripheral to the concerns of the state; arts forms and artists that appear in the public consciousness were usually discussed as problematic to nationhood. In the late 1990s to the 2000s, we saw the state's implementation of the RCP, where the arts are now a part of the state's repertory of economic strategies in response to the island nation's current and future economic realities.

Yet, the gaps in the historical narrative presented above present a lacuna within my puzzle that needs examination. Ong Keng Sen's responses set up the background of why arts practitioners seem to perceive the recent state enactments towards managing the arts in Singapore in the ways that they do. However, an issue that needs further unpacking is the ways in which we operationalise the arts in Singapore. The arts should not be construed as a monolithic cultural form, but as a vast collection of aesthetic practices belonging to different cultural settings. Ong Keng Sen's bureaucratic imagination of the state managing the arts is

situated in the setting of professional and semi-professional groups and should not be conflated to encapsulate the entirety of the tensions between the state and arts practitioners. However, if the arts' practices and production of professional and semi-professional groups constitute 'high' art, what is missing in this overview are the issues and tensions that come about in instances of 'everyday' arts making – the arts practices and products that are used in education, in leisure, and in social settings. Furthermore, if Ong Keng Sen's responses make concrete why there is a tension between arts practitioners involved in 'high' arts and the state, would arts practitioners who take part in 'everyday' arts making and production experience similar tensions?

Many arts practitioners are conscious that the perchance for state control has shifted its modality from outward symbolic and physical violence through arrests as seen in the 1970s and 1980s, to a more insidious form of control through grant awards and subsequent withdrawals (Gerard 2015; Nanda 2015; Tan and Sasitharan 2015; Yong 2015).¹⁵ Subsequently, this discomfort adds an additional dimension of the tension between arts practitioners and the state. Furthermore, arts practitioners are not fully convinced that these state enactments have improved the ways in which the arts are practised and produced. To them, whilst RCP was intended to stimulate the growth of the arts, the RCP also perpetuates state-determined conditions and the subsequent control experienced by arts practitioners (Chong 2011, 2014a; Chua and Lim 2015; Wee 2016).

The works and sources discussed earlier in this section allude that the Singapore state has always dominated the arts. Collectively they seem to suggest

¹⁵ The idea of arms-length funding is discussed and presented within the "manifesto of the arts" which was mentioned in chapter 2.

that since the inception of the country, arts practitioners had little choice but to produce the arts under state-determined conditions of stringent content control. These works inform our understanding of the problem in the relationship aspect of the state and arts practitioners—that from a Foucauldian perspective, not only does the state produce categories of the ruled, it also determines the ways in which resistance can be performed by the subjects. Furthermore, these works inform us that the narratives that are used to describe the relationship between the state and arts practitioners do also change, and these changes are often due to a re-orientation of the state's immediate and long-term goals. These works also provide the impetus of my own study; now that the state has embarked on the RCP which also changed the narrative of the arts in Singapore, how do arts practitioners re-orientate their own roles within the newest adjustment of the developmental model?

Furthermore, we can also see that the Singapore state has shifted its modalities towards the oversight towards the arts, moving from outright arrests and criminalization to the use of public ordinances such as licensing, censorship, as well as the mechanics of legibility towards the deservedness of state grants and resources. What I find most useful in informing my own theoretical work is that these works collectively suggest that as the relationship between the state and arts practitioners change, so too does the points of contention that give rise to the tensions between both. This also seems to suggest that the contradiction between state desired outcomes and arts practitioner sentiments is part of the sociological puzzle that my thesis attempts to explain. This leads me to ask two questions – (1) given that history suggests the tension between the state and arts practitioners comes from the contradictions mentioned above, where can we find

such lived examples today, and (2) are there any other sources of tension, especially in how the state carries out arts and education-based policies under the umbrella of the RCP, given the shifting modalities of state rule?

3.3 – The arts in Schools as Renaissance City Plans (RCP) Strategy

In Chapter 1, I mentioned that by the end of the 1990s, the Singapore state had categorically laid out its support of the arts through various policies that are enacted in concert by various ministries and statutory bodies (Koh 2015b; Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts 2008; National Arts Council 2012). Most of these policies were clustered around the *Renaissance City Plans* (RCP) project, a state-wide initiative that sought to transform Singapore into a Global City and vibrant centre for the arts. The RCP was officially launched in 2001. Since then, the RCP policy cluster has guided various state bodies in effecting many changes not only to Singapore's infrastructure, but also to social and educational imperatives so as to better prepare Singapore and its citizens to become active participants of the new global city reality (Huang 2016; National Arts Council 2012, 2016; Tay 2005).

These changes at the state level are sociologically interesting; they are also relevant to how we understand the current tensions between the state and arts practitioners. My work uses the context of how arts practitioners experience the various policy enactments and policy adjustments over a period of time—that these arts practitioners make sense of their work in relation to the historical tensions made real and tangible via their collective social memory, the new interventions by the state, as well as their own experiences with state proxies and actors who are perceived as representatives of the state.

The RCP's influence can be clearly seen in MOE's crafting of its policies regarding arts education and arts practices (Koh 2015b; Lee 2000; Lee, Sasitharan, and Maizhnan 1998; Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts 2008; Ministry of Trade and Industry 2002; National Archives of Singapore 2018; Shanmugaratnam 2003; Sim and Ong 2014; Tan 2015; Wong 2017). Chief of these practices is the SYF and its wide array of competitions and activities, and the adjustments to these policies that are informed by MOE's own operational understanding of achieving the goals set out by the state in the RCP (Gopinathan 2007; Ministry of Education 2015, 2018a; Tan 2010a). This informs us of two things: firstly, the alignment of goals across state bodies is well coordinated in terms of each organization's orientation, given that the mandate by the government is to work collectively together to achieve the developmental model goals. Secondly, we can trace the decisions made in policy changes back to the state's overarching goals.

At the time of writing this dissertation, there are currently three iterations of the RCP, with the last being rolled out in 2012 (Koh 2015b; Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts 2008; Tan 2015). The RCP policy cluster ensured a state-wide multi-agency approach towards implementing social and educational policies geared towards transforming the citizenry into active participants of a global creative city. The state devoted a significant amount of economic resources to build facilities and infrastructure that would facilitate arts making and performances. According to Mr Tan Chin Nam, former Permanent Secretary of MICA,

There were discernible linkages also in development plans between the Ministry of Labour, which later became the Ministry of Manpower and MICA. Simultaneously, a structured approach towards arts education was receiving attention at the Ministry of Education [MOE], to prepare manpower to propel the creative industries, in order to make Singapore a Creative Nation or a Renaissance Nation. There were orientations that led to the whole foundation of the term "Renaissance City" in which Singapore would evolve to be a Learning Nation, with an emphasis on creativity in arts and culture (Tan 2015:4–5).

Tan's mentioning of MOE being tasked to prepare the citizens to become active participants in the future creative economy is of significant interest to me, especially since MOE is also the largest employer of arts practitioners. When we look for reasons why there are ongoing tensions between the state and arts practitioners, the answer can be found by further examining instances where arts practitioners are hired by the state to professionally facilitate acts of everyday arts making. These instances mostly often occur in schools, where the state is employer, and the arts practitioners are employees of the state. Whilst some arts practitioners are hired by MOE to teach school curriculum as full-time teachers, many of them take on contract positions as Co-curricular Activity (CCA) instructors. For my thesis, I am interested in looking at choral music practitioners who are hired by schools to helm their school choirs. The nature of their work is different from curriculum-teaching full-time teachers, who impart theoretical and technical content of the arts. For CCA instructors who instruct performing arts ensembles, their work deals mainly with tactual arts making geared towards the bi-annual SYF competition. Secondly, and more importantly, the adjustments in SYF policies in 2012 provide us with an opportunity to study how choral music practitioners produce culture in relation to these policy changes and adjustments.

We know from Tan (2015) that part of the preparations to transform Singapore into a *Renaissance City* came under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of

Education (MOE). I am most interested in how MOE recalibrated the delivery of holistic education in schools to meet these goals, and how this set up the working environment for arts practitioners.

MOE utilizes both curricular and co-curricular programmes to prepare students for their future participation in Singapore's economy. This recalibration first culminated in the *Thinking Schools, Learning Nation* Framework launched in 1997 (Gopinathan and Sharpe 2002) and then subsequently the *21st Century Competency Framework* (21CC) launched in 2009 (Tan et al. 2018). According to MOE,

The person who is schooled in the Singapore Education system embodies the Desired Outcomes of Education. He has a good sense of self-awareness, a sound moral compass, and the necessary skills and knowledge to take on challenges of the future. He is responsible for his family, community and nation. He appreciates the beauty of the world around him, possesses a healthy mind and body, and has a zest for life (Ministry of Education 2018b).

Schools are oriented by these frameworks in utilizing both curricular and co-curricular teaching and learning programmes to develop resilient and creative denizens of the future (Ministry of Education 2015). Furthermore, MOE also collaborated with other ministerial bodies such as the NAC and MCCY to build programmes that schools can tap on as supplementary programmes for students' holistic development. Such programmes included broad-based arts appreciation programmes under the auspices of the National Arts Council Arts Education Programme (NAC-AEP) umbrella. MOE also planned for the expansion of specialised arts programmes: examples include the introduction of Drama as an examinable subject at the GCE 'O' and 'A' Levels, and Music at the Normal (Technical) level. The curriculum for these specialist elective AEP and MEP programmes were reviewed to include a wider range of genres, and MOE strived

to make these programmes more accessible by allowing more schools to offer these programmes.¹⁶

The Singapore Government also decided to strengthen the capacity for the education system that would facilitate pathways for students coming out of these specialised MOE programmes to gain access to further specialised professional arts training. They did this in two ways: Firstly, they provided additional funding to established arts institutions like NAFA and LaSalle to strengthen their programmes. Secondly, the government sought willing institutional partners to establish new arts institutions in Singapore. This resulted in the establishment of the Yong Siew Toh Music Conservatory (YST) in 2001, which was a goal of the first iteration of the RCP. Two other schools were established under the auspices of the second iteration of the RCP (Ministry of Trade and Industry 2002; Tan 2015): the Tisch School of the Arts in 2007, which was subsequently closed in 2015, and the School for the Arts (SOTA) in 2008.

Earlier, I mentioned that CCAs are also part of MOE's strategy to prepare students for the future economy. According to the MOE,

CCAs are an integral part of our students' holistic education. Through CCA, students discover their interests and talents while developing values and competencies that will prepare them for a rapidly changing world (Ministry of Education 2018a).

I also mentioned that the CCA's relationship with the SYF is an integral part of finding lived examples of existing tensions between the state and arts practitioners. This relationship is best described in a reply to a question presented in the parliamentary debates on 17th September 2007 by Tharman

¹⁶ At this juncture, I note that what is of interest to me and this thesis is how co-curricular activities are being managed by schools and MOE in view of the Desired Outcomes of Education (DoE), and how these changes have affected the ways in which arts practitioners who operationalise and negotiate their work with the schools and the state. I elaborate this later in the section.

Shanmugaratnam, who was then the Minister for Education. He described the SYF as follows:

The SYF plays an important role in promoting the development of the arts in our schools. Its objectives are to encourage mass participation in performing arts CCAs, promote the growth of an arts culture in our schools and raising standards in arts education. The SYF also showcases the diverse talents of our students in the arts. The SYF is a two-step process each year. In April, the central judging benchmarks the standards of performing arts groups in schools by assessing them in six categories: band, Chinese orchestra, choir, dance, drama and instrumental ensembles. Schools that do well in each category are then selected and showcased in the festival in July. Each year, more than 20 events are staged under SYF and the performances reach out to ticketed audience at formal concert halls as well as members of the public at shopping centres and parks (Singapore Parliament 2007).

The SYF is more than just an annual series of events organized by MOE with a focus on the co-curricular activities and the youths. Since its inception on 18th July 1967, the state intended the SYF to be a visible nation-building project that would “produce robust and healthy young people” (Ministry of Education 2019) and provide “a common ground for young people from different backgrounds to mix and get to know each other” (Faisal 2016). In the 1960s and 1970s, given the backdrop of the geopolitical and economic issues Singapore faced during that time, the SYF was seen as a crucial form of state intervention to foster a sense of belonging and national identity in Singapore’s youths (Chong 2010b; Ministry of Education 2019; National Archives of Singapore 2018). The SYF was declared a national event in 1994, supported by other state bodies such as MCCY, People’s Association (PA) and Sports SG. the majority of the SYF’s participants are from local schools Since the 1990s, the SYF has included a competition segment for the performing arts. Shanmugaratnam mentioned that the SYF serves as a benchmarking platform for performing arts CCAs to assess their standards. This benchmarking exercise evolved to become a competition

that held high stakes for participating schools. The results of the SYF competitions were used by MOE as part of a ranking matrix for schools—this was known as the Schools Excellence Model (SEM) (Ministry of Education 2007; Mok 2003; Ng 2003; Shanmugaratnam 2003). Schools are ranked every year in accordance to the average performance of the entire graduating student cohort as well as their performance in other areas such as co-curricular activities (Ministry of Education 2007; Ng 2003; Sim 2014). These rankings are published by MOE and are made available to the public (see Ministry of Education 2006).

This ranking system became a pecking order not just to MOE and school administrators, but also to parents and students. The pecking order also became the symbol of the unintended effects of meritocracy: parents would desire their children to go to better schools. The published results reinforced the perception of disparity of educational outcomes between the ‘elite’ schools that dominate the upper echelons of the ranking table, and the ‘neighbourhood’ schools which may not even qualify to be positioned in the banding table. The SEM was a tool through which school leaders made strategic actions and decisions that would help their schools produce better results. This included school leaders and administrators instrumentalizing the SYF as part of their strategy for competitiveness vis-à-vis other schools (Huang et al. 2019; Lye 2012; Ng 2017; Sim and Ong 2014). It is worth mentioning that there are two specific strategies that successful schools employ in order to reproduce results. The first being the hiring and retention of arts practitioners who are capable of reproducing desired results; The second is establishing niche programmes and using this special status

to attract talented students via the Direct Schools Admission (DSA) programme.

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3.4 – CCA instructors in the post-2012 SYF era

This brings us to the next point of interest for my thesis, where I examine the aftermath of a change in policies that outlined changes to the SYF and its role in the assessment of schools. A summary of the policy changes are as follows: The first of these changes was made in 2012. MOE has mandated that the SYF move away from the highly rigorous competition format implemented previously, and instead implemented three broad categories of adjudication results. The rationale for this is to remove the competitive elements of the SYF in order to instil a more holistic approach to towards arts making and performance. Other changes occurred from 2014 onwards, where MOE restructured the school awards system and removed the SYF results from the assessment of schools (Ministry of Education 2013). Furthermore, the results of the SYF adjudication will no longer contribute to the school's institutional assessment. This is to de-incentivise school leaders to hot-house students with additional training sessions or rehearsals in order to prepare them for competition.

This juncture embodies a crucial point of analyses for my work as we are able to see how well-intended policy enactments have caused discontent in arts practitioners who are employed by the state. Whilst these policies changes

¹⁷ The DSA programme was formalized as a policy and a process by MOE in 2004 (Ministry of Education 2017a). It allowed students to use their talents to enroll in schools with independent or autonomous status, or schools that have niche or special programmes. However, these students would be required to meet the minimum score requirements to qualify for certain academic streams or courses, such as required a total aggregate of 20 points for GCE 'O' levels or less in order to qualify for Junior College Admission.

mentioned above do not directly deal with arts practitioners per se, it does affect the ways in which arts practitioners perform their roles as hired instructors and content providers in MOE, especially in the ways they identify and present themselves to the schools and to others.¹⁸ It is important to note that each school or institution does have a great deal of autonomy in deciding how these policies should be carried out, and the ways that schools make sense of and implement these changes are dependent on the resources they can access and make use of.

By looking at the aftermath of the policy changes in MOE and how these changes affect the everyday work of arts practitioners in schools, my puzzle of why there are continued tensions between the state and arts practitioners can be framed by how the state's well-intended policies have unforeseen consequences to the arts and arts practitioners. The significance in exploring these changes is that they are sites of the emergence of specific new tensions—more specifically, changes to existing policies and its subsequent effects on the arts practitioners employed in schools. Scholarly work that look at the effects of educational policies in Singaporean schools have been more concerned about broader educational outcomes and pedagogical effectiveness rather than how policy changes affect the lived realities of adjunct or contracted educators, and especially CCA instructors (See also Costes-Onishi and Caleon 2016; Huang et al. 2019; Mok 2003; Ng 2003, 2011, 2017; Ng and Chan 2008; Shanmugaratnam 2003).

In summary, the tensions coming out of these policy changes represent a significant shift as a mode of governance compared to earlier periods—a move

¹⁸ I discuss the effects in greater detail in chapters Four and Five of my thesis.

that is in many ways more subtle, especially when compared to the overtly controlling and censoring stance the state adopted in the 1960s to 1980s. Scholarship pertaining to the study of the state presented in this chapter collectively show that a source of tensions between the state and arts practitioners come out of policy changes. Furthermore, examining the SYF has allowed us to witness an exercise of inconspicuous state power, imperceptible even to those who are themselves subjected to it. In the next few chapters, I show how choral music practitioners experience these changes and subsequently negotiate with the schools and institutions. These individual accounts give us a better understanding of how they as arts practitioners perceive these systemic changes as part of a more macro state action. Their experiences can also help us account for the situated and specific experiences they have with their schools in order for us to make sense of how these experiences collectively contribute to the ongoing tension between them and the state.

CHAPTER FOUR:

Camps and Factions – a social map of the choral music scene in Singapore

4.1 – Introduction

In my previous chapter, I focused on the history of the relationship between the state and arts practitioners. At the beginning of Singapore's nationhood, the government initially created barriers to arts making in the interest of consolidating its legitimacy to rule. Later, the Singapore government changed its position to utilize the arts as part of its own strategy to make manifest its' developmental model. Following this trajectory of explaining the puzzle of why there are ongoing tensions between the state and arts practitioners, in this chapter, I bring to attention how despite the state's attempt to ameliorate the arts, state-led interventions continue to be a source of distress and uneasiness for the arts practitioners.

When I asked my informants to describe the choral music scene, almost everyone started talking about how the scene is divided into different camps. Of all the responses shared with me, the one given by Wen struck me as the most vivid.¹⁹ He said

¹⁹ Earlier in Section 1.5, I mentioned that I employed the use of pseudonyms when referencing my informants. I employ a mix of names to reflect that the sample has a good mix of genders and ethnicities. However, I do not name my respondents according to their real genders and ethnicities in an effort to anonymise their identities, especially to others within the community.

Every workplace has politics, and this is something someone like you should know very well [as a former schoolteacher]. Some people get along and some people don't. But here we're talking about choral conductors and pianists... these people are artists... are musicians... They're cliquish not because they can't get along with others... Even though... you know, some people are just built to rub people the wrong way. It's a bit ironic because artists rarely get along with each other, at least that's what I think *lah*. They're together, as in *working* [emphasis his] together because there is *no choice* [emphasis mine]. They're working together in their different camps because the camps and the people in them can get them jobs and contacts. It's a different kind of politics – it's about competing for jobs. You can only hope that the people who are supposed to be on your side won't go for the same jobs as you.

Wen's word choice of "politics" and the subsequent mentioning of belonging to a camp as a strategic choice gives us cause to think on what he meant by the idea of "no choice". I use the spatial practice perspective to examine and understand this idea of choices or the lack thereof, and how choral music practitioners make sense of their relationships in the workplace, with each other as well as with the state.

According to Lefebvre (1991), the spatial practice perspective informs us that certain spaces induce specific types of social actions which are carried out by specific actors in space. How much of the orientation of camps as a form of social grouping and its idiosyncratic practices are influenced by the localised practices of schools in which these arts practices are enacted? This question is pertinent as most of the choral music practitioners are employed by schools, and schools are spaces that are produced and determined by the state. In fact, the arts practitioners themselves understand that the professional relationships they have with one another is, in many ways, a product of how the state produces and controls their working environments. This is made manifest in how the SYF and its policies are the focal points of the work arts practitioners do in schools.

I found using the spatial practice perspective in the analysis of the camps useful in finding out how my puzzle of the ongoing tensions between the state and arts practitioners plays out in schools and institutions. Here is where an explanation to my puzzle emerges: where the state, on one hand, gives employment opportunities and resources, the ways in which these employment opportunities and resources are allocated brings about excessive competition and tension amongst arts practitioners. Not only that, this competition and tension had become embedded in the ways arts practitioners see one another, and also the ways in which they produce a culture of the arts.

I decided to employ a social map to illustrate how the working environment in schools informs choral music practitioners of which camp affiliations they can prescribe to. This social map will also clearly illustrate the divisions amongst choral music practitioners. A social mapping of the choral music scene in Singapore via a taxonomy makes it easier for us to see the relationships between choral music practitioners and others within the scene, and makes clear how these relationships and their associated dynamics shift as policy changes are enacted. This chapter thus answers the following questions: (1) “If the social spaces undergo change, would the social practices also change accordingly?” and (2) “If there are changes to the social practices, what considerations do the actors have when conceiving of such changes?” By answering these questions, part of the explanation of why there are ongoing tensions between the state and arts practitioners emerge – that while the state seemingly creates opportunities for employment and builds cultural and social capital via the SYF, these same structures also create tension and competition amongst arts practitioners.

In this chapter, I show (1) how choral music practitioners' perceptions of inclusion or exclusion in relation to their respective camps are considerably influenced by the state's production of social and cultural capital. This production of capital is concentrated in MOE's enactment of the SYF and in changes made to arts education policies. (2) The ways choral music practitioners create cultural practices and norms within their respective camps and across the entire choral music scene are influenced by the SYF. By cultural practices and norms, I mean the repertory of actions, attitudes, and behaviours that are employed interchangeably by arts practitioners in social and professional settings. With respect to the changes to the social and cultural formation, it must be noted that the state does not explicitly seek to regulate the professional relationships of arts practitioners. Rather, the state's influence on these relationships occurs indirectly through policies that regulate the institutions which employ arts practitioners. I use both these instances as evidence to this chapter's argument, which is that tensions between the state and arts practitioners arise when state enactments, unintendedly or otherwise, change the social and cultural formation of the arts practitioners. These changes, in turn, put them in a compromised position and require them to expend effort and time to produce new strategies in order to adjust to the new order.

4.2 – “Which camp do you belong to?” - Mapping the choral music scene

When I met up with the respondents who were introduced to me, the first question many of them asked me was, “Which *camp* [emphasis mine] do you belong to?” Each of them had their own reasons for asking me that question. Some of them sought to find common ties or other mutual friends with me. Others

were worried about crossing unspoken lines of loyalty and secret keeping if they agreed to be interviewed by me. “Camp” was the word that my informants used to describe the different social groups that exist within Singapore’s choral music scene. The use of “camp[s]” indexes a social map in which choral music practitioners use for the purpose of locating others in the same profession . Hence, it was necessary to find out what the word “camp” meant to my informants, and how the meaning is used to make or break social and professional relationships amongst arts practitioners.

The choral music scene has five main camps. Four of these camps are dominated by an apex personality. These apex personalities are collectively referred to as the “*four choir gods of Singapore*”. In fact, each camp takes on the name of their apex personality. These individuals gained prominence in the 1990s when MOE’s Choral Excellence Programme was at the height of its popularity with the state (Tan 2000, 2014; Toh 2011). Since then, every one of these ‘*choir gods*’ have produced choirs that have won numerous prestigious awards both locally and internationally. Because of their numerous accolades, each of these ‘*choir gods*’ is imbued with tremendous social and cultural capital within the local and international choral music scene, and are well regarded by other practitioners as well as state institutions, such as MOE and NAC.

For the uninitiated, the camps of the choral music practitioners consist of four large clusters of individuals, with a scattering of individuals in the periphery. The four clusters make up the first four main camps. There are informal hierarchies within each of these camps, as well as across the choral music scene. The informal hierarchy across the choral music scene is stratified by a combination of the following: the seniority of the individual, the person’s

relationships with the other apex personalities, and finally, his or her own social and cultural capital. The hierarchy within each camp is constructed along the lines of seniority and rank in relation to a choral music practitioner's age and the lineage from which the person comes. My explanation of this idea of lineage is informed by Bourdieu's notion of social capital, in which a person's social capital in the form of interpersonal and group connections can be transformed into tangible outcomes, such as getting jobs or creating access to resources (Bourdieu 2002; Coleman 1988; Couldry 2004). For choral music practitioners, lineage is a matter of your choral history—which choirs you have sung in, and who you are associated with. A person's lineage determines which camps he or she has access to, and subsequently, his or her ability to tap into the collective memories and resources of camps (Bourdieu 1977, 1989, 2000b, 2002, See also Coleman 1988).

Most choral music practitioners I spoke with felt that camp membership articulated their own individual identities as choral music practitioners. It also informs others of their positions within the choral music scene. My informants share a collective understanding of the concept of “camps” and their distinct boundaries. To them, camps are distinct social groupings amongst choral music practitioners that delineate traditional allies and rivals. To them, the lines between the camps are drawn very clearly. Each choral music practitioner is perceived to belong to one of the five camps. This perception is informed by a choral music practitioner's lineage—more specifically, which choirs he or she sang in when they were schooling, and which community choirs they continued to sing in after leaving school.

There are two additional aspects of lineage that delineate a person's inclusion or exclusion in a specific camp. The first being one's direct association

with a choir god, which in most cases, is determined by one's membership in choirs directed by that choir god. The second being a matter of secondary degrees of separation in relation to a choir god, where one is a member of choir(s) whose conductors are directly associated as mentioned earlier. Most of my informants have had, at one point of time in their lives, sung in such choirs in school. Many of them still continue to sing as members of community choirs led by the *choir gods*. Additionally, gaining access and maintaining membership to these networks are part of their own repertory of strategies and interventions towards the production of arts, of which I will discuss later in this chapter.

While the first four camps are built around individual members linked by their direct and indirect relations to a specific choir god, the fifth camp has a different structure. The fifth camp is not a definitive group of individuals per se, but rather a collection of individuals who are not situated in any camp. Membership to the fifth camp is defined in relation to the rest of the camps – personalities who do not subscribe to a membership to the first four are categorically placed in the fifth by the choral music practitioners themselves.

As such, unlike the other camps, the fifth camp does not have a semi-formalized social structure. Neither are they dominated by an apex personality who sets the cultural tone of the group. Rather, these individuals are mostly practising choral music practitioners who, by conscious choice or lack of affiliation, work independently and away from the meshed social networks that collectively make up the other four camps. Notably, these individuals position themselves in a different capacity from other choral music practitioners and are independent of the advantages of being part of the other four camps.

There are three types of choral music practitioners in this fifth camp. The first type is made up of choral music practitioners who are conductors of school choirs, and happen to be schoolteachers or administrators of their school(s). Many of these individuals have successfully led choirs to achieve good results in the local SYF competitions as well as other overseas competitions. In part, their lack of affiliation is reflective of their own contractual position within the school and MOE. Furthermore, these individuals use choral music direction as a creative outlet and an additional facet to their educational careers, where they also teach the curriculum and perform administrative duties within their school.

The second type of individuals associated with the fifth camp is those who work within the governmental and cultural institutions of Singapore. These individuals tend to be highly educated and have closer ties to professional music circles. Some of these individuals are also faculty members of tertiary arts institutions. These individuals do not actively participate in the circuits of production tied to the SYF. Rather, they are regarded as experts in the field of choral music and are often called upon or referred to in the discourse of choral music in Singapore. These individuals are also more focused on music-making for working adults.

The third and final type of individuals associated with the fifth camp is individual practitioners who do not profess any affiliations to the four *choir gods*. Many of these individuals also participate in the SYF circuit as choir instructors. While most of these individuals maintain a cordial relationship with other choral music practitioners, especially with the four *choir gods*, they choose to be independent of the camp affiliations and pursue their own artistic and professional goals. Their independence does not preclude them from working

with other conductors. In fact, because of their relative distance from the camps, they have more flexibility of choice when it comes to collaborations with other choral music practitioners.

Camp members are made up of more than just conductors. The majority of people in the camps are singers from schools and from community choirs. Some of them are instrumentalists who also perform with choirs. Earlier I mentioned that each camp has its own semi-formal hierarchy. The conductors and accompanists have a higher social standing, just below the resident *choir gods*. In this stratum, there are several individuals who take on the dual roles of conductor and accompanist: they take on conductor roles in some schools, and then take on accompanist roles in other choirs. Furthermore, most accompanists are accorded with some prestige, as well as enhanced social standing, by most members of the choral music scene. This is because these accompanists are highly trained musicians who have earned accolades from prestigious institutions.

Assistant conductors, section leaders, and choir administrators are positioned just below the choir conductors and accompanists. Some assistant conductors also double up as student accompanists. Finally, the rank and file singers are at the bottom of the hierarchy; these singers are mostly students singing in school choirs, and some of them are working adults who still continue to sing after completing their education. I use figure 3.1 below to illustrate the different types of members in the choral music scene:

Figure 4.1 – Choral Camp hierarchy

Source: Author

For choral music practitioners, knowing what the social map of the choral music scene looks like allows them to have a better understanding of the cultural milieu. Yet, when I ask my informants about why the scene is structured this way, most of them replied that they “don’t really know”. Furthermore, many of them mentioned that they took the factions for granted—this is how it has been, even before they entered the choral scene. This social map informs them about who they can associate and collaborate with, which choirs to listen to, and which choirs and conductors to avoid. In many ways, choral music practitioners have allowed the idea of camps to influence their own behaviours and attitudes towards other choral music practitioners.

Now that the social map of choral music practitioners is laid out, I return to explaining my puzzle why there are ongoing tensions between the state and arts practitioners. I’m interested in how the social structures are produced in a way that allows choral music practitioners to use camp membership as a strategy

for them to access jobs, as well as a way to position themselves within the choral music scene. Manifestly, the camp is both a structure as well as a practice (See also Sewell 1992 as well as Swidler 1986). What is missing in this explanation here are the ways in which schools and school policies effect the ways in which choral music practitioners socially group themselves. To that end, I use MOE's co-curricular and SYF policies, including their influence on choirs and camp recruitment, as a way to show how schools and schools policies help shape the social groupings of choral music practitioners.

We begin by looking at how choir members are recruited in school choirs, and how these choir members are inducted into the rank and file of camps. One of my informants, ZM, recalls the time when he first joined his school choir as a newly matriculated secondary one student:

Well, it started out during my secondary one orientation programme where there was a compulsory audition [for choir]... I remember that we were sent to the music room. You were made to go into the room in groups of five while the rest of the students were waiting outside. I don't know everyone then. When I went in, the conductor and two teachers were there. During the audition they made me face the conductor, who made you sing a series of notes. After that exercise, they will tell you the results if you can pitch or cannot pitch notes. Maybe a day later, they [the choir teachers in charge] came over to my class and tried to persuade me to join the choir. I mean for me, before coming to this school I never had the intention to join the choir. Their marketing strategy telling you that you can go overseas can go join competitions and stuff like that... And of course, the CCA points that caught my attention. And yeah, it started out from there. I mean it wasn't a bad decision after all. It kind of made me realize that the choir is not so boring and it kind of nurtured my interest along the way.

ZM's account shows us how CCAs, especially performing arts groups like choirs and wind bands, conducted mass auditions as part of their orientation programmes. This process involves getting an entire cohort of new students to be auditioned by the teachers in charge and CCA instructors. This strategy allows

the teachers and CCA instructors to identify students with potential musical ability and aptitude. While there is no compunction for students who successfully “pass” the auditions to join the performing arts CCAs, teachers and the CCA instructors use this opportunity to pitch the virtues of joining the CCA.

The rationale of these auditions is based on the principles of “best fit” and “potential for growth”—principles that come under the broader umbrella of holistic development (Ministry of Education 2014b, 2018a). Framing this with ZM’s recount of the audition process, we can see how MOE’s directive on student development is translated into CCA recruitments in Singapore’s local schools. These recruitment events double as a categorization and legibility process for choral music practitioners, which in many ways inform both the students, teachers, and CCA students of the potentiality of recruitment and participation (See also Scott 1998).

That said, these mass auditions should not be construed as actual formalized channels of camp recruitment per se. Rather, the results of these mass auditions provide the camps with a ready pool of students from which the conductors, as camp member recruiters, may select and recruit the “best”. My informants shared that as soon as a student joins a school choir, they are made aware of the existence of camps and their choir’s position vis-à-vis other school choirs, as well as Singapore’s choral music scene. As each new student learns who their conductors are in the course of instruction and socialization, these students are made aware of the camp to which their choir conductor belongs. As they gain cognizance of who’s who within the choral music scene, these students are essentially primed for camp recruitment whilst participating in their own school choirs.

The ways CCAs are structured in schools facilitate the primary avenues for development and advancement in choral music practice. Let me illustrate this point further: the conductors themselves look out for (1) potential students who demonstrate a keen interest in choral music, and (2) a potential to be developed further as a chorister. This usually happens from the start of their participation in the school choir. Both the conductor, as well as the teachers-in-charge, will encourage these students to take up administrative and musical leadership positions within the school choirs. This is to develop their administrative and leadership skills, as well as develop a portfolio that can be used for the entry into the next stage of their academic journey. In summary, the trajectory for camp membership is as follows: the student joins a school choir, moves up the ranks within the choir to occupy student leadership positions, and then uses their choral experience as social capital to apply for entry positions in their next choir.

This strategy is commonly used by students who seek to take advantage of alternative educational pathways, specifically the Direct Schools Admission process which allows potential students to be directly enrolled into prospective schools via their talents and contributions. This strategy is also manifestly a part of the cultural tool kit that is produced within the lower echelons of the camps and is facilitated by the upper echelons of the camps. Student choristers are socialised to understand that being associated with a camp is a mark of distinction amongst choral music practitioners. Many of the students who joined choirs in schools continue to pursue this throughout the various stages of their education. These students, especially those who are intrinsically motivated to pursue choral music-making outside the auspices of their schools, will form the bulk of the new camp recruits. The promise of access to ‘better’ choirs in ‘good’ schools

incentivises them to not only hone their own musical skills, but also to make social connections with their conductors and to form nascent identities aligned to a particular camp.

Many conductors also take the opportunity to use their relationship with their choirs to recruit new members into community and institutional ensembles that they are affiliated with.²⁰ These affiliated choirs, which exist outside the frame and governance of MOE and its' educational institutions, are marketed by the conductors as the apex of choral music-making in Singapore. Since these choirs have rigorous inclusion requirements, notably an audition and interview process, it provides the students with a tangible place to aspire to.

Many choral music practitioners regard entry and membership into these choirs as a proxy for induction into the camps. Recruitment for most of these community choirs often doubles up as camp recruitment. Each camp has a choir that pools the best choristers together and is directed by a choir god. Membership of these choirs is mostly from current and former student choristers from each camp. I discovered that these community and institutional choirs are heavily reliant on school choirs for recruiting potential members. Without having access to students, conductors will have a difficult time replenishing the ranks of the camps. An overview of the recruitment chains for choirs and camps can be seen in Figure 4.2.

²⁰ Here I make the distinction that institutional choirs are choirs that are affiliated with a cultural institution that is recognized and made legible by the state (See also Scott 1998). Many of these institutions are privileged to have the appellation of the word 'Singapore' as part of their name and branding, since the use of the word is highly regulated by the state.

Figure 4.2 – Recruitment Circuits for choirs and camps

Source: *Shifting Undergrounds Conference, ARI NUS (Mohamed Salleh 2018)*

4.3 – Roles, culture and divisions of labour in the camps

My journey of understanding the roles and culture of members of each camp began when I attended their concerts as part of my fieldwork. Listed below is an excerpt from my field observation notes:

I watched a concert... in 2018. The music was exquisite – contemporary compositions, and a showcase of two Singaporean composers. What struck me was the vibrancy and enthusiasm of the audience, whose responses were more at home to a football match than that of a high-art concert. They were hooting and cheering as the choir processed in and out of the stage. I then realized that there were pockets of audiences who clearly knew each other, who also collectively knew individual members of the choir. As the member walked on stage, these groups within the audiences started shouting out their names. But these individual calls for member's attention dimmed compared to when the conductors took the podium. When [the conductor] entered the stage, nearly the entire audience erupted in cheer and cries. Here is a man whose mere presence demands such as reverence and attention. He walked, he smiled, and when he pressed a finger on his lips, the audience settled quietly, and when he started conducting, the magic of music began.

I noticed that the audience was made up of a fair number of choral conductors. In fact, I had arranged to meet one of my informants David after the concert. Our conversation went as follows:

Me: Did you enjoy the concert?

David: The music was good, as expected.

Me: It was, wasn't it? I'm really glad that local choirs are doing music written by local composers. Also, I have forgotten how enthusiastic the audiences are.

David: I'm not really sure I would call it enthusiasm. This is a camp trademark. Most of the audience members are from the school choirs in his camp. At every concert, they will be shouting out their friends' names. You know you can literally mark the attendance of the choir by just listening to the names that the audiences are shouting. I just wished they learnt proper concert etiquette. You don't get this type of behaviour from (other) audiences.

David readily identifies himself as a member of a camp. From our conversation, I discovered that the behaviours exhibited by the audience members during the concert were a common occurrence in concerts. Such behaviours are socialized – learnt from going to concerts together with school seniors and grounded in the consistency of audience behaviour practised by members of the camp. He also shared that the younger camp members seldom – if at all – go to the concerts of choirs belonging to other camps. Hence, they become socialised to behave in this manner and are unaware of other forms of social mores expected of an audience. When asked about what was a choir god's role in producing such behaviour, he hesitated at first and then said,

I don't think it's what (a choir god) does, but what he or she *doesn't* [emphasis mine] do – He didn't tell the choir members to stop behaving like that. If (they) actually puts (their) foot down, every member of the (choir god's) camp will stop behaving like that. That's how influential (they are).

David's response is reflective of how he and many other informants perceive the four *choir gods* as cultural gatekeepers of the choral music scene. Cultural gatekeepers are not only facilitators that mediate between the production of cultural goods and the production of consumer tastes (Janssen and Verboord

2015), they also control the induction processes of a social group as part of their own individual capacities (Burawoy 2018). The examples articulated above by David are an instance of how choral music practitioners see cultural gatekeepers' function. The behaviours exhibited by the choral music practitioners during the concert that I mentioned earlier is one of the cultural norms that are synonymous with a specific camp. Cultural norms would be a set of specific attitudes and behaviours that are performed by members of a social group. The choral music practitioners perceive the role of a cultural gatekeeper as the main authority figure in the production of a camp's cultural norms of their respective camps.

Yet, for choral music practitioners, the distinction between the cultural norms curated and produced by the *choir gods* and the norms they are imagined to inculcate is blurred. This ambiguity occurs because of the ways the camps socially organize themselves. Firstly, the size of the camps and the degrees of separation within each camp accounts for much of this ambiguity. The sum of a camp is not just choral music practitioners' direct associations with the respective choir god's choirs. Rather, the sum of a camp also includes the choristers from choirs led by choral music practitioners who claim membership under the respective choir god's camp.

Secondly, I mentioned earlier that the networks of relations are semi-formal. There are no codified guidelines or bylaws a camp member must follow. Most of these attitudes and behaviours stemmed from active socialization from being in camps, very much similar to Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977; Lim 2012). Hence, the possibility of a choir god to enact immediate changes to behaviour and attitudes of entire camp members will be limited to how he articulates and disseminates his or her desires through proxies (such as

senior camp members). This is a good example of how camp members imagine their choir god to have tremendous influence within the camp. By extension, the common belief shared by camp members is that the resident choir god is imagined to be a source of the attitudes and behaviours adopted by the camp.

The influence the *choir gods* extends beyond camps. When I asked David about how others view the *choir gods*, he shared the following:

Well, If I recall correctly, all these *Lao jiaos* [literally translation: ‘old birds’ – meaning senior members of a group] are quite influential in the arts scene... (they) always collaborates with the big and established musical groups like the Singapore Chinese Orchestra. (They) are like the go-to people if any government group wants to know about choral music... like how MOE usually ask them for expert opinion on SYF matters too. I would think for people outside the scene, they may not know what choral music is about, but they will probably hear these names. Plus, (one of them) is a Cultural Medallion [the nation’s highest accolade for the arts] winner, and that’s like a big thing nationally too.

For David and the rest of my informants, the four *choir gods* are not just gatekeepers of choral music culture. They also function as cultural brokers. According to Geertz (1960), cultural brokers refer to individuals who facilitate the bridging and negotiations amongst different actors within a social space. These actors often have different cultural repertoires, and require an agent to facilitate exchanges as well as to further the cultural interests of those involved (See also Christel Köhle-Hezinger 1999; Giorgi, Bartunek, and King 2017; Stewart and Campbell 2008). David’s account of how the *choir gods* are both representatives of choral music practitioners and intermediaries between the arts and state bodies provides evidence for their function as cultural brokers.

To the choral music practitioners themselves, these *choir gods* are not just personalities; they are the very heart of a camp’s network. As both cultural gatekeepers and cultural brokers, it stands to reason that the *choir gods* occupy

significant positions in the social map of the choral music scene. Choral music practitioners are informed of this positioning by their perceptions of how the *choir gods* are connected to one another and regarded by state institutions. From the conversations I had with David as well as other informants, I discovered that choral music practitioners perceive that the state recognizes the symbolic pre-eminence of the *choir gods* amongst other choral music practitioners. They come to that conclusion because the *choir gods* have not only been awarded various accolades and awards by the state (e.g. the Cultural Medallion award) but are also often called upon to be consultants and advisors to many state agencies and ministries in matters pertaining to the arts and culture. Their choirs have been called upon to perform at many high-level state events. Most importantly, choral music practitioners recognize that the symbolic capital the *choir gods* possess translates into cultural capital and has currency not only within the choral music scene, but also in many state institutions, especially in schools (Bourdieu 1989, 2006).

By describing how the roles of the *choir gods* are perceived by the choral music practitioners, I also highlight an issue that links back to my larger puzzle of why there are ongoing tensions between the state and arts practitioners. The issue here is that the perceived capital each of these *choir gods* has is construed by how schools place value in them. This issue is problematic because firstly, the ways attractiveness (of a choir god) is articulated is expressed via a syntax of prestige, awards and competitions. This then becomes codified into a semblance of standards for choral music practitioners. This becomes an impossible standard for many, since reproducing similar accolades remains beyond the reach of the younger choral music practitioners.

Furthermore, we begin to discover how perceptions of the *choir gods'* roles also impose an understanding of how these roles are implicitly predicated on cultural gatekeeping and brokerage. This results in junior choral music practitioners employing the cultivation of these relationships with a choir god as an instrumental strategy. I spoke to another conductor named Jay Like David, Jay is open about belonging to a camp. When I asked him why, Jay shared the following:

(The resident choir god) is like famous in and out of the choral scene. His name carries a lot of weight in MOE. If the schools know you are his disciple, it's easier to get hired, or at least be taken seriously. So when I introduce myself to the HOD or the teacher in charge, I would say "Hi, I am Jay. I sang with (the resident choir god) under this and this and this choir. The choirs I sang in won x and x competitions. I also was his student conductor and then later I assisted him in this choir and this school."

This orientation within a camp is almost formulaic in its format: When articulating an introduction of themselves, a choral music practitioner often evokes the name of a choir god as a means of positioning themselves in the wider choral music scene. He or she then speaks of his or her "experiences" in terms of competition and awards. Jeremy's response is typical of this introduction and reveals how some choral music practitioners use their connection and association with a choir god to borrow prestige and recognition. we can also see this as an example of how camp members describe their own relative positioning vis-à-vis the choir god in relation to others. Furthermore, the mentioning of awards and accolades is a cultural trope borne from choral music practitioners being disciplined into speaking in a technicist manner.²¹ Through the conversations with my informants, I discovered that part of the draw for individuals to sign up

²¹ I explain this practice of technicist syntax in greater detail in Chapter Five of my thesis.

and join the choirs led by the *choir gods* is the borrowed prestige that comes with association and membership.

According to the perspective of many junior camp members, especially those who are still in school, this idea of borrowing prestige is important. Intrinsically, being seen and recognized as a member of elite choirs that win awards and accolades is key in constructing their own self-worth and image. In some ways, this is another form of capital transference: when one is a member of a choir who has a prestigious conductor and has collectively won several awards, one can also borrow the choir's prestige as one's own prestige. In simpler terms, if my choir is good, then by association, I too am good. This is important also because these junior camp members are not yet capable of producing results on their own, since they themselves either do not have choirs of their own or have just started working with their respective choirs.

Furthermore, junior members of the camps perceive entry into these choirs as a matter of visibility and attractiveness. They imagine that their cultural experiences and acquisition of skills and habits can be translated to greater eligibility in the eyes of educational institutions, akin to what Bourdieu argues to be the transmutation from cultural capital to that of social capital. By eligibility in relation to educational institutions, I refer to specific instances where the junior members of the camps use their experiences in these choirs as a part of their own portfolios that they employ in order to get accepted into their desired schools (via the DSA), or even to apply for a job as a resident choir conductor.²²

²² The DSA programme was formalized as a policy and a process by MOE in 2004 (Ministry of Education 2017a). It allowed students to use their talents to enroll in schools with independent or autonomous status, or schools that have niche or special programmes. However, these students would be required to meet the minimum score requirements to qualify for certain academic streams or courses, such as required a total aggregate of 20 points for GCE 'O' levels or less in order to qualify for Junior College Admission

Subsequently, the junior camp members perceive that having an endorsement by a choir god would lend additional legitimacy to their performances of eligibility. These endorsements come in the form of being asked by the respective choir god to perform tasks or roles within the choirs: examples include being designated as a soloist for school choir performances, and being offered the role of a student conductor. Informed by this perception, camp members then construe that having access to a choir god also improves one's own positionality within the camp's hierarchy vis-à-vis its respective choir god. By access, I refer to how they can personally experience singing under the direction of a choir god, rather than having an aesthetic experience through one of his or her proxies. This increases the opportunities for the members to come into personal contact with a choir god, and to initiate and inculcate an interpersonal relationship that may possibly lead to further opportunities and endorsements.

This idea of instrumentalizing relationships is also useful in explaining how the state informs choral music practitioners of the production of culture, and thus deserves further elaboration and analysis. I look to the DSA policies and how it is practised by choral music practitioners as the means of drawing evidence for this instrumentalization.²³ Here, I outline how some of the relationships amongst choral music practitioners are established along similar lines to the relationships that schools have with one another. More specifically, the relationships between schools are determined by traditional affiliations and rivalries amongst schools and institutions, and these are also reflected in the relationships that choral music practitioners have with one another. This is also another example of how some choir conductors function as cultural brokers to

²³ The Direct Schools Admission (DSA) is described in detail in Chapter Three page 93.

schools vis-à-vis the DSA Policy. More specifically, the DSA policy allows students with exceptional talent to directly enrol into specific schools, and the choir conductors are part of the decision-making body that selects and endorses applicants. I refer back to my earlier discussion on cultural brokerage earlier in this section, where cultural brokers are actors who facilitate the bridging and negotiating amongst different actors within a social space in the pursuit of facilitating exchanges as well as to further the cultural interests of those involved.

to find out the role conductors play in the DSA, I asked Max regarding the experiences with the DSA process. Our conversation went as follows:

Max: You know, I'm a DSA kid myself. I DSA-ed from my secondary school to JC. I was lucky that my conductor in secondary school is the same. And you know lah, every choir always need guys. In fact, I know my batch there were a couple of guys who barely scraped with 20 points for their L1R5 [the aggregation score of the national GCE 'O' Level examinations] and still got into the top JCs.

Me: Interesting... now that you are a conductor yourself, has the DSA process changed?

Max: I'm not too sure if there were changes on paper or in policy, but I think now the system is a bit more sophisticated. There are clear lines and boundaries based on different camps, and you don't want to end up offending a choir god or someone senior. If you're a primary school conductor like me, we try to work with people we know and trust and see if we can help our own kids from the primary school to get to a better secondary school. You also know lah, this one is politics...

Me: I see. Have any students and parents shared with you about their own thoughts or feelings in this matter?

Max: Well... some schools got super 'helicopter' [overtly protective] parents and they sometimes grill you about the DSAs and ask if you can help their son or daughter go to some choice schools. These parents are more clued-in about what's going on, and they really do their research on how to DSA successfully. I usually tell these parents to work with the school teachers lah... Cos I really don't want to get involved. But, if I do see a kid with potential, and they're really keen on singing, sometimes I do ask them if

they want to consider DSA. If they say yes, then I ask my friends doing secondary schools if they're keen on auditioning these kids.

Me: I see... Any idea of success rates for your kids who do DSAs?

Max: I don't have an exact number to give you, and I don't do this often. But usually, when I do help, it's quite successful. Not because it's me lah... (laughs), although my relationship with the secondary school conductors does help. The kid has got to show interest and talent also... I can only recommend, but the conductor on the other side makes the decisions. Of course, their school must also approve *lah*, but sometimes I think that one is just like on paper only.

For completeness, Max's description of the DSA process is not really representative of how the actual DSA policy is implemented across MOE schools, nor should it be construed as an accurate description of the practices that the schools mentioned by him employ. There are specific requirements set out by MOE that students need to meet in order to qualify for DSA.²⁴ The conductors can only help students who qualify to enter the academic programmes in the receiving schools. That said, there are variations in how the sending and receiving schools understand the DSA policy and its processes. Each school has a different take on how the DSA informs them of running school-based programmes, and this is dependent on the school's position within the larger school ecosystem. There are some sending schools that put in place school-based programmes that help students prepare for DSAs. These programmes range from how to tackle interviews to how to build a personal portfolio.

²⁴ As stipulated by MOE, the baseline is dependent on the stream or programme. For example, at the secondary school level, the required PSLE T-scores to qualify for Normal (Technical) Stream is any score below 152, for Normal (Academic) Stream the T-Score ranges from 153 to 188, and Express Stream is any score above 189. At the Junior College level, the maximum L1R5 score is 20 points. (Ministry of Education 2017a, 2018d)

The roles of the CCA instructors are usually limited to providing recommendations for these singers. Yet, some of the CCA instructors take advantage of their own personal networks and help their own students in facilitating transference from one choir to another via the DSA. Similar to what Max described, some choral conductors use the DSA to build social capital by matching potential student to other conductors from receiving schools. This introduction does make a difference in informing the conductor in making decisions in considering whether to take in these potential students. Firstly, the recommendation of another conductor is valuable in assessing the potential student's capabilities. Secondly, if the conductors are from the same camp, the student seeking DSA would already be socialised in the culture of their camp, which would mean that the student is already familiar with how the receiving choir works.

These actions and practices within the DSA process is an example of choral conductors enact a form of cultural brokerage, albeit in a more localised and transactional manner. I discovered that many choir conductors of primary school choirs would sometimes work closely with their students, their respective parents as well as other conductors to facilitate the participation of the DSA programme. This also illustrates how the primary school conductors too perform an aspect of cultural brokerage – by linking hopeful candidates with schools that are looking to receive and recruit students. The relationships that conductors have with one another can potentially aid these students in gaining access to better schools.

The transference of choristers is not limited to just participants in the DSA programme. Often most of the students from choirs can get into choice schools

on their own academic merit. There is a general perception shared by both choral music practitioners as well as students that the top ranking schools also tend to have CCA groups that also perform well in competitions.²⁵ Most sending conductors do his or her best to guide their more able students and their parents to select schools whose choir conductor comes from his or her own camp. The main draw for these students would be the continuance of the music quality and type of experiences the student may have had in the sending school. Other considerations would also be an extension of the choral experience. These would namely be overseas trips and competitions, as well as ease of access to choose educational institutions down the line through DSA, as mentioned earlier in this chapter. These opportunities are regarded favourably by many of these students, especially those who came from schools who do not field their choirs out to such activities.

These acts of cultural brokerage also meant that potential students face an additional ‘gate’ in the DSA pathway that may either ease or hinder their chances of success. These ‘gates’ are the choir conductors of the receiving schools who have DSA for music and choir. As the CCA instructor, most of them have near-complete control as to who gets on the acceptance list. There is a power differential between the sending choral conductor and the receiving choral conductor; where the sending choral conductor may recommend, the receiving choral conductor is the one who makes the call. Hence, the position of the conductors has a strong influence on their ability to successfully enact their cultural brokerage. Camp loyalties and personal relationships become currency

²⁵ There is data to substantiate this claim and will be presented in chapters 5 and 6 of the thesis, with focus on figures 6.2a and 6.2b.

to both DSA participants and cultural brokers, and these attributes play an important part in contributing to the success or failure of the DSA.

Choral music practitioners employ the act of cultural brokerage as a strategy for camp recruitment. We can see evidence of this by looking at how conductors facilitate in arranging their singers to go and apply to choirs that are positioned within their own respective camps. Furthermore, as mentioned by Max earlier, some of the more senior choral conductors, especially the *choir gods*, have enough cultural capital with both the students and the receiving schools to significantly influence the outcomes of the DSAs. These more influential conductors have, on occasion, to (1) dictate the school choices to a student so that he or she requests to be posted to a specific school, and (2) limiting the options that the student has in terms of which schools would allow or disallow the student to be considered for the programme.

These descriptions of the processes and actions taken by the choral music practitioners within the context of the DSA gives us a sense of how my puzzle plays out in two ways. Firstly, these relationships amongst choral conductors themselves as well as their relationship with students-singers and their parents are built around the schools' ecosystem and the MOE DSA Policy. Subsequently, the DSA is the process where the performance of these relationships become acts of cultural brokerage, which makes these relationships both instrumental and strategic by choral music practitioners. We see how recommendations and referrals by conductors become the social currency for the participants in the choir scene. This works out to be a win-win situation all around; the students increase their chances of getting into a better school, the receiving choir conductor and school choir induct choristers who are already trained, and the

sending choir conductors earn social capital from both parents as well as their camp. I have also observed that Primary school choir conductors who produce choristers that successfully participate in the DSA programme are just as highly regarded as the conductors whose schools receive students. This systemic filtering of choristers eventually provides a concentration of quality choristers in the respective terminus choirs that are usually helmed by a choir god.²⁶ While the transference of choristers almost exclusively happens within the boundaries of each camp, a few notable exceptions will be discussed later in this chapter.

4.4 – Policy changes as a seismic shift: a re-ordering of social relations

Earlier in Chapter One and Three of my thesis, I briefly mentioned that the state calibrates its policies in order to meet the needs of achieving its developmental model. These changes are also informed by the demographic shifts in the nation's population. I see these policy changes as opportunities for us to examine how changes to cultural and educational policies also affect the way arts practitioners work within the confines of the school ecosystem. I note from my data that my puzzle of why there are ongoing tensions persist between the state and arts practitioner relations despite having changes to the state and the state policies – that despite whatever changes made to policies, the arts practitioners continue to make decisions based on how they orientate themselves vis-à-vis the state. These policy changes do not change the arts practitioners' orientation towards the state, but rather inform the arts practitioners of forming new actions, strategies and attitudes alongside the changes to policies. In this chapter, I will examine how policy changes, specifically that of MOE's SYF

²⁶ The choir gods also dominate the junior college choirs, and each of them have helmed a top-tier junior college choir.

changes, force choral music practitioners into abandoning old established practices and new ways of socially organizing themselves. This leads us to have a better understanding of why there are ongoing tensions between the state and arts practitioners: these changes are regarded as disruptions to establish pathways of progression and success. As such, these require the expenditure of effort and resources, and puts the arts practitioners in a position of uncertainty.

Whilst we understand that demographic changes were slow and gradual, many of my informants had a traumatic realization when MOE announced its policy changes to the SYF, specifically the move away from the competition format. They were very conscious of how this policy change affected them at the individual and the collective level. I draw similarities to these feelings of trauma to what Swidler would describe as their moment of ‘unsettledness’, where they now needed to reflect and contemplate what sort of strategies and toolkits that would work in these new times (Swidler 1986). Swidler explains that the notion of unsettled times is characterized by the transition from workable habits to new ideas, which she details as follows:

An ‘unsettled culture’ is ‘ideology’, understood in the sense of ideas governing action. Not habits but ideas are the motor-force of life. The agent ‘creates new strategies for action, but long-term influence depends on structural opportunities for survival of competing ideologies’. (Swidler 1986:282)

Having experienced this moment of unsettledness, the choral music practitioners’ ideological orientation towards Singaporean pragmatism informs them that they need to re-work the circuits of production and consumption in light of the changes. After the changes to MOE policies were announced, many of the younger choral music practitioners realised that many older tropes and practices that their seniors used when they first started are no longer relevant and as such,

no longer work. These instances of insight and reflectivity made my informants become aware that things need to change. Some of the older cultural practices and strategies, such as the need for competitiveness and politicking amongst choral music practitioners, no longer serve their purposes and are in fact weakening both their individual and collective positions vis-à-vis the newly changed reality. Furthermore, in order for them to find value and relevancy with schools within the new post-policy change reality, they also need to reframe how their current relationships with each other help them to produce value and relevancy.

The first example I use to describe this re-orientation of social groupings is the convergence between the Chinese-speaking and English-speaking choral music artworlds. Every members from each artworld had their own reasons why they wanted to initiate this convergence. These artworlds have existed autonomously since the 1950s and have had their own cultural circuits of production and consumption.

From the perspective of the Chinese-speaking choral music artworld, the desire for convergence was a matter of preserving their own practices. According to Tan (2014),

Towards the late 1980s and mid-1990s, however, their [Chinese Choral music] activities began to decline in the face of an ageing membership and a changing social environment. In recent years there have been attempts to hold annual joint concerts, but the exuberance of the 1960s appears to have been a thing of the past. The late 1960s marked a turning point, paving the way for the third wave of musical activity that was to revamp the image of choral music in Singapore (p.58).

Tan (2014) and Chia (2014) both stated how Chinese choral music in Singapore is experiencing a slow decline because of Singapore's demographic changes due to a declining birth rate. Chia (2014) outlined four issues that

continue to plague the Chinese choral music scene, namely (1) the ageing membership of current members and shortage of young recruits to join the youth wings of choirs, (2) the declining musical standards that come with ageing performers, (3) the dwindling audience support, since most audiences are of a similar age as the performers and are experiencing limited mobility, and (4) increasing expenditure and overheads that come with inflation and the rising costs of living in Singapore (Chia 2014).

In the mid-2000s, the Chinese choral music practitioners had an epiphany stemming from their moments of the unsettledness brought about by the long decline. The strategies they adopted in the past no longer worked, and now they needed newer strategies in order to ameliorate their current situation. Tan (2014) described how the Chinese choral music practitioners tried different strategies to maintain the vibrancy of their part of the choral music scene. Chia (2014) details two specific strategies, namely the establishing of an English-speaking youth wing for these Chinese choirs, as well as the formation of a co-operative collective known as the Choral Association (Singapore), as a means of slowing down the decline of these cultural practices. Another strategy that they attempted was to reach out to some of the English-speaking choral music practitioners to get them to fill in the music leadership roles that have been vacated by the passing of the incumbent. These positions are often paid positions, which gives the English-speaking choir conductors more incentive to take on these roles. Ultimately, these Chinese-speaking choirs hope to create a mutually beneficial relationship between the two language-based spheres, where they could help each other in preserving the arts practice that they both share. From these

conversations, new relationships emerged that marked the beginning of the convergence of the respective spheres.

In order to discover the impetus of convergence from the perspective of the English-speaking choral music arts world, I spoke to senior members of the choral music scene and asked them for their views. When I spoke to Mr Nelson Kwei²⁷, about the convergence between the two distinct spheres, he shared the following:

I think now in Singapore, the largest choir organization will have to be the Singapore Choral Association. Singapore Choral Association actually has existed for as long as I can remember. 40 years, 50 years? Yeah. They are actually the core community in Singapore, where we went through the nation-building process. That was in the 60s and 70s. So they formed this choral association, but mainly from the Chinese choral community. Now, this association has 26 choirs in it, of which Vocal Consort is one of them. They still have annual activities. So this association itself has got more than a few thousand singers in it. By far, it is the largest. But it is an ageing community. Because a lot of them were very active 50 years ago, and 50 years later it is still very much the same group of people.

Nelson shared that he had a personal history with the Chinese speaking choir communities. He grew up singing in a community children's choir called the Echo Children's Choir. This choir was conducted by Mr Samuel Ting, a well-loved luminary and personality within the Sino-sphere (Anon 2015a). This children's choir was an extension of the Herald Choral Society, which itself was one of the many Chinese speaking choirs. Nelson then joined the Herald Choral Society's youth choir later in his teens.

For Nelson, working closely with the Choral Association (Singapore) was not just borne out of a sense of duty and nostalgia for a shared past, but also as a strategic opportunity to revitalize the entirety of the choral music scene. He saw

²⁷ I report this example and the next without the use of pseudonyms with explicit permission from my informants, and as a matter of historical record.

it as a matter of synergizing the strength of both spheres. For the Chinese speaking choirs, they provide not just a sense of history and continuity, but also have accumulated a wealth of social, cultural and tangible assets. For the English-speaking choirs, they brought with them a larger number of younger singers who are more in tune with the new digital realities of the day.

Since the late 2000s, Nelson's choir, The Vocal Consort, has contributed to many of the Choral Association (Singapore)'s activities, such as putting up performances that also include repertoire from the classics as well as operas. Nelson saw these collaborations as opportunities for the younger singers to be exposed to a variety of repertoire that they seldom get to perform in schools and to work with more senior musicians engaged by the Choral Association (Singapore) in a relaxed but formal setting. Furthermore, many of these performances are held at prestigious concert venues in Singapore. These concerts are usually fully funded by either the host organization or by private donors. As such, these collaborative opportunities also mean that the younger members of the choir would have more opportunities to experience performing in these performance spaces. In addition to that, these collaborative opportunities allow for an implicit form of market penetration between the Chinese-speaking choirs and the English-speaking choirs – by performing at each other's concerts, they hope to enthuse loyal audiences from both scenes to come and support their joint efforts.

Ms Lim Ai Hooi²⁸ offers another example of the convergence. She shared the following:

²⁸ As mentioned in the previous footnote, I report this example without the use of pseudonyms with express permission from my informant, and as a matter of historical record.

I do have many personal connections with the Chinese speaking choirs here in Singapore. Even though I originally came from Penang, I knew one of the principal members of the Choral Association (Singapore) as he is a friend with my teacher in Penang. He asked people like myself and Nelson to come and help keep the choral traditions alive. I then met up with another prominent member of the Choral Association, who then paved the way for me to meet up with the Song Lover's Choral Society sometime in the late 2000s. So we met, and they wanted to adopt a Youth Choir. So I brought ONE chamber choir in to be the youth branch of the Song Lover's Choral Society. They [the Song Lover's Choral Society] are so lovely, they come and support us and they don't really tell us what to do.

But I have to say, it was quite tough on the part of the young singers in ONE. So for instance that when I first started asking ONE to sing Chinese songs, *waaahhhh* [exclaim] there's a lot of objections... this cannot, that cannot.... That was a few years ago when we ONE and the Song Lover's Choral Society began their relationship. But slowly, I got the singers from ONE to sing together with the people and they start loving the older people. And they are really easy people to love. So because of the friendly and familial connection between the two choirs and two generations, both choirs benefit from one another.

Ai Hooi feels very strongly that good ties amongst choristers and conductors and a sense of belonging are important for choirs in Singapore. In this particular example, the Song Lover's Choral Society have provided ONE chamber choir with not just opportunities to perform, but also a rehearsal space at Goodman Arts Centre.²⁹ Ai Hooi does not see this as a transactional relationship, but rather a strategy for inter-generational and inter-sphere cohesion, with the ultimate goal of proliferating the practice of choral music irrespective of the language medium used.

These inter-generational collaborations are not without their difficulties. As mentioned by Ai Hooi, the singers from ONE chamber choir initially put up some resistance to the repertoire. Most of their resistance stems from the

²⁹ Goodman Arts Centre is one of the many arts spaces managed by The Arts House Limited, which is a subsidiary of the National Arts Council. (National Arts Council 2016)

deviation of perceived standards, and not so much due to language. The mainstay repertoire of ONE chamber choir consists of complex acapella pieces in many different languages, whilst the songs performed by the Song Lovers Society is usually Chinese accompanied homophonic choral music. The turning point came when the younger singers developed their own personal relationships with the older host choir members, and then singing with them became more of emotional labour rather than an aesthetic one. ONE chamber choir has since acquired a dedicated following from the older Chinese audiences, courtesy of being introduced by the Song Lovers Society. Since then, ONE Chamber choir has been quite active in engaging both the older Chinese speaking audiences as well as the younger English-speaking audiences and regularly performs Sino-centric works in avenues such as the *Hua Yi* Festival organized by the Esplanade Theatres by the Bay.

The two choirs mentioned in this sub-section are community choirs with formidable reputations on their own. Both Nelson and Ai Hooi were able to perform this enactment of cultural brokerage because they used their own social capital as well as their respective choir's reputation as leverage towards building bridges and relationships. Earlier on, I referred to Chia (2014) who shared that there has been a diminishing quality of performances on the part of the Chinese speaking choirs due to old age and ill-health. This injection of newer and younger participants from these choirs allowed audiences to re-evaluate their imagining of the Chinese speaking choirs. This occurrence also allowed these elderly members of the Chinese speaking choirs to relive their own glory days by performing their favourite and challenging repertoire.

While both Nelson and Ai Hooi sought to initiate the convergence in order to raise awareness of choral music initiatives to the wider public, their targeted audience was also the state bodies, and especially MCCY and the NAC. In part, they shared a hope that this initiative would enthruse the state to be more cognizant of the different needs of the two choir artworlds. Consequently, these synergistic projects were also used by the two choirs as evidence for a wider community engagement, which is explicitly articulated by NAC to be highly desirable when deliberating the allocation of state grants (National Arts Council 2017, 2018).

Hence, this initiation of convergence between the two spheres is a win-win strategy for both spheres of choral music, and one that is reshaping the boundaries of the larger scene. In a nutshell, the examples above illustrate how two social groups with distinct cultural practices were brokered into associating with each other and collaboratively produce a new shared practice in response to the difficulties coming out of a new lived reality. These examples also demonstrate how the practice of forming relationships become an instrumental and strategic practice for the survival for choirs, and one that is used more frequently now than it was a few decades ago.

Earlier I mentioned that choral music practitioners turn to the *choir gods* as a role model and as a progenitor of culture. Their acts of cultural brokerage that resulted in the convergence of the two choral music spheres was not unnoticed by the rank and file of choral music practitioners. In fact, many of my informants shared that these two instances of convergence were read as a sign of things to come. When the changes to the SYF was announced, many choral music practitioners were forced to re-examine the cost-benefits of maintaining their

own camp fealty and identity as part of their plans for their personal professional futures. The issue that became apparent to the choral music practitioners was that the SYF policy changes had effectively blunted the collective social and cultural capital of each camp, as well as unhinged the old strategies that effectively utilized the semi-formal relationships that the camps reproduce.

When the choral music practitioners turn to their respective choir god for guidance through these times of uncertainty, they realised that while the *choir gods* still maintain impressive personal social and cultural capital after these policy changes, their potential for influence diminishes outside the elite school circles. Yet, as evidenced by the example of the convergence, the *choir gods* have done what very few within the choral music scene have done, which is to create value and attractiveness outside the confines of the SYF and raise their profiles both locally and internationally. As the *choir gods* have been seen to have transcended their traditional boundaries and broaden their perspectives, so too must the rank and file of choral music practitioners.

Consequently, since the camp membership is no longer a stable and assured pathway for employment as well as professional development, the social barriers in between camps and factions are weakened. Out of these ensuing confusion and uncertainty of post SYF changes, newer alliances were made. Before the SYF policy change, one of the issues that choral music practitioners have always faced is the gap between the more established conductors and the newer aspiring conductors in terms of personal networks as well as experiences in producing choral music. After the change was enacted, the playing field between these conductors is somewhat levelled since one can no longer rely on old accolades to establish social and cultural capital in the eyes of the schools.

From my own observations on the relations of choral music practitioners, I note that the younger choral conductors are more successful than the senior ones in terms of being able to foster new working relationships. I have observed that the younger conductors are seen to be taking charge of forging strong working relationships with other younger conductors even across camps, and generational links are deemed to be more prevalent than genealogical links. I spoke to Nathan, When I asked him on his thoughts regarding the relationships he has with other choral music practitioners, he shared the following:

Many of us from the same generation are friends. We come together and support each other in doing a lot of small concerts. Even in places like SOTA and VCH. So we have a group of friends that do combined concerts. For me, choral music has been doing quite successful in recent years, largely because also I'm quite pro-active in organising my own events. Within my circle of friends who teach secondary school and primary school choirs, I'm one of the organisers that always organize concerts and events. I pull my friends in to join me. And also I try to work around the school's budgeting issues and the systemic issues that they have lah, say if the school says they have no budget, it's either we plan ahead one year and tell them to prepare the budget, or if they still don't have the budget then we plan around it. It could be by selling tickets or getting funding in another way. So just manoeuvre around the issues that we face.

Nathan's response also exemplifies the various strategies that the choral music practitioners adopted in recent years. What we can see from Nathan's response is that a new strategy for choral conductors is to organize and perform collaborative concerts with other choir conductors who are of a similar age. This is a novel concept from the usual arrangements of inter-camp collaborations, where joint activities are conducted along faction lines.

When I spoke to some of my informants about the pervasiveness of this particular strategy, some of them expressed a sense of relief. They also shared that it's easier to get things done when working with peers of the same age as

they are unburdened by the need to do extensive facework – the act of performing social interactions as a means of lubricating relationships (Fletcher 2016; Geertz 1973). Furthermore, the act of *showing face*, which is to say, making oneself visible in a public setting, is relegated to the symbolic – while seniors are often called upon to attend and support, but their outward favour no longer holds as much weight as it did before.

I found that choral music practitioners regard concerts at a public performance venue as the epitome of choral music-making, and its intrinsic cultural value that schools place in them has not been affected by the changes in MOE policy. The concert provides visibility to the choir and the choir conductor, creating a cultural value by the school as well as by the school's stakeholders. My informants found this strategy of organizing and performing in joint concerts to be beneficial on several levels. Firstly, each choir shares the financial burden of putting up a concert. When several choirs share the cost of rental and logistics, performing in the public space is no longer financially prohibitive. Secondly, sharing a concert reduces the competition of having to book the performance venue. This way, the choirs can agree on a date that is mutually beneficial to all without the concern of another choir taking the slot away. Thirdly, there is a clear division of artistic and operational labour amongst choirs, where the choirs share the burden of preparing a full concert. This way, the schools can still work within the man-hours constraint for hiring the choral conductor, and the choir still gets to maintain some semblance of aesthetic quality for the performance. Finally, the choirs work in concert to create a wide market penetration. A single choir usually face tremendous difficulty in trying to sell out a hall. The assurance of being able to sell all the seats would allow the concert organizers to reduce the price of a

single ticket to an economically appropriate amount. This last point is a win-win situation by all accounts; by doing so, they allow the concert to be financially equitable and viable in that the concert does not make a loss, and the cost of a ticket is not so expensive that it becomes a barrier for people to attend.

Another strategy that gained prominence post-2012 was to invest in and support local festivals and competitions. Most of these festivals are held at premier venues such as CHIJMES and VCH. There are two distinct aspects of this strategy. Firstly, schools equate choral festivals with the same cultural value as a public concert. The openness to participate in these festivals is highly regarded and valued by schools and school choirs, especially those that would not be able to perform or put up a concert on their own.

Secondly, some of these local festivals also offer competitions and evaluative workshops as part of their programme. These evaluative opportunities are very much sought after by school choirs and their conductors especially after the changes made to the SYF in 2012. My findings suggest the impression that many choral music practitioners have is that current SYF platform does not provide adequate qualitative and quantitative descriptors to the choir. Thus, many of them feel strongly that alternative platforms for assessment are crucial to the growth of the choirs. The choral music practitioners are also contending with their own residual predilection towards getting awards and being measured, which makes these festivals an easy strategy to follow. Two local festivals, the Singapore International Choral Festival and the *Orientalis Conventus* are popular with not only local choirs, but choirs around the region as well.

Many of the more established conductors have now consciously distanced themselves from the old networks and are working harder to establish themselves

as independent conductors. Some of these conductors sought employment with the cultural institutions such as the Singapore Symphonic Chorus and the Singapore Lyric Opera Chorus. Some of these conductors followed the cue of the *choir gods* and went on to also establish community choirs on their own. These community choirs are operationalised as part of extending their practice, as well as with the intent of creating a new niche and subsequent social and cultural capital for themselves.

4.5 – Relationships as strategies

Throughout this chapter, we have discovered how the state has indeed shaped the ways in which choral music practitioners form their camps in the following ways. Firstly, the ways in which choral music practitioners derive attractiveness and value is determined by winning awards and accolades, and the SYF being the main site to produce awards. By extension, the *choir gods* who sit at the pinnacle of the camps similarly draw their prestige and influence from both winning the SYF competitions as well as their roles as cultural gatekeepers and cultural brokers to state bodies. The *choir gods*' imagined tremendous social capital within the choral music scene informs each aspiring camp member that winning awards and accolades is a determining factor for success when working in schools. Subsequently, most aspiring camp members borrow prestige from their respective camps and resident choir god in order to establish value and attractiveness when applying for positions in schools.

The larger issue discussed in this chapter which contributes towards the explanation of why there are ongoing tensions between the state and arts practitioners is how the changes to the SYF and school policies have disrupted

the ways in which choral music practitioners produce value and attractiveness. This bears repeating: when MOE changed the competitive nature and structure of the SYF, it also removed the prestige and institutional cultural value the SYF results possess to schools. This also signalled to the choral music practitioners that the former ways of borrowing prestige from the *choir gods* and the competitions no longer hold as much weight as they had before the policy changes. Subsequently, all choral music practitioners, even the *choir gods*, had to re-examine how they use relationships as strategies for successful arts making and professional development. I showed two examples of this in the previous section, the two *choir gods* initiating a convergence of the two choral music spheres, and how the younger choral music practitioners are making cross-camp links as strategies for survival. Hence, this disruption to the old cultural forms and pathways to success is another reason why choral music practitioners are feeling frustrated with the state.

CHAPTER FIVE:

Placements and Pathways of progression – The career stages of a Singaporean Choral Music Practitioner

5.1 – Introduction

Wherever an arts world exists, it defines the boundaries of acceptable art, recognizing those who produce the work it can assimilate as artists entitled to full membership, and denying membership and its benefits to those whose work it cannot assimilate. If we look at things from a common-sense point of view, we can see that such large-scale editorial choices made by the organizations of an arts world exclude many people whose work closely resembles work accepted as art. We can see, too, that arts worlds frequently incorporate at a later date works they originally rejected, so that the distinction must lie not in the work but in the ability of an arts world to accept it and its maker (Becker 1982:226–27).

In any professional field, getting work opportunities is more than being good at what you do. It is about knowing how and where to look for them, and how you position yourself to be the best fit for the job. In his book *Artworlds*, Becker (1982) introduced the concept of the artist as the “integrated professional” (p.229). According to him, an integrated professional is one who not only has the technical skills of producing arts but also possesses the necessary social skills and an awareness of how the arts world works. The challenge of the modern-day artist as an integrated professional is not bound by the quality or quantity of work that he or she produces. Rather, the challenge is how to engage with potential arts consumers via the arts world structures, so that his or her works can be marketed and subsequently consumed.

The previous chapter deals extensively with how choral music practitioners make meaning out of camp membership while using camp connections to set up pathways and work opportunities. The discussions of the

previous chapter parallel the discourse of the integrated professional, inasmuch as the choral music practitioners' integration to the choral scene and to the schools is facilitated by camp networks and common cultural practices in the form of behaviours and attitudes. Here in this chapter, I expand on the concept of the integrated professional, in which I find useful when looking at the work of arts practitioners in schools. Operationally, their work is located within the auspices of schools and therefore subjected to MOE policies and its regulation of the schools' bureaucratic systems. Since they are part of the school system, arts practitioners are also beholden to interact with other school stakeholders such as the school leaders and school administrators as part of their job.

From here, I describe and explain the career stages of a choral music practitioner's professional life chronologically from the hiring processes to the point of exit from a school contract to reflect how they perceive the state's role vis-à-vis their profession. This chapter provides explanations to my puzzle of why there are ongoing tensions between the state and the arts through the following. Using choral music practitioners as a case for arts practitioners working in schools, I show that the ways in which arts practitioners produce professional practices and norms in terms of operational activities such as applying for jobs are informed by the procedural and policy practices enacted by schools and institutions which are regulated by the state. I argue that the source of tension comes about when the changes to the SYF and school policies also disrupt the established ways of applying for and keeping jobs in schools. This disruption induces the feelings of instability and uncertainty in arts practitioners, which is similar to what Swidler (1986) would describe as "moments of unsettledness" (p.278).

There are three stages of a choral music practitioner's profession which is of interest in this chapter, namely (1) hiring, (2) on-the-job professional management, and (3) the end of school contract. This chronological accounting of the professional stages of a choral music practitioner allows us to see the intersection between the procedural processes instituted by the schools and the professional choices they make, and also show how they are constantly frustrated by ongoing changes taking place in schools. Here, I examine the experiences of choral music practitioners working in schools. While the hiring processes are tied to a government-wide system called GeBIZ, each stage deals with different aspects of the hiring procedural processes. Collectively, experiences in dealing with these procedural processes shape the arts practitioners' subjective understanding of the nature of working as a CCA instructor. These perceptions, in turn, show us exactly where and why arts practitioners are often frustrated by the greater systems of institutional governance: while the policies pertaining to the SYF and schools have changed the prestige and production of attractiveness, the hiring process idiosyncratically uses old measures of attractiveness to qualify fitness for hiring. The bureaucratic dissonances experienced by the arts practitioners here is why they are frustrated with the schools, which to them is symptomatic of larger statewide attitudes and behaviours.

5.2 – Making sense of the choral music practitioners work in Schools

I asked CY out for an early dinner right before going into one on his choir rehearsals for my fieldwork. As we ate, we spoke about being a choir conductor as a full-time profession. When I asked him about what he felt about working with schools, he sighed and said:

One thing that really frustrates me is that no matter how many times school principals tell me that I'm part of the school and a valued member, I know that every October when I have to reapply the bids in GeBIZ, I'll be left wondering if I will still have a job with the school. As conductors, we may have similar roles to play as classroom teachers, but we don't have their "iron rice bowls" [Job stability and certainty]. We're not covered if we're sick, we don't get bonuses, and we have to bid for jobs every year. No one [in MOE] is looking out for us. If anything happens to the school budget-wise, we [The CCA instructors] are going to be the first to go. We're not employees, we're vendors... and we have to take care of our own "rice bowls".

This idea of the choir conductors being 'vendors' is a common refrain coming from all my informants. From CY's perspective, his relationship with the schools is transactional and has an eventual deadline. Schools engage CCA instructors in very specific terms – they are paid a fixed agreed upon rate for a specific task of coaching the respective CCAs in a specified period.

This employment arrangement is not unique. In fact, in the current market and labour realities, many companies and organizations around the world have adopted the use of casual contracted labour. Casual contracted labour refers to the practice where people are hired to provide labour for a specified period and is now a prevalent practice. In the case of the choral conductors in Singapore schools, these contracted employees do not have the same benefits as full-time employees, such as sponsored and structured professional development programmes for full-time employees as well as paid medical and annual leave.

When one is a contracted worker, the onus of developing professional capabilities is a personal responsibility rather than a corporate one. Market realities put pressure on these individuals to pursue professional development as the job market becomes increasingly competitive. This competitiveness is attributed to the field being saturated with the influx of new worker graduating from schools and entering the workforce. For these individuals, pursuing

professional development is at their own expense, and often incurs an opportunity cost, such as loss of income whilst training or studying.

Scholars have described these phenomena as the rise of the precariat class and have attributed the phenomena to the globalized practice of neoliberalism (Brown 2005, 2015; Mōri 2009; Standing 2011; Wong 2016). I refer to these works as a means of framing how choral music practitioners create repertoires of actions, attitudes and behaviours to navigate and ameliorate their own lives whilst facing uncertainty. In my work, I found that choral music practitioners perceive that the nature of their chosen professions is precarious, inasmuch as it does not offer a more conventional form of job security (See Standing 2011). I bring this idea of precariousness back to my larger overarching argument of why there are ongoing tensions between the state and arts practitioners. The elements within the way the job is managed does give credence to why arts practitioners feel a sense of unsettledness and uncertainty akin to precarity. We would imagine that this unsettledness could be caused by a systemic rigidity in the ways in which the arts practitioners and their work are managed the schools. After all, we have seen in chapter three of my thesis that the Singapore state can be pedantic in micro-managing the lives of its citizenry.

The problem here stems from the fact that there *is* a great deal of autonomy afforded by the state to both the arts practitioners and the schools that hire them. It seems counter-intuitive when we think of how the old tensions between the state and arts practitioners stem from the state's need for *overt* control over the arts practitioners. We now have arrived at a contradiction between the residual tensions arising from the state's need for overt control to the state's current neoliberal approach of allowing ancillary institutions autonomy to

interpret and implement policies based on institutional needs. This contradiction itself becomes a source of tension between the state and arts practitioners, and how this comes to pass lies at the heart of the professional relationship between the schools and the arts practitioners – the online government bidding portal called GeBIZ.

The GeBIZ portal and its associated issues came out prominently during my interviews with my informants. According to the MOF website,

“GeBIZ is the Singapore Government's one-stop e-procurement portal. All the public sector's invitations for quotations and tenders are posted on GeBIZ. Suppliers can search for government procurement opportunities, download tender documents, and submit their bids online. GeBIZ allows any supplier to access public sector business opportunities anywhere and anytime with just an Internet connection” (Ministry of Finance 2016)

This portal is the main site where arts practitioners find opportunities to work in schools as CCA instructors. Schools do not directly hire programme providers and CCA instructors per se. Rather, arts practitioners who would like to offer programmes and teaching instructions to schools are required to find opportunities through the GeBIZ system (Ministry of Finance 2017a; SPRING Singapore and Ministry of Finance 2005).

The GeBIZ bidding practice ensures that all state bodies and institutions comply with a state-wide set of procurement rules that instils specific standards. Secondly, it allows the governmental bodies to enjoy the privileges of the open market, which includes the convenience of vendors coming in to bid for tenders as opposed to having to source for suppliers. Three principles, that of transparency, open and fair competition, and value for money, govern the system. The government expects all its agencies to “adhere to these principles and apply

them sensibly to ensure procurements are managed properly and public money is spent wisely” (Ministry of Finance 2017a:4).

The government, through MOF, laid out guidelines to all state bodies and institutions regarding the procurement of goods and services. According to MOF’s website, there are four key stages to this bureaucratic process, which in order of occurrence are (1) sourcing, (2) evaluation, (3) approval of award, (4) contract management (Ministry of Finance 2017b). One of the bylaws enforced by MOF is that any goods and services that have a total procurement value of more than SGD 6000.00 would require any state body or institution to participate in an open quotation exercise in GeBIZ (SPRING Singapore and Ministry of Finance 2005). The state body or institution would post a call for quotations on the website for a variable duration that is determined by the institution, during which, interested potential suppliers and vendors would put in their application to bid for the opportunity. There are no official announcements or advertisements from the state body or institution informing the public of new opportunities. The usual practice for these institutions, however, would be to have the officers who initiated the ‘Call To Quote’ to ask informally through familiar vendors who already have had dealings with their institution. Some vendors also make it a point to check the GeBIZ website regularly to see if there are any new opportunities to bid. The application would also include detailed documentation regarding the quality and type of goods or services rendered.

On the part of the arts practitioners, accessing opportunities to bid for work opportunities via GeBIZ is straightforward. As of 1st of January 2015, an arts practitioner would need to register with MOE via an online portal system,

either as an individual or as a business entity.³⁰ Once the application is vetted and approved by the relevant authorities within MOE, the arts practitioners can then proceed to the GeBIZ portal.³¹ Whilst even members of the public can simply search for opportunities using the search function of the website, only registered CCA instructors will be able to bid for these jobs. This portal is also the site where the results of the bidding will be displayed. The results are also made public, where anyone can see who has placed bids, how much they've bid for, and who was finally awarded the job. A still capture of the website can be seen below in figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1 – Screenshot of the GeBIZ website.

Source: www.gebiz.gov.sg

³⁰ In the time of writing this dissertation, the web link to the MOE website is as follows: <https://www.moe.gov.sg/coaches-instructors>

³¹ The GeBIZ portal's address is as follows: <https://www.gebiz.gov.sg/>

Going back to the idea of autonomy given by the state to both schools and to arts practitioners, autonomy follows the principle of the free market enterprise.³² Each school has been given autonomous control by MOE to determine its own institutional goals and outcomes, as long as it follows the broad guidelines set by the state in terms of financial and institutional governance. This means that the school can determine, amongst many other things, how much they want to devote to the arts or the CCAs in terms of funding and resources. On the part of the arts practitioners, autonomy comes in the form of having a ‘choice’ to bid for schools. This may not be much of an advantage to the arts practitioners since each opportunity is paid labour. That said, in instances where a job posted on GeBIZ is seen to be deliberately under-resourced, or if the school posting the job has a reputation of being difficult, most arts practitioners would then avoid bidding for schools. Even then, there will be individuals who would be willing to take on even those jobs. When it comes down to it, the choices made by both choral music practitioners and schools are determined by circumstances that they are in: schools may put up offers for less pay and less contact time, and it’s up to the choral music practitioners to bid and take up offers.

I find that due to the nature of the free market, the schools will often end up getting a better end of the deal. The deal has unequal outcomes and this imbalance reinforces the buyer-supplier relationship in certain ways. To be exact, the school's freedom to pick and choose strongly echoes the neoliberal sentiments of the free market: where the arts practitioners are beholden to adopt 'you're the

³² A discussion of neoliberalism and the free market enterprise can be found in Chapter Two, page 61.

supplier, you cannot pick your customers' / 'customer is king' mentality because the decision to hire lies in the schools.

Looking at the interactions facilitated by the GeBIZ system allows us to see two dimensions in the relationship between the state and the arts practitioners, (1) that of employer (which refers to the state in the form of schools and institutions) and employee (which are the arts practitioners), and (2) that of buyer (which are the schools) and supplier (which is the labour provided by arts practitioners). The description of GeBIZ also highlights what seems to be a competitive, merit-based and supposedly more “open” system practice by the schools under the auspices of state governance. These descriptions also help us frame the discussions in the following sections, where we look at how individual choral music practitioners navigate the system and make meaning out of the heterogeneous requirements set up by the schools that they seek to get employed.

5.3 – Getting hired

Procedurally, applying for a job as a CCA instructor is simple. Get registered, get on GeBIZ, and then click on a bid and do the documentation. Getting selected is the hard bit. This section discusses the issues choral music practitioner faces as they embark on this journey of job hunting. Earlier in the previous section, Chen Yang mentioned that October is the time where most schools put up their ITQs for instructors to bid. It is usually around this time that the arts practitioners go on the GeBIZ platform and look out for opportunities to bid for contracts. Many of the arts practitioners also come to rely on their established professional networks (i.e. camps) to find out more regarding potential hirers, such as the working environment of the school, past

accomplishments of the choir as well as the personalities of the administrators. They do this in order to better frame their responses when they present their bids in the online system.

According to MOE, CCAs are an extension of the school's instructional delivery that serves to nurture the holistic development of students (Ministry of Education 2014a, 2018a; Sim and Ong 2014). There are expectations to be had in relation to a potential CCA instructor's professional abilities and outlook. Each school has the autonomy to select and hire a CCA instructor based on their institutional needs and constraints. When I first started my fieldwork, I wondered if there was a discrepancy with regard to what is expected by the school and whether this is known by the arts practitioners themselves.

To that end, I went to find school administrators to see if this is the case. One of the administrators I spoke to was Michael. I asked about his thoughts on what makes a good performing arts CCA instructor. He answered,

The role of the CCA instructor is to provide every aspect of the artistic and technical guidance to the members. He or she needs to develop the students holistically in their music or artistic ability, and not just to perform three songs for SYF. You want the students to grow in their love for the arts form, and as a performer or as a person in general. The important aspects of a good CCA instructor are the character, good values, and is equipped with good pedagogical skills.

I also asked my choral conductor informants the same question. One of them was Mel, who shared the following:

Number one, I think you must have a passion to teach *lah*. And, teaching is not just, for me, I feel it's not just getting a gold. I'm more into character building, humility. So let's say my choir is a gold choir, but if they go out and laugh at other choirs, I think it's failed education... To me, you must be able to teach the students in the right way, which is character building. At the same time, using that time to build a life skill. That means you teach them not just to memorize a song but how to read music and why interpretation is done this way. You inject some history in them. In the long run, their appreciation of arts would increase. So let's say out of the choir, they have their own small little singing group, they sing solo, or even just attending the concert. I think that is already a success because you cultivate something in them. That's what I think a good conductor should be, rather than I teach you and you get gold and then your CCA points are very high and you graduate. Then after you graduate, you don't touch music at all. Then I think that is a failure. To me, that's what a good conductor should be.

Both Michael's and Mel's responses are quite similar in outlook. Both regard the position of a CCA instructor to be first and foremost that of an educator. One of the important responsibilities of the CCA instructor is to instil good values in the students he or she instructs. Both believe that CCA instructors not only impart musical and performing skills but also instil an attitude towards music-making that hopefully persists beyond their formal schooling. This perception of a potential CCA instructor requiring the practice of sound values is reflective of an ideal type of an educator in Singapore.

Most of my informants whom I've asked that question shared very similar responses to what both Michael and Mel shared when I asked the first question. However, I find this perception to be somewhat problematic, at least when I reframe the question from "what makes a good conductor" to "how does one get hired as a conductor?" When I asked the first question, I had intended to discover what exactly makes an individual attractive and desirable for hire. I am not disputing that the idea of sound values as articulated by both informants are

unimportant or relevant. Yet, when I asked the second question, another pattern emerges.

Michael's response was as follows:

My school has had a long history of having good performing arts ensembles. We take a lot of pride in our Aesthetics teams. The baseline for an instructor is that they should have a track record of producing good SYF results. A potential candidate would be advantaged if they have had experiences in leading ensembles in international competitions and achieving good results in those as well.

When I clarified and asked what he meant by 'good results' to which replied,

Well, most of the Performing Arts CCAs in my school have maintained a distinction or gold standard for the last couple of SYFs. If you want to be considered for the position of a CCA instructor in my school, that would be the baseline.

As a researcher, I was somewhat surprised that there were differences in the ways my school administrator informants articulated what it meant to be a good instructor and what it took for a person to be hired as one. I made an assumption that the conceptualization of 'a good instructor' is a requirement to be hired. The situated behaviour that I was interested in discovering was the ways in which potential CCA instructors adapt the way they present themselves, both in terms of the way they produce their CVs as well as actual responses during interviews. Specifically, these actions are geared towards how to make themselves most attractive to the hirer. Yet, my informants tell me that a good instructor is someone with good pedagogy and who is also a good role model. Clearly, there is a gap between what they articulated and what they look out for when hiring new instructors.

Outwardly they articulate the importance of qualitative values (e.g. pedagogy, good role model, etc), but it seems that the final decision is heavily dependent on a quantitative measure of awards and accolades. This deserves

greater scrutiny. When a school is looking for a CCA instructor, their administrator will post an invitation-to-quote (ITQ) document on the GeBIZ porta. The ITQ document outlines the explicit requirements set forth by each school and is made publicly available on the GeBIZ Portal. I include below in Figure 4.1 an example of the documentation contained in the invitation to quote.

Section C: Specifications for Instructors	
Registration with MOE	<p>All Instructors supplied by the Contractor shall be registered with the Ministry of Education.</p> <p>The Contractor shall use the Instructors specified in Annex F (Instructor Deployment List) and shall ensure that Instructors deployed remain registered with the Ministry of Education throughout the Contract Period.</p>
Qualifications	1. Any other relevant and recognised certification in Choir.
Experience	<p>All Instructors should be competent to handle the tasks and responsibilities assigned. All Instructors should have preferably 3 years of coaching experience in Choir.</p> <p>Instructors may be requested to give a lesson to demonstrate competency in facilitation training for students.</p>
Track Record	To provide a list of current and past training conducted for similar programmes from 1 Jan 2015 to the closing date of this quotation.
Employment Pass	<p>1. If the Instructor is not a Singapore Citizen, or Permanent Resident, the Instructor must possess a valid Employment Pass issued by the Ministry of Manpower for the purposes of the engagement.</p> <p>2. This pass must be valid throughout the duration of the Contract.</p>
Language of Instruction	English

Figure 4.1 – Example of specifications for CCA instructors

Source: GeBIZ portal website (Ministry of Finance 2016)

Apart from the first category, all other categories are common job requirements across any profession in Singapore. While these categories are common attributes used in the construction of eligibility, each profession has different issues in negotiating how the attributes can be utilized. Out of all these categories, three are of interest to this chapter. More specifically, these categories are (1) qualifications, (2) experiences and (3) track records.

The notion of qualifications has always been somewhat problematic for the arts practitioner when applying for a CCA instructor position. Part of the issue stems from how schools and institutions recognize only certain types of credentials. I spoke to YM who shared the following experiences in dealing with some of the school administrators:

Just the other day the AM (admin manager) of one of the schools I decided to bid called me up and asked me to submit my O level certificate. I have a higher degree in music performance. How does my O level show that I'm qualified to do my job? What does my O level have to do with being able to accompany the school ensembles?³³

When I asked YM about his own views on how schools recognize certain certification and qualifications for jobs, he noted that schools have different requirements for different positions. This shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone, since different jobs may require different skill sets. From what I understood from his response and from analysing ITQ documents, I saw that the formal criteria stated on ITQs are one thing and the actual qualities schools look for are different from what was listed. On this specific point, I can see why my informants are somewhat irritated with the ways in which schools put up ITQs: despite the GeBIZ system setting itself to be an "open" system, there is too much ambiguity on the part of the schools who participate in it.

However, YM clarified that he took umbrage with how the qualifications demanded by schools did not sufficiently correspond to the skillsets that are required for the job itself. When I asked him to elaborate further, he shared that

³³ On the 11th November 2018, The Straits Times reported that MOE is moving towards de-emphasizing the role of O level certification in university applications (Teng and Ang 2018). While this may be a way in which the state is signposting further changes in how educational qualifications are perceived, at the time this thesis was written, most state bodies, including schools, still continue to require potential candidates to submit their O level results as part of their job application.

in order to be a choral conductor instructor, most schools would want you to have a minimum ABRSM Grade 5 in Music Theory, and ideally also a grade 5 in voice performance or piano. For pianists, many schools are asking minimally for a diploma in piano performance or even a degree in music. The heart of his issue in this matter is this: that by putting up arbitrary standards for both positions and by paying a position that requires higher qualifications less than a position that has a lower qualification requirement, it demonstrates two possible positions of schools and MOE. Firstly, both schools and MOE seem to have no clue as to how artistic work should be valued. Secondly, the haphazard way of putting up ITQ indicate very little regard as to how artistic work in CCAs should be managed. To Yong Ming, it is a combination of both.

The ambiguity of formal certification for skill sets deserves greater scrutiny. To note, many of my informants share Yong Ming's sentiments with respect to how schools are arbitrarily assigning requirements for jobs. In fairness, I note that some arts forms do not have specific accreditation bodies from which to draw institutionalized cultural capital. However, it cannot be said that choral music falls under this category. There are diploma certificates offered by various examination boards, and some conductors have obtained Masters Degrees in conducting from overseas institutions.

The crux of the matter here is that it seems that my informants perceive that schools are ignorant of the existence of these qualifications, and to them, it seems that school assign the qualification requirements of CCA instructors in an arbitrary fashion. From the interviews I conducted, I discovered that choral music practitioners come to this perception from two sources; (1) from their personal experience of seeing different schools putting up different requirements for the

same job, and (2) that schools seldom, if at all, articulate as to why such qualification requirements are even necessary.

From interview data of schoolteachers and administrators, I discovered that the decisions made by most school administrators to recognize and determine proper qualifications are framed by a limited understanding of the technical value of accreditation. This reality can be sociologically explained by an argument made by Bourdieu (2000). He explains that accreditation can be understood under the premise of institutionalised cultural capital. The value of accreditation lies in what is considered recognized and legitimate within the frames of the job market – especially so for my thesis where the state, through schools, are the potential hires. This value is produced in many dimensions, but two way which is of significance to my study is as follows; (1) the ways in which the state allocates prestige, status and resources to the institutions such as the ABRSM that confers the accreditation and (2) how the state assigns value to accreditation by hiring the individuals who possess the prescribed qualifications.

While essentially the state is more than able to create opportunities for individuals to accumulate cultural capital through the establishment of institutions and systems of accreditation, it would be more economically and bureaucratically efficient if the state took advantage of already existing structures, such as qualifications derived from GCE ‘O’ and ‘A’ level results or qualifications from local arts tertiary institutions such as Lasalle and NAFA, and co-opts them for the state’s purposes. Yet, as mentioned earlier, the lack of understanding around what formal accreditations are available puts schools and institutions, and to an extent the state, at a peculiar impasse between a lack of

qualification and grounding concrete criteria for attractiveness for hire. The impasse consists of two issues.

Firstly, it can be said that there are no local institutions that impart the skills required for the job. This issue is made specific to choral conducting itself, and not so much the piano accompaniment in school choirs. This is problematic for school administrators as they could not rely on a local institution's cultural and symbolic value to have a basis for comparison of skills and content. Secondly, and more prevalently, the administrators themselves are not familiar with the content and technical representation of the available accreditation. This makes them reliant on whatever established norms that are available for them to draw on, inhibiting their ability to make a value judgement of what or which accreditation is more valuable than others.

This is made apparent in my conversation with Rey, an informant who is a teacher in charge of a primary school choir. She shared with me that when she puts up the ITQ for a choir instructor, she used the ABRSM Grade 5 Theory and Grade 5 instrument as the minimum requirement. She herself has no musical background and her only experience with choral music was when she attended church services. She also shared her predecessor had set this precedent. When I asked her what a possible explanation could be of why this was an acceptable standard, her reply to me was as follows:

I actually don't really know the reason why we keep this standard. I mean, no one has complained about it yet, and I think the other music CCAs also have the same ITQ requirement. I think somewhere somehow someone saw a memo that had that those requirements for something that was music-related.³⁴ It's been a couple of years since we have been doing this since my senior's time, and we're just copying and pasting from previous years.

Rey's example is one of the many variations to the ITQ practice. As illustrated in Figure 4.1, some schools use generic terms for the section on qualifications. Others would articulate specific post-secondary or even university qualifications. The existence in the variations of the ITQ practice has led me to believe that the practice is more reflective of the schoolteachers and administrators drawing on their habitual practices rather than a pervasive state-wide iteration of policy enactments.

Here I offer two explanations. Firstly, my own interpretation of this practice of re-using legacy paperwork could still be loosely associated with Bourdieu's argument for institutionalized cultural capital: that when these teachers and administrators rely on legacy documentation and paperwork when administering the ITQs, they do so because they are relying on a history that someone before them has done the appropriate checks. Furthermore, since the system of vetting and approving has not rejected the reproduction of this legacy content, it inspires them to genuinely believe that this is the *appropriate* and *accepted* way of identifying qualifications in the ITQ. By extension, despite whatever qualifications a choral music practitioner may have, their institutional cultural capital value is determined by whether the schools have deigned to include or exclude them in their respective ITQs. For clarity, this means that the

³⁴ On this, I suspect that her predecessor may have read the O level music's minimum requirements sent out by MOE and may have misconstrue this as a requirement for CCA instructors. Her predecessor is no longer with the school, and I was unable to verify this.

GeBIZ system and its contents via ITQ provides both the technical and symbolic validation of institutional cultural capital.

My second explanation refers to instances where the types of descriptions written in the ITQ were the result of deliberation by the schoolteachers and administrators. Here, their rationale for selecting types of descriptors moves away from the discourse of cultural capital and more towards the utilization of GeBIZ as a free market application. For example, schools who employ vague descriptors do so in hopes of attracting a wider pool of applicants. On the other hand, schools that detail more exacting criteria already have an idea of a type of candidate, or even a specific candidate with the exact qualifications, as exemplified by the descriptions provided by Michael earlier in this section. This is also reflective of the state's stance on how schools should be run; that each school possesses autonomy in deciding what is best for the school.

The Singapore government is cognizant of such issues and does have processes that regulate the production of accreditation in Singapore and educating the citizenry on alternative means of producing employment attractiveness (Toh 2017). Yet this regulatory process is not without its own internal contradictions. In the Careers@Gov portal where the government puts up notices for employment opportunities, it states that

There is no central authority that assesses or accords recognition to degrees for employment into the Public Service. In general, degrees from universities accredited by the home government of the country where the university is located will be considered for appointment into the Public Service. This applies to degrees obtained full-time or part-time, through distance learning or twinning programmes etc. Each public service agency decides on the skills required for their respective jobs, and qualification may be one proxy for the required skills. For overseas professional qualifications, agencies will check whether these are recognised by the relevant professional bodies in Singapore (Public Service Division, Singapore 2019).

As shown here, the decision to recognize certain institutions is delegated to the ministries that seek new hires. Furthermore, MOM actively maintains a list of accredited universities that the state recognizes as valid (Ministry of Manpower 2017).

Part of the issue stems from how arts practitioners imagine the worth of accreditation vis-à-vis the state. After all, Singaporeans themselves are inundated with reports of mainstream media regarding how well our education system and institutions have been performing in comparison to the rest of the world (Chong 2014b; Huang et al. 2019; Koh 2014; Ng 2011). It is little wonder that the arts practitioners perceive the state to require tertiary institutions, both locally and abroad, to maintain the rigour of their own accreditation in order to validate the accreditation's cultural and economic value. In the case of visual and performing arts, recognition of a degree or certificate is based on how widely accepted their accreditations are in the wider international arts markets, as well as their placement in international rankings garnered from external organizations such as QS World University Rankings and Times Higher Education Rankings (Ministry of Manpower 2017). That said, because of the lack of familiarity with such degrees, many of the schoolteachers and administrators rather rely on what they are more familiar with, which in this case is the music examination board certificates.

The existence of institutional rankings and how they are circulated by mainstream media informs the Singaporean arts practitioners of the notion of an accreditation's prestige and desirability; the better an institution's position on the rank boards, the more prestigious their conferred accreditations are perceived. Earlier, I mentioned that one of the limitations of gaining prestigious

accreditation with high cultural capital worth is often prohibitively costly. The economic cost has created a barrier for participation, which in turn creates a circular logic linking cultural prestige to social-economic standing.

Hence, producing attractiveness when understood from a neoliberal perspective becomes problematic to the arts practitioners. From the perspective of the arts practitioners, the array of accreditation as a facet of attractiveness supposedly produces a hierarchical differentiation between those with accreditation from institutions perceived as prestigious in terms of institutional rankings, and those who do not. While the state broadens its options in terms of choices for qualification, for the arts practitioners, these choices are predicated on the limitations of their own personal economic resources that can be drawn from their individual socio-economic background and social capital. Even then, as we saw from the issues that came out of the examples of Yong Ming and Rani, some school administrators aren't cognizant of the value of such accreditation, and instead rely on residual practices rather than giving these accreditations full credence.

5.4 – Building a career: Demonstrating relevance and results

I met Samuel, who shared the following:

I think it's really nice of (the organizer) to organize it for the choral music people. I know many of them, myself included, are quite taken by surprised when MOE decided in 2017 that there was going to be an improvisation and co-creation portion in SYF.³⁵ I mean... none of us is trained in composition, and we're all anxious about how to go about in teaching the choir students how to compose. Many of the teachers in charge of schools aren't musically trained themselves, so we are the ones who will have to facilitate this. And you know lah... Since this is part of the competition, even though they (as in MOE) say it's not going to be part of the judging criterion and overall scores for the competition, we will still be judged by everyone else who's gonna be there. So... we might as well learn how to do it properly.

For Samuel, the course represents an opportunity to acquire a new skill set that will be immediately useful to him. It also gives him an opportunity to interact with other choral music practitioners in a collegial setting, and to see how others are coping with having to deal with the new requirements set forth by MOE.

I found that many other informants are concerned about this specific change to the SYF. Some of my informants shared that they are worried that if this co-creation process is not managed well, it would have severe consequences on the morale of their students. There's also the issue of how some schools, especially those who have the Music Elective programmes, are placed in a more advantaged position than others. These schools have music teachers who can facilitate the co-creation portion of the set work for the students. Inevitably, these school choirs have a more polished outcome than the choirs from the neighbourhood schools. However, rather than focusing on the inherent inequality experiences by schools vis-à-vis other schools in this section, I focus more on how choral music practitioners who do not have the skills and expert support from the schoolteachers go on to find ways to ameliorate their own situation. More specifically, choral music practitioners are finding that there are newer

³⁵ This co-creation activity is one of the many changes to the SYF competition that was initiated in 2012.

challenges that require them to acquire new skill sets in order for them to better carry out their roles as choir CCA instructors.

Like any professional, arts practitioners who seek employment are to acquire and accumulate accreditation as a means of producing attractiveness for themselves. Here, I posit that accreditation and skills acquisition are not necessarily mutually inclusive – while accreditation does involve the acquisition (and a demonstration thereof) of skills or knowledge, not all skill acquisition activities are accredited. Referring to my conversation with Samuel, I asked him for his views about accreditation and skills acquisition. Our conversation went as follows:

Samuel: Well, sometimes it depends on the type of school that you work with and what they expect you to do. I heard from my friend who's a CCA instructor from another school who said that for that particular school, all CCA instructors are *highly encouraged* [emphasis his] to get CPR and first aid training. I'm not sure if the school paid for that, but I knew my friend eventually caved in and did it with some of the other instructors in school. He got a certificate for that and its part of his portfolio.

Me: Do you think you need to get that? I mean, would it be useful for you?

Samuel: Well... a First Aid and CPR certificate is useful in a generic sense. I mean, it's something everyone knows that will be useful in an emergency. Sometimes, I feel that CCA instructors have to *pa ka liao* ['perform all the tasks' in dialect] if they want to be seen as 'useful' and 'value-add' to the school.

Me: How do you decide what certs to take?

Samuel: Well, when you take a look at (the folksong arrangement) workshop, that sort of skills is very useful for me as a conductor. Even though the course got no cert, I would still go because it helps me become a better conductor and musician. But things like this the schools won't recognize. So we got to be strategic in what we do and when we do lah, cos most of the time we have pay for ourselves. Own time own target also... Some things you do because you want to keep your job, and other things you do because you want to get better at what you do, you know what I mean?

To my informants, going for courses and obtaining certificates that are recognized by the school administrative system becomes part of the repertory of strategies that arts practitioners employ to sustain their careers as CCA instructors. Deciding when and where to do a course is both instrumental and strategic; it is dependent of the current needs of the schools that they are employed in as well as the schools that they hope to get employment. I discovered that my informants operationalize professional development in two dimensions, the first being *practical* and the other being *applicative*. I refer to practical professional development as courses and certification that are generic in nature and are part of employment or institutional requirements. Examples of these courses would be the specialist diploma mentioned earlier, and other courses such as CPR, first aid or even basic counselling skills. Due to the nature of the discipline of choral music, these applicative courses are not as easy to come by when compared to the practical ones. More often, these courses tend to be one-off workshops organized by larger bodies such as the Choral Directors Association of Singapore (CDAS) or institutions such as NAFA or La Salle. The more senior camp members also make use of their extended international networks to fly in experts from around the world to conduct such workshops with both choirs as well as choral conductors. An example of this can be seen in Figure 5.2 when Ms Lim Ai Hooi invited Ms Maria Guinand from Venezuela to give masterclasses at the Goodman Arts Centre in Singapore.

Figure 5.2 – Choral Music Workshop with Maria Guinand
Source: Ong Wei Meng (used with permission)

These various examples show us how choral music practitioners perform various strategies in their pursuit of professional development. Yet, there are two missing puzzle pieces in the larger picture: (1) how do choral music practitioners know what is desirable by their current and future employers, and (2) how do they know when it is time to employ certain strategies. The first puzzle piece is made manifest in Figure 4.1, where the wordings that describe each category, and specifically for this case the section on experiences, are written in a broad and generic way. A convenient interpretation of why schools do so the GeBIZ post may entice more applicants to apply, which then will allow schools to have a greater choice in selecting the best candidate for the position.

Yet, when I observe the ways my informants articulate these experiences through both documentation as well as through interviews, I begin to see how they have translated an imagined check-lists of what they perceive their employers want into concrete ways of performing and presenting. Other than the

tangible items (MOE registration, accreditation, experience), this imagined checklist created by the choral music practitioners themselves contains the following:

1. Adopting a creative ‘problem-solver’ perspective in dealing with new challenges without incurring a cost to the school
2. Be a lifelong learner and constantly improve on the teaching skills at your own cost
3. Have a wide network to tap into in order to find opportunities for the school
4. Come up with concrete actions to show ‘value-addedness’ to the school, such as the CPR training
5. Maintain and improve your track record

On the topic of track records, presenting your personal and professional ‘track records’ is a common practice when one seeks employment for most jobs. Applying for a performing arts CCA instructor position is no exception. Ideally, a person’s accomplishments represent concrete pieces of evidence to a person’s capabilities and proficiencies in a real-time context. Yet, not all accomplishments are transferable or equally valued, especially when a person moves on to different career stages or different industries. In fact, each industry practises different dimensions of success. Here, I explore how arts practitioners imagine the types of records of accomplishment that schools desire as a means to a better understanding of how they perceive their relationships with their employers.

When I asked Mel about how track record affects the ways arts instructors get offers for jobs, she shared the following:

This is Singapore... it's very competitive because you have many people come into the market now... A lot of times, the decisions now is made by dollars and cents. And you have new conductors come into the scene, charging \$60/70 per hour. Well, our rates are also considered very cheap already, about \$110-120. Some conductors charge from \$150 to \$200, but they are the pioneers la. Let's say if I'm the teacher, I want to choose a conductor, but then the admin and principal say 'eh this \$60 one bidding, why don't want to take the \$60?' Then the teacher can justify and say 'oh she has a degree, she has obtained how many golds, how many COD (Certificate of Distinctions)'. After that, the school says 'Okay, take that one'. All these define your success. At the end of the day, it's still all these. On the paper, they cannot see how when her students or his students came out, they have very good character and they have impacted the society etc. If it's not in your resume, it's not there. What they see on the paper, is the number of golds, number of CODs, years of experience, educational background.

From Mel's perspective, schools consider a potential candidate's qualification, experience and record of accomplishment when deciding to hire a CCA instructor. She also believes that there is a hierarchy of preferences amongst these three qualities and that each school has different preferences. Her belief is shared by many other informants. They draw this belief from their experiences in bidding for CCA instructor positions and the conversations they had with teachers and HODs who interviewed them. Despite MOE moving away from SYF being a competition and the abolishment of the school ranking systems, many interviewers continue to ask candidates about how many awards an individual person has produced over the years.

Other informants have shared similar experiences. I spoke to Daniel, who recounted an interview he had which is as follows:

I got called up for an interview by the HOD of a ... school. He and the choir teacher in charge were present when I came down. One of the questions he asked was, 'Before you conducted such and such school, what did they get for the SYF?' So when I told them how that particular school got their first distinction under me, I could tell they were quite interested in the possibility of hiring me. I must say, they didn't beat around the bush. The HOD told me that they're looking for someone that can get a distinction for SYF, and the reason they terminated the previous conductor was that the school got an Accomplishment award for the last SYF. He looked me straight in the eye and said, 'There are certain standards to be met in this school, and we're looking for someone who has delivered result and can do the same here.'

Daniel's recollection is an example of why choral music practitioners perceive that school administrators continue to fixate on records of accomplishment. This fixation of records of accomplishment, especially in terms of SYF results, informs the choral music practitioners on how they need to be strategic in their choices in arts making. The choral music practitioners would seek out and emulate working styles and techniques that are known to produce good results, which in turn helps them to obtain the desired result and thus increasing the likelihood of getting hired by schools. While the bureaucratic processes of hiring CCA instructors has not changed, the ways in which schools deal with this new reality involving policy changes has a direct impact on the instructors of the performing arts CCAs. In many ways, these changes have systematically positioned the Performing Arts CCA instructors in a more precarious position. The old systems position the arts vis-à-vis the SYF as tangible outcomes, one that schools can work on as part of their repertory of attractiveness. The new policies have fundamentally changed this production of attractiveness since now the results of the SYF supposedly no longer have institutional value to the schools.

Yet, I found evidence that many schools continue to use the SYF as a measuring index for the performance for the CCA instructors. When I asked

Daniel about his thoughts about the SYF and MOE's directive of moving away from competition and competitiveness, he candidly shared the following:

Okay, so initially when I first stepped in, the structure was gold, silver, bronze awards. And you have the gold with honours for the top few who did really, really well. And they have this certificate of participation, basically 'thank you for coming and you are just lousy'. But now, they reduced that 6-tier to now 3-tiers. Certificate of distinction, achievement and commendation. So they have told us the reason for the change, is that they don't want choirs to be competitive. And I don't understand why 'competition' is a vulgar word, why 'competition' is such a bad word. Why can't choirs be competitive? Because you have sports CCAs that are competitive, so why can't we be competitive? Because it is only through competition that you discover ways to improve yourself, to be inspired to improve yourself. So I don't think competition is a bad thing. I feel that diluting it to three tiers makes it less inspiring for the singers because for all those that have been doing well, those that I have mentioned before – have a long-standing culture – they will be almost guaranteed a distinction. But for choirs stuck between or have been growing, they will always try to break out of that accomplishment and reach out for that distinction. But they can't. It makes it more difficult because no one wants to be labelled as a commendation choir, and I find it that when they try to play down the competitiveness, I think it still remains. It's the same old story and it doesn't help. Because they said that choir competition is unhealthy and it doesn't foster good connections with other choristers and blah blah blah. But they are basically rebranding it but basically doing the same old thing. MOE can say what they want, but I know even the schools aren't buying it. They're (the school administrators) still looking out for conductors who can wave their arms and produce distinctions. You know lah... Different labels, same shit.

From my own positionality, I had assumed that when MOE moved the SYF away from the formal competitive model and geared it towards holistic participation, the intrinsic institutional value of the SYF outcomes no longer have that imagined gravitas it had before. Yet, my informants feel that the changes to the SYF are merely cosmetic in nature. In fact, when the changes were first announced, many arts practitioners, teachers and students were not really convinced that these changes are for the better (Lee 2013; Lye 2012). When I asked my informants if these sentiments have changed since 2012, most indicated that their perceptions

have not changed. In fact, they feel that while the stakes for the SYF have decreased for the schools, in many ways the students and conductors still continue to experience the same levels of performance pressure.

From my own position, it is difficult to determine which aspects of these anxieties are brought about by the school administration, and which aspects are self-induced due to the residual sentiments of the SYF being a summative competition. I am informed by the data from the interviews as well as looking at GeBIZ documentation uploaded by schools that quite often the SYF results are used as a measure for professional success. Furthermore, even amongst choral music practitioners, there are those who tabulate and track the SYF results, and the statistics are often a conversation point amongst choral music practitioners.

I did ask some of my informants if there were alternatives to using the SYF, and all of them were unsure if there would be any viable alternatives. Some did mention the use of external (those not organized by MOE) competitions, but they also realised the move doesn't change the reliance on competitive results and awards. Using the SYF as a reference point for track records is convenient to both choral music practitioners as well as the school administrators. I say this because firstly, the SYF is regulated and managed by MOE, and this gives it symbolic credence vis-à-vis the state. Secondly, the results are readily understood by both sides of the employer-employee relationship.

Linking the discussion back to the larger puzzle of why there are ongoing tensions between the state and arts practitioners, we find that one of the underlying causes of tension is that the people making decisions have limited knowledge by which to judge the value of the artistic credibility and labour in which I discussed at length in the previous section. While the school

administration may not necessarily know the quality of aesthetic output that a choir conductor is capable of producing, the results, which are awarded by a team of experts appointed by MOE, hold certain and quantifiable value. In some ways, choral instructors have limited capital legible to the schools other than awards and medals.

5.5 – Ending the contract

It was the end of the academic year. Sam, who had been the school choir's CCA instructor for several years, had every reason to believe that he has a secure position with this school. After all, he believed that he had developed a good working relationship with the school administration. He worked very closely with the teachers in charge of the choir and had a great rapport with the students as well as their parents. As a point of professional practice, Sam makes appointments to meet the school leaders at least once a term; in part to renew his professional relationship with them, as well as to keep himself updated with the strategic direction of the school. Sam regularly sought feedback from parents, teachers, and the school leaders regarding how he could be of value to the school. The response that he often got was that they would like the students to get 'more exposure', to get more opportunities to perform in public.

Informed by the feedback he received, Sam endeavoured to address the issue of public performances for the following year. When Sam submitted his scheme of work documents in the portal in November, he included plans for the choir to take part in a performance at one of the museums in Singapore. He made the necessary arrangements so that he could ensure the choir members would get their exposure from performing in public. While the performing slots were

limited, Sam used his own informal connections to secure that platform. Prior to the December holidays, he announced this to the choir during the last rehearsal of the year. The students were very excited to hear of this and looked forward to that performance. Sam also informed the teachers about the performance prior to the announcement, who simply nodded in response. After the final rehearsal, Sam asked the teachers for the academic schedule and CCA timings for the following year. One of the teachers told him that he would get all the necessary documents after the GeBIZ arrangements were finalised.

The last week of December came, and Sam had yet to receive an email from the teachers regarding the new schedule. He sent an email to the teachers in charge of the choir to ask again for the schedule, but no replies were forthcoming. The first week of January came, and Sam signed into the GeBIZ portal. Only then did he discover that the school awarded the contract to another choral musician. Sam did not have an inkling that the school was looking to replace him. There was no official explanation given as to why he did not get the contract; not from teachers, nor the school leaders, despite the many years in what Sam believed to be quality service to the school. The realisation of this disappointed Sam. He felt that there was no closure to be had; neither professionally nor emotionally. Sam looked at the results of the GeBIZ page once again. He discovered that the winning bidder offered a lower hourly rate compared to his regular rates. Sam reflected that if he knew the school wanted a lower rate, he would have gladly offered to lower his hourly rates. The greatest disappointment was that the only information he could get out of the whole transaction he had with the school was through GeBIZ.

The termination of a school contract is a sensitive topic amongst my informants. From the data drawn from interviews, I observed that my informants who have worked as CCA instructors for more than ten years tend to be very cynical towards their professional relationship with the schools. In fact, the vignette of Sam's life shared above reflects the experiences of some of these informants in their dealing with schools vis-à-vis GeBIZ. The perceptions of my informants are subjected to their own personal experiences as well as the stories told by other choral music practitioners. It would be an oversimplification to categorize the ways contracts are ended as a result of unequal power relations between the schools and CCA instructors as employers.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, we know that individual employment decisions made by both employee and employer alike are dependent on their own individual needs. We also know that GeBIZ functions like a job portal and the job market are run by along the lines of the neoliberal free-market principle. According to Fine and Saad-Filho (2017), they argue that the constellation of neoliberalism's ideology, scholarship, policy, as well as practice, does indeed create a site-specific culture within the boundaries of the neoliberal space. I would contend that GeBIZ is one of such spaces.

I draw this idea that the GeBIZ is a neoliberal space from how MOF's three principles directive. The first is "Open and Fair Competition", and it refers to how the fair treatment of suppliers would encourage suppliers to "give their best offer" (Ministry of Finance 2017:4). The second is "Transparency", and it refers to how the state is "committed to maintain an open and transparent system throughout the procurement process" in order for suppliers to better acquaint themselves with how bids are evaluated by state bodies (Ministry of Finance

2017:4–5). The final principle is “Value-for-money”, and refers to how the state rationalizes “the optimal balance of costs and benefits, as well as on the basis of the total cost of ownership” when considering the evaluation of bids so that the state agencies may best benefit from competitive costs (Ministry of Finance 2017:5).

The official descriptors are made public by the MOF in the GeBIZ website.³⁶ I found out through my interviews that there are differences in interpreting and operationalising these principles as a practice from the perspectives of both individual actors from within state bodies as well as arts practitioners. Yee had this to say about GeBIZ:

(GeBIZ is) this government tender website where you (the CCA instructors) submit your bids for jobs. It is supposedly based on fair competition. I used the word ‘supposedly’ because most schools would have had a very long-standing relationship with their current conductors and pianists. Usually, if they have not done anything wrong, there is usually no reason to terminate them for someone who may or may not be cheaper. But then again, it all depends on what your school leaders really want. Sometimes, budget issues can be a big factor in this decision process.

Yee went on to explain that whenever school leaders decide to change the school’s strategic direction, the deployment of resources will change correspondingly. The school leaders will re-calibrate the school’s strategic direction at the end of every in each academic year. These changes are not made in isolation. These decisions are contingent on the current and future needs of the school as an institution and the students, as well as the external social and economic realities that inform state-wide educational policies.

One example of the decision of changing a school’s strategic direction is on whether the school will be taking part in SYF. There are operational and

³⁶ At the time of writing this dissertation, the guideline documents can be found in the GeBIZ website. The url is <https://www.gebiz.gov.sg/singapore-government-procurement-regime.html>

administrative consequences in making this decision; from the implementation of budgets to consequently making the decision to retain or to hire a new instructor. Yee later qualified that the school had the same choir instructor for the last eight years and that the working relationship between them was good. The school leaders also do have a good impression of the instructor as well. Whenever Yee gets information about budgets and school constraints, this is communicated to the instructor so that they can work closely together to find alternative solutions.

The professional relationship Yee has with the choir instructor is not unique. Yet at the same time, not every choir instructor would have the privilege of working with a teacher that cultivates close collegial rapport with the CCA instructor. The vignette at the beginning of this section differs from what Yee describes the situation at school. Yee's own position has part of the school administration offers a different aspect of the relationships between schools and CCA instructors – that both schoolteachers and instructors are subjected to the institutional needs of the school. For Yee, employment decisions are strategic and instrumental decisions not at the individual level, but rather at the level of the institution.

I turn to another informant named Christian, who had this to say about the experiences with finding and renewing contracts:

“I think the government, (or rather) the organisation that we work with, which is the Ministry of Education, they don’t really tell us how to do it. They don’t give us specific guidelines, but the budget for the number of hours we are allowed to train... *these give us a direction of how much we can be involved and how much work we can do* (emphasis mine). Well, just to put this into context, when we are asked to apply for a job even before an interview, we have to go on GeBIZ to bid for a contract. And during this bidding process, the advertisement that is put onto the portal is: ‘Okay we need a choral instructor for 40 hours, for 80 hours, for 150 hours, for 200 hours’. So they already state down there how much they are willing to pay for the year. So this doesn’t just tell us how much time we have and what we can try to do with it. It’s an indication to us how supportive the school is of that group.”

When comparing Christian’s response with Yee’s response, the issue of gaps in information pertaining to available contract requirements is made prominent. These information gaps arise in part through the ways in which contract requirements are captured in the quotation documents on GeBIZ. This is not to say that the school administrators are selectively putting up information or are redacting required information to the vendors in the quotation documents. In fact, the quotation document is a specific template that details most operational information such as rehearsal timings and duration of the programme. Yee suggested that it may be useful to the applicants if the quotation document included the *maximum quantum* that the schools can afford. However, this may not be a feasible practice for schools to do so as the school budget goes through several rounds of calibrations, and the maximum quantum figure may vary depending on how the overall budget is balanced.

Earlier in the chapter, I discussed how choral music practitioners depended on conventions to interpret what is desired by the schools during the application stage of their career. Yet, the choral music practitioners would find that these conventions are working against them, rather than helping them as a practice. Even if schools were to provide such information, it has a negative

impact on the effectiveness of bidding for the contract per se. Here, the conventions of GeBIZ would inform all the choral music practitioners to inculcate a ‘race to the bottom’ practice – to underbid others so that they can position themselves for the job. Furthermore, the quotation documents do not reflect other meaningful information that would be useful for an incumbent instructor, such as the work culture of the school, and the cultural span of the students as well as the specific additional commitments the school CCA has in the academic calendar. In that regard, Yee’s response informs me that a possible mitigating factor would be a strong professional relationship between the teacher-in-charge and the arts practitioner as CCA instructor, which would facilitate open communication regarding school needs and budgetary constraints. That said, not every CCA instructor would have the opportunity to have such rapport with the schoolteachers and school administrators. Those informants that do not have such relationships have reported that the information gaps have caused them much frustration and anxiety when it comes to the status of their employment.

My informants also reported that another source of job-related anxiety is the practice of contract renewal via GeBIZ. To be sure, some contracts do stipulate a possible renewal after the first year of completion, and the renewal is processed automatically and internally for the second year. However, rather than having a separate and internal administrative process in the schools for subsequent years, contract renewals are essentially successful biddings of fresh contract terms. Some schools would report the exact qualifications of the current CCA instructors in the ITQ.

I posit this action serves two purposes based on neoliberal rationality. Firstly, it would be easier to justify why the same instructor is getting the contract

since the instructor has the exact qualifications as outlined by the ITQ. Secondly, there might be a possibility whereby other individuals with similar or better qualifications put in their own applications and give the school a broader range of choices. The vignette at the start of this subsection also illustrates that there are times when a CCA instructor would not be aware if a school is considering a change of instructors. Furthermore, other instructors would not know if the bidding opportunity actually is a pro-forma renewal exercise, or if a school is genuinely looking out for new instructors.

This institutional practice by the schools produces not only individual anxiety, but also creates unnecessary tension amongst arts practitioners. Whilst we should note that the positions are term-based contracts, there are instances where schools and choral conductors seem to have an established working relationship. The choice for other choral conductors to bid for such schools are inherently interpreted as a personal attack on the incumbent – which is somewhat reflective of the turf wars and boundaries I spoke about in chapter four of my thesis.

The essence of Christian's responses is like that of the vignette. Both illustrate how the reality of applying and bidding for government contracts informs the arts practitioner of seeing and performing their practice as a commodity rather than a craft and a profession. By doing so, the arts practitioners have allowed themselves to be subjected to the neoliberal rationality as practiced and re-produced by the state. Formulated 'template responses' to template queries posted by schools on GeBIZ form the core of the conventions that arts practitioner draws upon to deal with the uncertainties of their employment in schools.

So, what happened when choral conductors finally had enough? I spoke to Jia who recently decided to leave the choral music scene to pursue a career in the private sector. When I asked how he made the decision, he shared the following:

Well... we have to be practical when it comes to building a career for ourselves. Don't get me wrong. I love being an instructor in schools. The kids are really fantastic and enthusiastic about learning and performing. But then you see the landscape changing quickly. Schools are changing their priorities. Now the students don't really need the CCA points, and the schools I worked with are always complaining that they have no budget to do anything. On top of that, I kinda went through in my head the pros and cons of staying. If I continue, I know that personally there's always going to be cash flow problems. I'm not covered by a group or professional insurance, no medical coverage if I'm sick, and there are no entitlements like medical leave and stuff like that. Let's be honest – being a conductor you don't have any safety net at all. In the end, I got to do what's right for me financially, and I decided it's time to stop being a conductor and enter the workforce like every other Singaporean adult.

Like Jia, many of my informants candidly shared with me that as Singaporeans, they are quite pragmatic when it comes to making life choices. Many of them actually have conscientious in making provisions for themselves should there be a need for them to switch professions. As mentioned earlier, many choral music practitioners do have professional qualifications or degrees that are not related to music. With the onset of MOE policy changes circa 2012, my informants are conscious that they have the option of pursuing alternative careers, albeit also acknowledging the pain of having to start in a new industry at an entry-level. I discovered from my interviews that there some choral music practitioners who did make the decision to leave the profession and are currently pursuing careers in the banking and finance industries. There are many choral music practitioners who are exploring the possibilities of a hybrid situation, where they look for part-time or full-time positions that provide income to supplement their daily

expenses. These individuals, especially those with music qualifications, branch out to doing things like studio teaching or also take on jobs as real estate agents or financial planners. Currently, many schools are in the midst of streamlining their student contact hours. This meant that schools are trying to ensure that their CCAs will happen on a weekday. This move made by schools has further limited the options of the choral music practitioners in relation to creating a hybrid arrangement for themselves. If he or she takes on a job that has regular office hours, it would be impossible for them to take on instructor positions in schools.

From my interviews, I found that the options of either leaving choral conducting or staying and finding alternative sources of income are informed by (1) how much emotional investment each individual has in the art-form, (2) at which life-stage that the individual choral music practitioner is at this point in time, (3) what sort of alternative skills and qualification an individual has (4) the type of social networks that are available to these individuals, as well as (5) their own imagined projection of their longevity of their career as arts practitioners. My informants who are married have shared that spousal emotional support and spousal economic stability play an important part allowing the individual to make the choice of continuing the pursuit of choral music-making. These informants consider themselves privileged in the sense that their respective partners are earning a stable and relatively sizeable income, and that their collective incomes are enough to support their families. My informants who are single have shared that while what they earn at the moment is enough to meet their individual needs, they worry that pursuing life-stages such as marriage and having children may be financially out of reach to them.

5.6 – Employment Strategies as a cultural toolkit

Throughout this chapter, I detail how the arts practitioners who work within schools perceive these institutions and the people within them. I further explain how this leads them to perform certain explicit actions, attitudes, and behaviours based on their experience and their imagination of school needs, constraints, and practices. My findings suggest the following:

- i. That many school administrators value quantifiable criteria over qualitative ones ³⁷
- ii. The system depersonalises the process of hiring arts practitioners
- iii. It removes to some degree the domain expertise about arts making from the hiring process, but instead puts in additional requirements that may seem sensible (and strategic) to the institution, but appear as arbitrary to the arts practitioners
- iv. That because of the first three items, arts practitioners themselves have become more instrumental and strategic in making professional representations about themselves on the system

An explanation of this technocratic affectation can be found in the neoliberal logics of the hiring processes used by schools. In the open market embodied by GeBIZ, the schools are the buyers and the CCA instructors are the providers of services. The very nature of the open market creates a lopsided power imbalance between the schools and the CCA instructors, where the schools have the option of choosing “the best” that is offered. This then provides the impetus for CCA instructors to perform attractiveness - to upgrade their skills, to provide other

³⁷ I would like to qualify that I discovered this my conversations with my informants who are teachers and school leaders, whose sharing suggest that this happens due to the operational limitations of the GeBIZ interface as well as the limited understanding of how school administrators understand the mechanics of the arts profession.

“value-added” services (like CPR or First Aid Certification) or to lower their hourly rates in the bid to be “the best”.

By extension, the framing of neoliberal logic complicates the idea of what constitutes a “good” candidate. The meaning-making of “good” is not predicated on what we imagine to be shared and inherent moral values of education, but rather in the translatability of the candidate’s characteristics and qualifications to the hiring organization’s needs and goals. The more significant issue here is that “good” is often divorced from the *moral* valence of being a good educator or a performer, and instead is tied to the idea of technocratic reproduction of results and KPIs.

In a Weberian ideal-type situation, we assume that the desired qualifications of good educators are never opposing to those expected for good employees, because these two dimensions of the qualifications are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary to each other. The reality for the choral music practitioners is made more complex because the notion of “good” is defined by the institutions. I found that more often than not, the characteristics of a “good” instructor are never fully and explicitly articulated by the schools to the CCA instructors. Instead, the CCA instructors are often left to guess what these desirable characteristics are through their experiences and interacting with school actors and navigating the GeBIZ documents.

Another large part of the problem lies in the fact that *attractiveness* is not only a non-exhaustive set of attitudes, behaviours and accreditations, but also a shifting target or goalpost that accentuates the inequality amongst the CCA instructors. In fact, some aspects of attractiveness, such as gaining accolades and accreditations from overseas, are only available to those with sufficient cultural

and economic capital. When CCA instructors attempt to make sense out of the ambiguity of who gets hired and who does not, they piece together bits and pieces of anecdotal evidence from conversations and GeBIZ announcements – a practice of the sociological imagination. Yet, this very sociological imagination is limiting and in many ways unhelpful, especially to those who lack the sufficient social and cultural capital, since they are no closer in having a concrete or consensual understanding of what it means to be good vis-à-vis the schools that hire them; either they are already there, or it is something that they have yet to do.

The experiences and the resultant perceptions form the basis of a subjective understanding of their own indirect relationship with the state. It is through their interactions with the school administrators throughout their career stages that they come to understand how school administrators are part of the state bureaucracy and are beholden to the state's overarching rationale and direction when it comes to making employment decisions.

Situating this back to my overarching puzzle of why there are ongoing tensions between the state and arts practitioners, I find that a source of tensions comes from the cognitive dissonances experienced by choral music practitioners working in a school. More specifically, these dissonances occur when they experience what they perceive to be contrary enactments between what the school does and what the state claims to do. Furthermore, and more importantly, it seems that the school administrators do not have the familiarity and technical knowledge of how to ascertain the quality of the accreditations and the work that arts practitioners do in schools. This resulted in schools using competitions and

awards as a way of measuring these qualities and subsequently forces the arts practitioners to use the same as a form of institutional cultural capital.

I have also discovered that despite experiencing ambiguity, anxiety and cognitive dissonances, that choral music practitioners are quite adept in updating their repertory of attitudes, behaviour and strategies to the current realities of the day. They have both individually and collectively made strategic and instrumental choices in selecting which contracts to maintain and which ones to walk away from in order to create a successful career for themselves. Some do this better than others, but that is more reflective of the individual's capacity rather than a cultural impediment that prevents them from pursuing their economic and social pursuits.

The examples I presented in this chapter collectively highlight one source of the tension between the state and arts practitioners – that as arts practitioners, they perceive themselves to be subjected to a constant arbitrariness in relation hiring and working in the schools, which arise from how schools have heterogeneously interpreted the SYF, school policies, and guidelines. Subsequently, the policy changes pertaining to CCAs and the SYF have disrupted professional practices and norms of presenting CVs and portfolios, which understandably frustrates the arts practitioners and forces them to recalibrate their strategies of action to best suit these changes. This disruption to cultural practices is another underlying source of the ongoing tensions between the state and arts practitioners.

CHAPTER SIX:

Making sense of arts and Work – How Singaporean Arts Practitioners negotiate between aesthetic practices, attitudes and behaviours

It is not to point to structural similarities between music and some other activity or medium; rather, it is to observe that music shares basic procedural traits with extra-musical activities and that these traits will have consequences for the doing and handling of those extra-musical matters. It is here that we can begin to appreciate just how dynamic a medium music is in relation to extra-musical matters. And it is here, thanks to Adorno, that we can begin to see how music, in deciding how to handle, for example, the interrelationship between voice parts, is inevitably a moral medium: that morality is made manifest in and through music's handling of material. (DeNora 2003:152)

6.1 – Introduction

In Chapter Five, I made a claim that both schools and CCA instructors use CCAs as sites to produce attractiveness in terms of gaining experiences and winning awards. This then informs us of two potential sources of the ongoing tension between the state and arts practitioners. Firstly, arts practitioners are forced to produce legibility by producing institutionalised cultural capital in the form of competitions, awards and accolades. Secondly, when the SYF and school policies shifted away from the competitions system, arts practitioners were forced to abandon the old practices of producing legibility and create new strategies for producing attractiveness. I extend the discussion on producing attractiveness here in this chapter through a discussion on how arts practitioners perform artistic labour and curate artistic choices based on their perceptions as employees of the state.

I ask, “How do the arts practitioners’ perception of being employed by schools affect the ways they make artistic choices?” Here, I make a claim that the

arts practitioners' artistic choices in schools are strategic and instrumental; that they are informed by how such choices allow them to achieve institutional outcomes but are sometimes at odds with their own aesthetic interests as artists. This then informs us of another source of tensions between the state and arts practitioners: that artistic endeavours are not about the arts, but have been co-opted to the interest of the institutions that hire them.

Briefly, this chapter deals with the issues that come about when arts practitioner have to deal with the notion of cultural proclivities, sensitivities and social mores of the multiple audiences of their artistic work. We also know from the discussions in Chapters Two and Three that the production of these cultural proclivities, sensitivities and social mores are very much regulated by the Singapore state.

I use choral music as the subject of study in order to examine the production of artistic labour performed by CCA instructors in the school setting. I focus on how both school stakeholders and CCA instructors perceive MOE's overarching directives and policies pertaining to artistic content and how this subsequently informs them of making and allowing artistic choices and content. Broadly speaking, we can see that CCA instructors do have some semblance of autonomy in making artistic choices, especially when it comes to choosing which items or songs to perform. However, I argue that these choices are made in view of how artistic content can help fulfil the respective school's requirements. By seeing to the needs of the school, the CCA instructor fulfils his contractual obligation to the school. Even so, sometimes there are points of contention from some sectors of the school stakeholders, such as students and parents.

There are three sections to this chapter. In the first section, I discuss how choral music practitioners deal with cultural sensitivities in the course of making artistic choices. I found that choral music practitioners are required to negotiate and balance what is culturally relevant to the imagined audiences to sustain their interest, as well as choosing repertoire that meets the developmental and operational goals set out by the school. There are times where there are differences in preferences in musical tastes between school stakeholders, which puts the choral conductor in a difficult situation.

In the second section, I discuss how choral music practitioners deal with religious sensitivities in the course of making artistic choices. Most of the issues stem from how choral music is often associated with rituals and religiosity, and that a sizeable amount of choral literature is of a sacred nature. This is somewhat problematic as most schools in Singapore are secular in nature, with most of them being multi-ethnic and multicultural institutions. Furthermore, the degrees of tolerance towards sacred music varies from institution to institution, and such heterogeneity is another potential source of frustration for the choral music practitioners.

In the third and final section, I discuss how artistic choices of performances in public spaces engender a greater span of negotiation between the choral music practitioners and administrators. Each party contends with their own perceptions of what is socially acceptable in different public spaces. I discovered that many non-MOE administrators who administrate performances in public spaces also demonstrate similar decision-making processes as their MOE counterparts, which are centred on what they perceive to be desirable by

the state. The underlying issue here is that the choral conductors would need to contend with the cultural and religious sensibilities of these administrators.

Overall, my findings indicate that while each choral music practitioner experiences artistic autonomy differently, their autonomy is tempered by their perceptions of cultural and religious sensitivities that may exist in both state and school administration. Unlike their professional contemporaries like Haresh Sharma and Ong Keng Sen who were mentioned in Chapters One and Three, the arts practitioners who work in schools do not actively seek to challenge their audiences' perception and understanding of social norms through sometimes controversial content. Rather, their artistic labour revolves around the SYF and other ancillary projects within the various communities. They seek to perform works that are not contextualised to any specific ritual or religious practice but to do works that have contributed towards the holistic and artistic development of the students involved in the arts.

My data also shows that the school administrators support or reject these artistic choices based on (1) what they perceive to be desired by the state, and (2) how they imagine the reactions and responses of school stakeholders would be in relation to artistic work. The artistic choice becomes a negotiated process between the choir conductor and the school stakeholders, and the negotiation and decision-making process is reflective of how artistic choices are both strategic and instrumental on the part of both choral music practitioners and the school.

6.2 – Aesthetic choices and producing culture

While aesthetic choices are an important aspect in arts-making, they are not limited to the arts or to arts practitioners. Scholars opined that everyone

makes aesthetic choices on a regular basis. According to McCurdy (1954), making aesthetic choices involve juggling between prioritizing personal preferences and the need to make certain decisions in order to attain the best plausible outcome. These can come out of very mundane instances where a person needs to select items of similar function, such as picking a more functional handphone cover and a more aesthetically pleasing cover. For Melchionne (2017), aesthetic choices “tend to be small choices, with low stakes and relaxed deliberation” (p.283) and is reflective of an individual’s imagining of his or her own agency in terms of buying and using goods, or in the context of this study, the choice of buying tickets and attending concerts. Melchionne (2017) further suggests that the effect of a person’s choices is situational as well as cumulative (i.e., derived from the series of events experienced by the individual), and the importance of individual choices “is best judged by seeing them in the context of other choices” (Melchionne 2017:283). Fine (1992) suggests that aesthetic choices reflect a desire to produce work that displays a person’s competency and capability. He then claims that the “centrality of an aesthetic orientation depends upon the market niche of one's organization, career stage in the occupation, and the nature of the work task” (Fine 1992:1268). He further suggests that

(1) issues of quality are central to production and that process involves "aesthetic choices," (2) aesthetic choices are a form of organizational decisions, are capable of being negotiated, and are not fully reducible to organization demands, (3) organizational features encourage, channel, and limit explicitly aesthetic choices, and (4) organizations can define their own aesthetics, given their placement within a market niche and clients' definitions (Fine 1992:1269).

The works of these scholars inform me that aesthetic choices are deliberate, rationalized choices. While both McCurdy and Melchionne suggest that aesthetic choices have low stakes due to how such choices are made in the

context of acts of leisure, Fine posits that in the case of those working in the creative industry, aesthetic choices form an inherent basis of their profession. There are two aspects to this. Firstly, the organizations and industries do play a part in determining the types of aesthetic choices one can make. Secondly, these aesthetic choices involve greater stakes since they have real consequences that affect their jobs and their professional outcomes.

Knowing how aesthetic choices facilitate arts helps us to better understand the relationship between the aesthetics and the production of the arts. This relationship has its roots in how the arts are thought of as a cultural form as well as the arts as a commodity (Caroll 1999; Goehr 2007). When creating a visual artwork or performance, the arts practitioner begins the process by asking himself or herself a series of *why* questions - why does the works of art need to exist? Why does the work of arts fulfil these functions? Why is there a need to create or perform this piece now?

While many people do endeavour to create arts for their own consumption, the professional arts practitioner produces arts with an imagined audience in mind. This idea of imagined audience is an important consideration when making aesthetic choices – in consuming the work by the artist, the imagined audience transmutes cultural artefact to economic form through patronage or subscription (Caroll 1999; Dissanayake 1992; Goehr 2007). Yet who exactly are these imagined audiences, and why would they want to participate and interact with the arts practitioner's work?

These ideas of 'why' help us to better see the deep-seated relationship between the arts and the imagined audience. According to Dissanayake (1992), the answer to the *why* of making any form of arts is to 'make things special'; that

the arts are the reified form of the human condition and history in various dynamic mediums. She argues that arts plays a key role in the development of humans as a species and that our aesthetic sensibility is what sets humans apart from the animal kingdom. She believes that the production and consumption of arts is an unalienable human right, which is as crucial as food, water and shelter. In making art, she posits, anyone can exert some modicum of control in his or her life that is constantly subjected to the precarity of everyday life.

Before we answer these questions on the imagined audiences, it is best to draw the links between these audiences and the cultural artefacts they purportedly consume. Du Guy et al (2003) suggests that we should examine “how (a cultural artefact) is represented, what social identities are associated with it, how it is produced and consumed, and what mechanisms regulate its distribution and use” (p.3) I find Du Guy et al’s (2003) ‘circuit of culture’ framework, which is an interwoven web of concepts which are representation, connection, production, consumption and regulation, useful in this chapter’s discussion.

In the earlier part of my thesis, I pointed out that a significant proportion of arts making in Singapore is concentrated in educational institutions. Within these institutions, the arts are framed as both a school process and an educational outcome. I argued earlier in Chapter Four that the production and consumption of the arts are skewed to producing a semblance of attractiveness for employment. This earlier argument, in conjunction with employing Du Guy’s framework in analysing cultural objects, sets up the framing of who the imagined audiences are in my thesis. While in the previous chapter I focused on schoolteachers and administrators and leaders, in this chapter I expand this idea

of the imagined audience to include students and their parents as well as other school stakeholders, school administration and leadership, and the state.

The consumption of a cultural artefact need not necessarily be limited to the realm of exchanges with respect to economic commodity. In fact, the consumption of a cultural artefact would often lead to the production of another form of cultural and even social capital. This further association with both cultural and social capital is best illustrated by Larsen (2016), whose work looks at the production of legitimacy by non-profit arts organizations. Legitimacy, in this case, refers to how an artistic work or artefact carries embedded value depending on the perspective of the audiences that the artistic work targets. He argues that audiences are not merely passive consumers of the arts; they are actively involved in influencing the modes of artistic production. He suggests that within the wider public, the concept of audiences could be better understood by using a matrix of the tripartite relationship between content producers, funders and communities, and how each of these domains creates a different kind of support, space and legitimacy for the arts. Following this paragraph is a table that shows how these relationships are situated:

<i>Audience</i>	<i>Content Producers</i>	<i>Funders</i>	<i>Communities</i>
<i>Type of Support</i>	Artistic	Economic	Social
<i>Societal Sphere</i>	Art	Market/State	Civil society
<i>Type of Legitimacy</i>	Artistic credibility	Financial stability	Widespread approval

Table 6.1 - Audience for public performances of legitimacy
Source: Taken from Larsen (2016:10)

Larsen suggests that the audiences do draw upon different perspectives that are dependent on where they are situated in the circuit of arts production. These

positions also contain situated knowledge in that there are specific tropes and imaginings that each person can draw on that inform the way they construct what is aesthetically valuable and meaningful (see also Swidler 2010).

Using table 6.1 as a reference, I use the example of the content producers as an audience to illustrate this point. Content producers are mainly arts practitioners. The type of support that they require of each other is that of artistic or technical expertise. They know of one another within the networks formed around their arts forms. The notion of legitimacy, where they know that production is worth their effort and participation or collaboration, is determined by the artistic credibility of the producer. The trappings of both social and cultural capital determine this artistic credibility.

Swidler (2010) offers another interesting perspective in this discussion on imagined audiences. She begins by commenting on Bourdieu's idea of cultural distinction, in that the idea is built around an assumption that the role of culture is to reinforce the categorical differences in class. She argues that this idea does not account for how different social-organizational factors produce differentiated access to cultural products. She suggests that the consumption of cultural products is best analysed through the notion of aesthetic pleasure, rather than the reinforcement of class differences as argued by Bourdieu. Drawing on the works of other scholars, she observes that the production and consumption of cultural products does not reinforce class differences. Rather, it is the market associated with the production and consumption of cultural products that drive and accentuates these differences.

Swidler's works inform this chapter with two broad themes. Firstly, the idea that the consumption of cultural products driving and accentuating class

differences does manifest itself in the experiences of my own informants, especially when they are trying to come to terms with why different schools that have a concentration of students coming from specific socio-economic background have different capacities to learn specific types of song genres. Secondly, when I frame students from higher socio-economic backgrounds as a case for audiences from the elite classes, I discovered that these students tend to do “better” in terms of performance quality and outcomes because of their own socialised norms of taking up musical and instrumental studies as part of their own personal enrichment programmes. I explore both these issues in the following sections of this chapter.

Finally, Swidler’s argument (2010) is that there is a specialised relationship between content creators and audiences. Audiences create a market base; audiences from the elite classes tend to create broader and more entrenched markets for preferred cultural products due to their economic capital and spending power. Content creators produce the supply to these markets. They also have the potential to shift the market base by setting new trends of cultural products. In that regard, she uses *hip-hop* music as a cautionary tale of how some subcultures fall victim to their own success. Firstly, the wide-ranging distribution and consumption of *hip-hop*, was that the music itself created commercial or rather external pressures to reproduce the product and not the inherent cultural meaning. Secondly, having a wider audience base dilutes the knowledge base of a cultural product’s inherent quality, since less knowledgeable audiences will readily consume less credible cultural products that appear in the market. This is referred to as cultural dilution, and this phenomenon creates a rift between content creators and audiences that are more knowledgeable.

From this aspect of Swidler's work, two themes emerge that informs me of this chapter's discussion. Firstly, the idea of external pressure to reproduce content is a real pressure that my own informants experience in the course of their work with schools. This is often framed by building an acceptable balance between the sensibilities and tastes of school administrators, the students themselves and the wider public audience for which the school ensembles perform. Secondly, cultural dilution is made manifest as a tension between the older, more established choral music practitioners and the younger generation of practitioners, insomuch as aesthetic choices are seen to have repercussions on maintaining the aesthetic standards of the art-form.

The works of these scholars provide a frame of reference for how imagined audiences influence not only aesthetic choices on the part of the arts practitioners but also how they have an important role in the production and marketization of the arts in general. This frame of reference also extends to understanding the social relationship between audiences and the arts practitioners in general. Orienting this framing back to my puzzle of why there are ongoing tensions between the state and arts practitioners, in demonstrating how arts practitioners deal with the relationship with audiences, I also make representations of how the arts practitioners deal with the cultural and religious sensitivities that are produced by the state. The difficulties here lie in how these sensibilities are managed differently in different spaces, even though the referencing of these sensibilities come out of an imagining of the state's ideological positioning of multiracialism and multireligiosity. From here, I draw on the data I collected during my research to show the extent of these various relationships that audiences have with arts practitioners in Singapore.

6.3 – Negotiating cultural sensitivities

In Chapter Two's discussion on multi-racialism and multi-religiosity in Singapore, I draw on the works of various scholars that indicate how cultural products and its contents are heavily regulated by the state with the view of maintaining a semblance of racial and religious harmony. In relating these works to the works mentioned in the previous section, we know that the state is cognizant of how consumption of cultural products can drive and accentuates these differences between race and religion. Having an amorphous understanding of which cultural products can or cannot be performed in a public space for public audiences forms the basis of what I define to be cultural sensitivities. A choral music practitioner's understanding of cultural sensitivities is informed by his or her perceptions on the artistic preferences of his imagined audiences. I define artistic preferences as the aesthetic taste of individuals and how they choose specific cultural products to consume (See also Swidler 2010).

The imagined audiences, in this case, would be the students, parents and teachers of the schools in which the arts practitioners work in, as well as the actual audiences for performances put up by the arts practitioners and their students. In this section, I posit that artistic choices are pragmatic and instrumental; choral music practitioners need to negotiate and balance what is culturally relevant to the imagined audiences to sustain their interest, and at the same time choose repertoire that meets the developmental and operational goals set out by the school. Arts practitioners realise that most of the artistic choices they make are localized and situated. Despite being in similar age brackets, students from different schools do have different preferences in terms of choice of repertoire and artistic outcomes.

I draw upon Du Guy et al (2003)'s circuit of culture as a frame of reference to explain the roles students play in the production of attractiveness. My findings indicate that students take on multiple roles in the circuit of arts production within the context of schools in Singapore. Furthermore, the ways in which arts practitioners imagine students to be both co-producers, as well as consumers of aesthetic cultural products, inform the arts practitioners' aesthetic decisions. This section of the chapter uses the phenomena of aesthetic choice, framed within the context of repertoire and performance choices, as a means to examine the relationship between students and arts practitioners vis-à-vis these multiple roles, and how these relationships inform arts practitioners in their aesthetic choices.

To begin, I re-articulate the roles of the CCAs in the context of schools and education. According to MOE,

CCAs are an integral part of our students' holistic education. Through CCA, students discover their interests and talents while developing values and competencies that will prepare them for a rapidly changing world. CCA also promotes friendships among students from diverse backgrounds as they learn, play and grow together. Participation in CCA fosters social integration and deepens students' sense of belonging, commitment and sense of responsibility to school, community and nation (Ministry of Education 2018a).

Each school provides a wide offering of CCA activities for students to select. Prior to the changes to MOE policies pertaining to the SYF in 2012, the result from the biannual SYF competitions was used as part of the SEM reporting. Most schools practised differentiated resource distribution to their CCAs in order to achieve the strategic production of results. More explicitly, CCAs that have consistently produced good results are given more resources and opportunities. This distribution of results also produces the optics of success; a visual tangibility

that is consumed by the students. During this time, schools also internally manage the numerical distribution of students participating in CCAs to ensure that each CCA has the capacity to produce results.

Superficially, the strategic practices adopted by schools explain why underperforming CCAs are caused by systemic failure. Since schools are more likely to distribute resources to groups that can guarantee results, the poor performing groups are given fewer resources compared to other better-performing CCAs. Furthermore, since CCA results translate into tangible grades for students, many of them are less likely to participate in a CCA that does not yield results, which consequentially does not award prestige that is associated with results.

However, this explanation does not take into consideration the personal capacity of the arts practitioner as CCA instructor, as well as the potentiality of the teachers and students who belong to the CCAs to achieve actualisation despite these structural limitations. I frame the selection of repertoire as an aesthetic choice and explain how this specific aesthetic choice is used as a strategy to deal with structural limitations. From this standpoint, I highlight that the students become the imagined audiences made real, becoming both consumers of the arts form as well as a resource for arts practitioner to tap on. I set out to demonstrate how the aesthetic choices an arts practitioner makes are used as a strategy for attracting student membership and participation.

I spoke to Nicholas, who at some point in our conversation, shared about recruitment strategies for his school choirs. He shared the following:

Well... a lot of the factor is whether you get to choose songs that are 'hot' at the moment. The kids nowadays are quite in tune to what's floating around on YouTube, Spotify and on the digital radio. They are interested in listening to all the latest pop songs,

and they get bored with popular songs quite quickly. So nowadays if you suggest songs like “Let it go”³⁸ they will all groan and eye-roll you. So if you’re in a school where you’re struggling to get students to come, a good way to attract them is start getting the choir to sing all these songs lah.

Nicholas shared that recruitment is an uphill battle for his choirs. He also noted that in some schools whose choirs are recognized for their performance in both SYF as well as overseas competitions, many of them instituted a mass audition at the beginning of every year for the secondary ones.³⁹ Many of these schools also have the DSA mechanism that channel and contractually bind good singers into the choir. These choirs are considered to be successful – and with success comes its own branding and attractiveness to new members. For other school choirs who are less able or resourced, recruitment comes from a lot of hard work.

He nonchalantly added,

Ayia, not all school choirs can go fly around and compete every year. Also, not all schools choirs have the whole school to make sure they have enough members every year. And the kids are all ‘*sian*’ [bored] of singing the SYF set-piece and competition songs... So, rather than wait for the kids to come to join on their own, we just have to hard-sell *lah*. If we sing songs they know, then it’s easier for the kids to relate to the choir activities.

My informants who happen to be choir instructors of neighbourhood schools shared similar responses when asked the same question. For these choir instructors, they do take into account the cultural tastes of the students in the selection of repertoire; who they are listening to, which movies currently playing that have top hits soundtracks, and who their pop icon idols are. They understand that curating a repertoire set that is relatable to the students in the school is a critical factor in the success of recruiting new members and sustaining the longevity of the choir.

³⁸ A song featured in the cartoon “Frozen” by Walt Disney Studios in 2013.

³⁹ This was also discussed at length in Chapter Three of my thesis.

I spoke to Jeannie about how as a teacher she and her CCA instructors deal with recruitment in schools. She shared the following:

My school choir did have some boys who do want to join the school choir when they first entered school at sec(ondary) one. I found out that previously any boy who joins the school choir will get teased by other boys in school. I don't think it's because the other boys consider choir 'girly', but they think choir at that time was considered 'boring' and 'lame'. I suspect it started when I first became one of the choir ICs [teacher in charge] and my previous choir instructor was conducting them. It might be because she would always prepare the choir to be ready to perform 'competition' songs that are more suitable in concert halls. The songs she chooses are 'very foreign' to the students, so I think the non-choir students can't really relate. Now with the new instructors, they sing more 'hip' songs, and the boys don't get picked on anymore. Changing the choir image from 'classical' to 'hip' really helps the choir and the choir members. Now the kids who want to sing in a choir aren't so self-conscious about themselves, and their school mates are less judgemental on them.

Jeannie's reflection gives us a deeper insight towards how aesthetic choices are key strategies in cultivating two different types of audiences. The first type of audience is associated with the production aspect of arts making, and the other is associated with the consumption aspect of arts making. We can see in this reflection that the effect of aesthetic choices in changing the repertoire genre from 'competition' type pieces to 'hip' pieces created interest in not just the students who participated in the choir, but also the students who, while not directly involved in the performances, are captive audiences to these performances. This stratification of audiences, from those directly performing to those indirectly consuming performances, is another key concept that arts practitioners internalize as part of their repertoire of strategies. It is to the interest of the choir instructor to ensure that the choir is relatable and accessible to these different types of audiences.

While the social aspects of broadening acceptance and consumption are critical to legitimizing the existence and practice of the CCA in relation to the students, this practice raises concerns and questions regarding the aesthetic integrity of the arts form amongst the arts practitioners' themselves.

I spoke to Andrew, and asked him to share his thoughts on how aesthetic choices, specifically in relation to the selection of repertoire, has affected the arts form. He shared the following:

No. I think it is so common that for people who talk about choral music, they will just make those [howling] kind of sound. This is absolutely distressing. Yeah, at one point, because of the TV show 'Glee', people thought that is choir, or that is a cooler choir, which I also absolutely cannot accept that. So we are just ignorant.

Andrew later qualified that he acknowledges the tremendous role popular culture television and movie shows such as the TV show 'Glee' and the movie 'Perfect Pitch', played a big part in raising the awareness of the existence of vocal music here in Singapore. Yet, Andrew is rather concerned that the media representation of vocal music embodied in these shows should not be construed as the totality of vocal music. While he commiserates with the difficulty that his fellow colleagues are facing in terms of sustaining interest for the choir, he feels that it is imperative to instil integrity and rigour in creating strong foundations in students as opposed to pandering to their tastes. He offered the following perspective:

Whatever repertoire we choose, we need to think of the best that our students can do. So we still keep to the same type of artistic principle, our demand for them to really perform should never change. It's still the same. Of course, we know that they know that, singing songs like these, we will definitely get a distinction (award). But that's not the point. The point is to sing the best. To learn the most and perform our best, is what conductors should be thinking about. Trends and fads come and go. The discipline and rigour that we teach and instil in our students are what will stay on throughout their lives.

As a senior member of the choral music scene, Andrew feels very strongly that conductors must take their roles as cultural brokers seriously, and that being a CCA instructor in school also means that you have a duty to instil rigour and introduce the higher-order aesthetic sensibilities of the discipline, such as being familiar with the canonical choral works.⁴⁰

As we continued our conversation, Andrew shared more of his thoughts regarding the choice of genres in choosing repertoire:

You look at those choirs doing all these modern-day choreo and sing all these pop songs for SYF. Already you know that these modern-day songs are not suitable for kids in secondary school or primary school – just look at the vocal compass [range of notes] you can see. It's meant to be sung by adults who have solid pop training. When you don't sing properly, you will sound bad, and that's what will drag you down during SYF. What's worse is if you don't teach proper singing techniques and let the kids moan like that, it's going to wreck their voices in the long run.

He was concerned that the aesthetic choices that some of his peers are making, specifically to completely embrace the pop genres of choral music, will create a cultural divide between the more established choirs and the rest of the choirs. He has issues with two aspects in relation to their aesthetic choices. Firstly, Andrew personally feels that doing popular music exclusively reinforces the media portrayal of vocal music, which shifts the aesthetic dimensions away from the traditional roots of the arts form and instead situates the practice into popular

⁴⁰ The concept of cultural brokers have been discussed in Chapter Four of this dissertation.

culture. Secondly, Andrew is aware that each genre uses different performance techniques. There is a danger that if the students are not properly trained or grounded with the technical aspects of the arts form, there will be serious repercussions in the vocal health of the students.⁴¹ Andrew's final position in this matter is that because MOE has allowed these popular genres to be included in the SYF, the rigour of the choral music discipline has begun to be undermined and the quality of techniques and performances will begin to deteriorate over time.

His concerns are somewhat similar to what Swidler (2010) argued, where the alienation of the knowledgeable audiences from the arts form occurs as a result of the 'commercialization' aspect of inculcating popular music. I extend this notion of commercialization beyond that of an economic transaction mode and embrace the concept whereby cultural and social capital are transformed within a webbed network of exchanges as argued by Bourdieu (2002). Andrew feels that while the CCA instructors are indeed 'selling' the idea and the practice of choir as an arts form to the school students' vis-à-vis popular music repertoire selection, there should not be any compromise to the standards nor the integrity of the arts form. He also feels strongly that MOE should not have allowed this to happen, seeing that this is a step backwards from building up the rigour of the SYF competition over the years.

Andrew shared an example to his concern. In recent years, partially due to the popularity of the TV show 'Glee', there has been a movement to introduce the *show choir* concept to schools. The show choir is a similar arts form to that

⁴¹ Vocal health refers to the maintenance of the physiological conditioning of the individual's voice production system, which includes the vocal folds and the nasopharynx.

of choral music, but it incorporates dancing and acting as part of the arts form. The repertoire for show choirs comes mainly from popular music and musicals. The aesthetic divide between the traditional form of choral performance and that of the show choir is not a new phenomenon. Some scholars have commented that the divide is somewhat reminiscent of Adorno's dim view towards popular and jazz music, in that show choirs are more concerned with being a form of entertainment than they are of actual music-making (Itkin 1986; Powell 2010).

Powell made the following observation:

Too often, it appears that the majority of the attention in preparation has been given to the development of an audience exhilarating "choreography" and much less attention given to the development of good singing and musical expression. Consequently, the group may have energetic moves but sing out of tune, lack blend and clear diction, intonation, and optimal blend, and breathe heavily, among other things. These weaknesses detract from the performances for audience and singers. (Powell 2010:45)

My own observations regarding the differences between show choirs and the traditional choir setting in Singapore have provided several insights. Firstly, the entry of show choirs into the choir ecosystem is relatively new, as compared to countries such as the United States of America (See also Itkin 1986). Secondly, we know from the discussions in Chapter Five that many schools are still focused on pursuing of achieving competition results and reproducing high-quality performances, despite MOE's directive towards a more holistic approach to CCAs.

The SYF competition criteria do not take into consideration the dramatic and choreographic elements synonymous with show choirs (Ministry of Education 2018e). While the competition criteria do not outwardly discriminate against show choirs, the judges are assessing choirs based on specific aesthetic

and instrumental techniques that are more rooted in the traditional genres of choral music. Thirdly, show choirs require extensive use of audio equipment, which makes their performances somewhat restricted when compared to the traditional choir set-up. The equipment balances the audio output of the instrumental accompaniment or accompanying backing track with the sound output of their singers. Furthermore, there are variations to the vocal techniques between acoustic vocal production and that of amplified vocal production. Hence, a show choir is at a greater disadvantage during the SYF competition, where the competitions are held in an acoustic setting, and does not provide the full set of audio equipment.

The purpose of stating these observations is not to make a judgement call on the differences in aesthetic output between show choirs and the traditional choirs. Rather, I do so in order to highlight the difficulties a choir CCA instructor may face in making the aesthetic choice of adopting the show choir approach. Indeed, here is where we can see how Fine (1992)'s positioning is more reflective of the situation about show choirs in Singapore than that of Melchionne (2017)'s - there are indeed opportunity costs in making aesthetic choices for arts practitioners. Many choral music practitioners, especially the younger ones teaching neighbourhood schools, find themselves caught in a catch 22 situation. In many ways, they are forced to make these aesthetic choices very strategically and any choice they make will make someone upset one way or the other. They are limited by the reality of the audiences, which in their case would be not just the school administrators and the students, but also their senior peers. In the end, they need to know that if they want to keep their position as CCA instructors, they are beholden to produce cultural products that would feed to the school's

needs first and foremost, be that the reproduction of SYF results or to keep the students engaged and entertained.

Orienting this discussion back to my puzzle of why there are ongoing tensions between the state and arts practitioners, the issue about the introduction of new genres and the possibility of cultural dilution is in many ways problematic. When I look back at the interviews I conducted, I realised that there seems to be a generational divide amongst my informants regarding the matter of show choirs as an aesthetic choice. On one side are my informants who also happened to be younger CCA instructors. They regard the show choir movement as a valuable and strategic approach in engaging the students to participate in choir and choir related activities. Many of these individuals contend that they face many challenges in producing a sense of legitimacy for the school choirs they work with and for themselves. Their disposition towards show choirs is built on their imagining of the reality of the schools they work with, in terms of both the strategic goals of the schools as well as the socio-economic background of the students, as well as their own lack of personal cultural and social capital. They feel that they cannot count upon existing resources or school processes to maintain the choir on its own accord and need to use strategies such as this to maintain the longevity of their choir and their position. Summarily, the larger theme that came out of my data is whilst my informants are divided by the issue of cross genres within SYF, both sides of the spectrum are unhappy about how the SYF competitions are administered, to which they categorically blame MOE and the policy changes, and by extension, the state.

I spoke to Daisy and asked her about how she goes about making aesthetic choices pertaining to repertoire and performances, she mentioned the type of

songs she chooses also depends on what the needs of her schools are. She shared the following:

One of my schools doesn't really know what they want, but they just want to make sure their students come to CCA and enjoy themselves. Then they decided that they want to do music group theatre, they want to do Broadway show choir style. Of course, the kids enjoyed themselves. That's why they want to join the choir, cos it's fun to them. But suddenly after doing show choir for 6 months then after that, the show choir has switched to the (traditional) choir, because it's going to be SYF period. Then, of course, the choir may not do so well for the competition because the school keep changing things all the time; first, they want to do show choir, then after that want to do acapella, after that do this do that. Okay, if you want to give the students a range of experience, can, but you also must have realistic goals. Then you don't expect a conductor to overnight churn out a distinction choir, cos it's going to be impossible. I think the only reason why the school still retains me as the conductor is that the kids want to join the choir and they enjoy being in the choir. It's not about the music and the results anymore. It's about seeing the kids enjoy themselves and see if they can get their juniors to join in every start of the year.

Daisy's response reflects a pragmatic and utilitarian approach with respect to how arts practitioners make aesthetic choices. To Daisy, the choice of repertoire is not about the artistic pursuit per se, but a more visceral issue which is CCA participation. This her case, the school's vacillating between trying to keep the students engaged and pursuing SYF is reflective of the school administration rather than a MOE policy or mandate. That said, Daisy's example shows how choral music practitioners often decide on aesthetic choices based on how they perceive such choices affecting their professional relationships with school administrators. As someone who considers herself to be one of the less accomplished conductors, Daisy feels that the aesthetic choices available to her, especially in relation to the choice of repertoire, are somewhat more restrictive when compared to other conductors.

Later in our conversation, she shared that for her, any song she picks has to appeal to the students. When students report that they enjoy the music they are given, it provides her with more leverage when negotiating the continuation of their contract. Her example shows that the choice of repertoire is geared towards building stronger relationships with the school stakeholders in a bid to justify her continued employment with the schools she works with, rather than a purely aesthetic pursuit.

Daisy's mentioning of how different choir conductors have different allowances to make and pursue aesthetic choices deserves greater scrutiny. This perception is deeply dependent on where individuals like Daisy see themselves and others in terms of individual positionality within camps and across the scene, as well as the amount of personal cultural and social capital that can be possessed by an individual choral music practitioner. Instinctively, practitioners such as Daisy perceive that established arts practitioners have enough cultural and social capital to even disregard the need to make pragmatic decisions in catering to tastes and preferences that they personally experience.

One of the things Daisy shared near the end of our conversation was as follows:

The *choir gods* will have their own magic formulas based on their magnificent choirs about choosing songs that will get them their distinctions. For us lesser mortals, we need to work with what we have.

From her own perspective, these senior choral music practitioners can simply coerce both the students in their choir and the school to accept any type of music they pick. Many others share Daisy's sentiments. They rationalise this through their perception of what senior practitioners can do so because (1) as individuals, they are systematically and institutionally supported due to their capacity to

produce the cultural capital that their schools need, and (2) the choirs that the senior practitioners conduct tend to be the elite schools, whose students tend to subscribe to a different stratification of aesthetic preferences. That said, this may not necessarily be objectively true, but rather is the impression that Daisy and the others have of the senior choral music practitioners based on their own perspectives and subjective understanding.

Orienting this discussion back to the puzzle of the ongoing tensions between the state and arts practitioners, here we see that choral music practitioners are conscious of the inequality between schools, and how this inequality also influences the types of outcomes and resources that each of the conductors have access to. Many of my informants have articulated their frustration regarding this. Their subjectivity also inhibits their sociological imagination in this matter, and it is easier for them to blame MOE and the state for “allowing” the stratification of schools to happen rather than seeing this as a larger wicked problem that is predicated by geography, urban planning and political economy. Tying this back to Swidler (2010)’s argument where the consumption of cultural products drives and accentuates class differences, what some of my informants profess is that in light of the limitations of the schools that they work in, some artistic choices are not choices at all, but a decision for survival.

From here onwards, I explored how the arts practitioners operationalize their perceptions of the quality of students to inform their aesthetic choices. My informants shared that the quality of students in terms of musical literacy and scholastic capabilities differ greatly from school to school. In fact, there is a stratified and unequal distribution of students with instrumental training in

schools – students who do have received private instrumental instruction tend to be more pervasive in elite schools. Despite MOE’s effort to establish the claim of “every school a good school” (Ministry of Education 2017c) in the view to level the playing field for all students, an informal stratification of schools still persists today (Yong 2017). Some scholars argue that this stratification of students and student ability is deeply rooted in how schools are also stratified (Chong 2014b; Tan 2010a).

This unequal distribution of students takes on the dimensions of a ‘wicked problem’ (Rittel and Weber 1973), in that it is simplistic to think students and parents would erase their perceptions of structures of school stratification after a ministerial mandate and a policy change. This sentiment stemming from this wicked problem is difficult to eliminate since many schools have cultivated and accumulated their own bank of cultural and social capital over the years of institutional existence (Goh 2015; Khan 2011; Yong 2017).

One of my informants, Tian shared his thoughts on Singaporean choirs in general:

I think that the choirs that are doing well in the competitions are really just a few choirs that are from elite schools and under certain top-notch conductors. But if you are talking about the scene at large or the population at large, then I don’t think it’s... in general, people are just not singing as much compared to people in Estonia. But I think we are doing well because we are hardworking. And it is only this small group of people that are doing well.

I asked to clarify what he meant by elite schools, and he replied,

Elite schools are... well, in secondary school, students would have been streamed according to their results. So there are certainly certain school which have the brightest children, and maybe they have a better background in music. Many of them would have learnt the piano or some other instruments. So they would be in a better position to do well in competitions. And of course, they have more resources, they get to travel more. Yeah. I guess that would be the elite schools.

Tian 's response is somewhat reminiscent of what Jeannie shared earlier, where students who are imbued with conventions and tastes that are reflective of their socio-economic background. To the conductors, good kids are rich kids who will always do well in studies as well as CCAs because their parents can afford to give them the extra support outside school.

After speaking to conductors, I wondered if teachers also share similar views regarding how artistic decisions had are constrained by the students' profiles. I then spoke to Frank, a teacher in a neighbourhood school in his thirties who also happens to be the school's choir conductor. I asked him about the elite and neighbourhood school divide in the performing arts, where he reflected on his own experience as a student from an elite school and the reality of his students that he currently teaches now. He shared the following:

Well, obviously elite schools are schools that obviously have a greater amount of support in terms of finances. In terms of talent, okay... Because let's not kid ourselves... Um, I'm not saying that the students of my school are not talented, they are. But in terms of raw talent, there is um, there are schools that actually receive a bumper crop of people who are musically inclined. For instance, my choir, like I said earlier on, they are, the most musically inclined student only has a grade 5 in music theory, grade 7 in piano. Whereas you know, the school that I came from when I was in secondary school. We had this music education program, and there were students my fellow classmates who were like diploma holders already at the age of 16 or 15 years old. My classmates had the money and opportunity to pursue music, and they were all musically literate by the time they got to secondary school. And we don't get that kind of calibre of students in the neighbourhood heartland schools, that's the thing.

I decided to see if I could triangulate the data from my interviews with other forms of evidence between academic aptitude and SYF outcomes. I present a set of descriptive statistics of the SYF results for the choir from 2009 and 2011 in the form of graphs as a means of corroborating the sentiments of my informants who posit a relationship between ability and results.

Graph 6.2a – Comparison graph of SYF results and Entrance PSLE T-Score for Secondary Schools (2009 & 2011)

Source: Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education 2018e, 2018d)

Graph 6.2b – Scatter Plot Graph of 2009 SYF Result
Source: Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education 2018d, 2018e)

Graph 6.2c – Scatter Plot Graph of 2011 SYF Results
Source: Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education 2018d, 2018e)

I use each school's Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) T-score Cut-Off Points (COP) as a proxy indicator for student's scholastic ability. The COP indicates the minimum scores that are required in order for a student to enrol in the school successfully. With the exception of students who entered the school via different pathways, such as DSA, most of the students within each school will have scores that are above the COP. In the 2009 and 2011 SYF, the competition still awarded the results based on a five-band tier.

Table 4.2a shows the number of awards given and calculated the median of each category. Tables 4.2b and 4.2c are scatter plot graphs that show the T-Score COPs of every school, and then tabulated the data point against the award the school choir receives. All the tables indicate an upward trend indicating a rising median result between PSLE T-scores and SYF outcomes. These graphs provide a visual representation of the correlation between student's scholastic ability and SYF outcomes, and show that there are also some exceptions to this possible trend.

In many ways, these graphs reflect the context the choral music practitioners work in and give credence to how my informants construct their imagining of the relationship between student ability and SYF results. Given the limitation of music instruction and curriculum in schools, the CCA instructors are reliant on students who take instrumental instruction on their own to anchor the arts production in schools. The contact hours for each CCA instructor are limited, and most of the contact hours are devoted to preparing the CCA for performances and competition. As mentioned by Frank, the differences in student outcomes in CCAs are heavily influenced by the cultural resources that the students have. The limitation of contact hours also makes the teaching of musical

literacy and skills a prohibitive opportunity cost for both the school and the CCA instructor. Hence, my informants feel the spectrum of aesthetic choices is strongly influenced by the inherent capabilities of the students of the CCAs.

The sentiments reflected by my informants is that the few instructors who teach in better ‘elite’ schools have a wider spectrum of aesthetic choices as compared to those who teach in neighbourhood schools since these students tend to be better equipped with the necessary musical and performance skills. It would be easier for them to allow themselves to pursue aesthetic goals, such as performing challenging repertoire or even put up entire concerts on their own. The flip side is that the majority of the choral conductors who work in neighbourhood schools find that it is a difficult task for them to pursue their own aesthetic goals; the artistic choices they have are severely limited to the capability of what their students can do and given the resources that the schools have allocated for them. That said, those choral conductors who do find success in expanding the capacities of their students despite their profiles are those who have had extensive teaching experiences and sound pedagogical approaches, but these conductors are few and far between.

6.4 – Aesthetic choices in the multi-religious setting

Like many arts forms, choral music has both a long history as well as an intimate relationship with religion. Chia (2014) explains that

Choral singing, a tradition beginning with Christianity in Western Europe, has evolved into an arts form that is adored by people universally... Today, choral activities are popular and flourishing in many parts of Singapore, including schools, churches and communities. (p. 65).

Choral music's long-standing relationship with religions, especially Judaeo-Christian ones, can be construed as problematic and contentious in a multi-religious society such as Singapore. This is especially so when choral music is often consumed in public spaces that are designated by the state to be secular and non-sectarian. Furthermore, the religious connotations embedded in choral music are possible sources of tensions between the choral music practitioners and their intended audiences and participants. These tensions arise mainly from the differences in religious affiliation and practices, and not from differences in taste or genre preferences.

From the government's perspective, publicly available arts must not offend the sensibilities of the conservative majority. Lai (2010) stated that the state has a repertory of safeguards in protecting religious sensitivity across various state bodies. I selected the following examples to show how NAC, as a state agency, explicitly draws the boundaries for grant recipients as part of these safeguards. In their guidelines for application documentation, they make explicit the following:

Who is not eligible to apply for the Presentation and Participation Grant?

NAC will not be able to support your application if you:

- 1) Are a group/organisation**
 - constituted for non-secular purposes;
 - currently receiving funding under NAC's Major and Seed Grant schemes;
- 2) Are proposing a project that**
 - has already commenced prior to the time of application;⁴
 - does not have a clearly defined arts component, including projects primarily aimed at promoting religious causes;
 - is held at a religious venue;
 - is not intended for public consumption;
 - is intended for fundraising purposes;
 - is presented under the auspices of a school or tertiary institution, or is part of its curriculum;
 - is intended specifically for academic purposes;
 - (where relevant) is unable to obtain an Arts Entertainment Licence (see "Licensing Forms" at www.imda.gov.sg)

Excerpt 6.3a – Excerpt One from the NAC Grant guidelines
Source: National Arts Council (2017)

A note on Funding Guidelines

While we celebrate diversity of expression and open, balanced dialogue in the arts, as a statutory body disbursing public funds in line with Government policies, NAC has to prioritise funding to proposals which do not:

- Advocate or lobby for lifestyles seen as objectionable by the general public;
- Denigrate or debase a person, group or class of individuals on the basis of race or religion, or serve to create conflict or misunderstanding in our multicultural and multi-religious society;
- Undermine the authority or legitimacy of the government and public institutions, or threaten the nation's security or stability.

Excerpt 6.3b – Excerpt Two from the NAC Grant guidelines

Source: National Arts Council (2017)

The NAC makes explicit that these guidelines are set in the interest of the public in Singapore, which is also in line with the state's 'soft' measures outlined by Mathews et al (2014). The rationale for this limitation deals primarily with optics; the idea is that public monies should not be spent on endeavours with specific religious affiliations so that the state is not seen to favour one particular religion over the other. While school choirs do not receive funding nor support from the NAC, as state institutions, schools are also beholden to maintain a secular space (Lai 2010).

Earlier in the chapter, I discussed how performances come under the umbrella of aesthetic choices. In this section, I use the practice of choral music in schools as a case to show how another state preference is mediated through schools vis-a-vis Singapore's brand of pragmatic sensibilities, which in this case refers to the religious sensitivities of citizens. Here I explain how choral conductors, as well as school administrators, manage the meaning-making processes of the practice and negotiate secularism in an arts form with deep roots in Judaeo-Christian liturgy and literature.

As school administrator, Salmah shared with me that she regularly deals with feedback from parents regarding issues arising from school-related matters. She recalled an incident where a particular parent was rather upset and had come to her office to express her displeasure. Her daughter sings in the school choir. The previous night, this parent had attended a performance by the school choir. She then realised that one of the songs the choir sang had the word “God” in the lyrics. She was livid and accusing the school of proselytizing. Salmah had assured the parent that no proselytizing happened during the performance but added that she will look into the matter and get back to her. After the meeting, Salmah then went to find the teacher in charge of the choir and asked her about the incident. She also asked for a copy of the sheet music and had a cursory look. She read the lyrics of the song and understood the lyrics to speak about ‘shared values’ and being gracious at the end of an ‘event’ or concert. The word ‘God’ was mentioned in the sentence – “May God bless you and keep you”.

Salmah herself is a practising Muslim. While she rationally thought that there is no conflict of interest and faith for the children to sing a song such as this, she can understand how parents of faiths other than Christianity can be somewhat “sensitized” to catchphrases such as this. She advised her teacher in charge to make an appointment with the choir conductor, and the three of them would then sit together and strategize how to best respond to the parent and to the school. She knew that the parents would discuss this issue in the WhatsApp chat groups that they have, and this matter would definitely need to be dealt with accordingly.

Salmah’s experience in dealing with this particular parent is one of the ways that show how choral music genres occupy a rather awkward position in

the sacred and secular divide. Traditionally, the bulk of choral music works are part of the liturgical rituals of the Judeo-Christian faith (Jordania 2006). Over recent years, much of this music fell out of favour with the various Christian denominations and was removed from their worship practices.⁴² These works later found a new purpose in concert halls, where they become part of the staple repertoire for public concerts. Yet, there is a residual association with religiosity because of their long history as part of the liturgy. This becomes a confounding issue with choir conductors as well as school administrators.

I spoke to Jun Ming regarding the selection of repertoire. We had the following conversation:

Jun Ming: Generally, I try to give my choirs quite a well-rounded view of different periods of music if that's possible, but there are some schools that I can't do sacred music at all.

Me: Why is that so?

Jun Ming: Well, some schools have such a policy. I can even name the schools.

Me: So it is a school policy?

⁴² One example of this would be how the Catholic Church left out much of these high arts choral works. The church decided that much of this music would alienate the current laity from the services, and opted to employ less complex music that have a greater mass appeal. This ruling is laid out in the 'Musica Sacram' and 'Sacrosanctum Concilium' codices of Vatican II. These codices can be found on the Vatican website at:
http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/index.htm

Jun Ming: So what happened was when I first started out in one of the schools, the choir was comprised of all boys, so they were doing TTB [Tenor 1, Tenor 2, Bass]. You know TTB repertoire is actually very limited. And I did sacred music and spirituals and all that. So when we performed for the concert, the principal was livid because one of the members was Muslim, although the boy didn't complain, the parents didn't complain. But the principal actually had a... he actually... how to say... (sigh). Yeah, he actually scolded the teacher-in-charge for allowing this to happen. And he actually had a written letter to sort of... it was a written reprimand addressed to the teacher and I actually have to sign to say that I have seen it.

This example makes explicit how arts practitioners and bureaucrats mediate their understanding of managing religious sensibilities. To Jun Ming, the decision to include sacred music repertoire is borne out of necessity. In cases where the choir is made up of all men or all women, the repertoire for such choirs is mostly sacred choral works in nature.

In the previous section of this chapter, I described how the ability of the students heavily informs the conductor on his or her choices in choosing repertoire. In this case, the limitation of the students' abilities lies in the number of divisions the choir can handle. With an all-male adolescent choir, the choices of repertoire are somewhat prohibitive when compared to a mixed voices adolescent choir. It is difficult to find appropriate male-chorus repertoire, especially when most composers have in mind the vocal capabilities of adults rather than adolescent voices.⁴³

The principal's reaction to sacred music works in the concert repertoire deserves greater scrutiny. As the school leader, the principal had anticipated that there would be a reaction from his imagined audience, which in this case would

⁴³ Scholars of voice and music education, such as Lynn Gackle, Nancy Telfer and Doreen Rao, have researched the limitation of adolescent voices and their capabilities.

be parents of the students. He was driven by his perception that the school as a public institution must be seen to enforce secularism in all its activities. Yet, this enactment should not be construed as state censorship, at least in the ways we construe censorship to be the coercive power utilized by the state to suppress undesirable content. I would argue instead that this is an instance of self-regulation, and is a part of the repertory of strategies that maintains the safeguards to multi-racialism and multi-religiosity in Singapore. To clarify further, not all schools maintain the same stance towards sacred choral music. The inclusion and exclusion of sacred music are dependent on several issues, predicated on both the cultural capital of the instructor as well as the affiliation of the school.

My informants shared that they have mixed experiences in selecting sacred repertoire when working in schools without religious affiliations. Another factor that plays a part in determining the types of songs that a choral music practitioner can select is the type of schools that hire them. Schools that have religious affiliations tend to be more permissive in allowing the selection of sacred repertoire. The outcome is determined by how they can negotiate with both school administrators and stakeholders, as well as the personal convictions of the decision-makers in school. I spoke to Xavier regarding the receptiveness of sacred music in schools. He shared the following:

There was this one time where I was prepping one of my school choirs for SYF. One of the pieces I selected for the school was an 'Ave Maria' for treble voices. Just before the submission of the competition pieces, which was about 6 weeks before the actual competition, the HOD came to me and said that I needed to change that piece. Mind you, this school is actually a Christian mission school. I have done sacred works with this choir before, but this is the first time I was asked to change the song. Initially, I was rather upset, after all, the competition is coming soon and the students would have to learn a new piece. I then realized that there are differences between the types of Christian mission schools and that the difference here is between the Catholics and the Protestants. The HOD told me that the protestant schools don't like Ave Maria because it's very Catholic. So, I had to recycle another song the choir did last year to replace the Ave Maria.

Xavier's recounting of that moment is an example of how religious subjectivity plays an important role in informing aesthetic choices. In this specific case, while the school was open to allowing sacred works to be performed, only specific forms that are congruent with the Protestant faith were acceptable.

My informants allude that the choir conductors who are known to *be allowed to* select sacred works regularly are the older and more established conductors. These conductors inculcate the practice of sharing with the students and the school the artistic merits of the piece and focus on the technical performance of the work rather than its spiritual connotations. The optics of these conductors performing sacred works does reinforce the perceptions of the younger and less established conductors – with enough cultural and social capital, one may make any aesthetic choice with impunity. Yet, this perceived immunity from consequences is somewhat different from the realities experienced by these conductors. When I spoke to the more established choral music practitioners with regard to sacred music, they too had their fair share of struggles. One of these senior conductors that I spoke to was Lao Mui who shared following:

I taught one of my school choirs a song. It only had one word which was 'Alleluia'. The song is nice and beautiful, and the kids

liked it because it is very nice to sing. To be honest, neither myself, the teachers in charge nor the students even realized it was sacred work. One day, the school choir had to do a lunchtime concert, and they decided to sing that. One of the ... teachers watched the performance and actually caught the lyrics of the song. She was upset and brought this up to the principal. The next thing I knew, the principal called me to her office, and we had a long discussion about whether the work is appropriate for the school choir. I apologized of course – because as the conductor, when I choose the song I didn't pay attention to what the lyrics meant and I focused instead of what are the musical things I can teach the choir. I assured the principal that I wasn't preaching or trying to convert the students. The principal and I do have an understanding, and she does trust that I do the right thing. I promised her that I will be more careful, and also explain to the girls why some songs are not so appropriate to sing in the school lunch concert.

I went on to ask her if she still does continue to do sacred choral music with her choirs. She replied,

Can is can... but not too much lah. Maybe out of 10 songs, maybe one or two can. Also, we should be more sensitive that other people may not like that we are singing these songs. I tell my students not to be upset with these people – different people have different ways of understanding what life and music is like, and they are not wrong. We need to always try to find middle ground so that we and them can grow to be more understanding towards one another.

I discovered that the ways in which choral music practitioners understand religious sensitivities are similar to how they understand cultural sensitivities. When I compared the experiences that my informants had with regard to sacred music as an aesthetic choice, I discovered that there are varying degrees of acceptance amongst schools and school administrators. There are many factors that determine whether such practices are acceptable – the social and cultural capital of the choir conductor, the social mores that are dominant in the specific school spaces, the school leadership's own perceptions towards what is acceptable and permissible, and finally, how the students themselves and their parents react to the presence and practice of sacred choral music. On that note,

self-regulation and the choice of selecting sacred repertoire are determined by how a choral music practitioner understands the factors that are at play. Often the choice of selecting and performing sacred choral music is still an option for now and can be made possible through negotiation and open communication between the choral music practitioner and the school stakeholders.

6.5 – Aesthetic choices for public spaces

One of the discoveries I made was that the way in which Singapore has been ‘put together’ since 1965 does have lingering and long-term consequences. Yet, not all these consequences are necessarily state-imposed, and this understanding of the construction of Singaporean sensibilities is more important than the effects of state sanctions. In this section, I look at another facet of making aesthetic choices as a means of negotiating religious sensitivity, which is how the music will be received in public spaces. Sinha (2016) suggested that there is inherent liminality of Singapore’s public spaces in relation to the sacred and secular divide, where the rituals and religious practices, such as putting up shrines in corners, have seeped into the consciousness of the ordinary for many Singaporeans. I extend her argument by adding that the consciousness of the calendar of cultural holidays also plays an important factor in determining the outcomes of liminality and acceptance of sacrality in the public space. The idea of sacrality itself is challenged when it comes to public artistic performances, since the state heavily regulates the public practices of ritualistic expressions of faith (Lai 2010), especially when music and public performances are involved (Chia 2017) in the interest of the greater public good. This section focuses on performances by the school and community choirs in public spaces and for public

audiences. Here, I discuss how choral music practitioners negotiate repertoire acceptance within a public space, specifically around the Christmas holiday and carolling.

Christmas season is a busy time for many choirs. Carolling is a type of performance where choirs go around singing Christmas songs in public. The practice of carolling has a specific relation to Christmas as a Christian religious holiday, even though there are several secular songs that belong to the carols sub-genre. Choirs are further incentivised to take on carolling gigs because gigs are a lucrative form of income. Shopping malls and other public spaces are willing to engage the choirs and pay them for their performances. Sometimes, choirs also take on free performances at hospitals and other spaces as part of their social responsibility activities. The aesthetic choices regarding the negotiation of repertoire are very similar to that in schools.

Recalling my conversation with Samuel, he shared the following regarding his experiences with public performances:

You know recently, one of my choirs were invited to carol in the MRT train by SMRT. We were preparing the songs for a couple of weeks so that we can put up a good performance. A day before the gig started, one of the officers from SMRT called me and asked what songs the choir was performing. When I shared with him the repertoire, he hesitated. He then asked if we don't sing songs that included the word, 'God', 'Jesus' or 'Mary' in the repertoire. I was quite stumped. More than half the songs were traditional Christmas Carols, and they all contained those words in some form or variation. I told the SMRT officer that the choir will not be able to learn new songs, and we don't have enough music to cover the time requested. The officer told me that he'll call me back and he ended our call. He did call me back, and he told me that we can go ahead to sing the songs we programmed since it's also songs most people are familiar with. He then shared with me, half-jokingly, that he hopes no one from the public will complain.

Samuel's reflection is another instance of mediation and negotiation of aesthetic choices. In this scenario, the officer's comment about being the target of a complaint by members of the public is a recurring trope that stems from an imagining of the public's sentiments as to what is acceptable or not acceptable for public consumption. Yet, the officer was also aware of the cultural value of the songs, since in this case, the songs had a somewhat universal appeal vis-à-vis the time of the year. We can see that this trope is similar to that shared by Jun Ming earlier, in that the agent who acts on behalf of an institution is informed by his or her imagined reaction by public audiences. This imagining is further informed by the time frame of the event, especially if the event in itself is out of synch with a cultural theme or holiday.

With instances such as this, where an institutional actor with authority responds negatively or otherwise in relation to the selection and performances of sacred works, it reinforces the conductor's consciousness of liminality as to what is allowed and what is forbidden. I also discovered through conversations with my informants that there are times where a conductor was able to successfully negotiate performances for sacred music in the context of carolling. I spoke to Noreen, about public performance, and especially about carolling, and she shared the following:

Noreen: I have several students from all the religions singing in my choirs. When their choir had a Christmas carolling gig, I pulled them aside and explain to them that that the songs that the choir will sing are all the Christmas and Christian songs. I also told them that I'm not a Christian myself, and I sing these songs because there's an element of fun and enjoyment. I also tell my students that firstly, they are not comfortable singing the songs, then they don't have to perform with the choir. And if they are still keen on singing, I tell them to go and talk to their parents first. If their parents allow them to go then they can come and join us. If their parents say yes, then they can come. If the parents say no, then sorry, they can't come and sing.

Me: How were the response from them and their parents?

Noreen: Most of the students will want to sing. They really enjoy being in a choir, and their friends are all here. Surprisingly, most parents will actually allow their children to come sing. The Muslim parents, the Taoist parents, the Buddhist parents, most are okay. Only a few parents who are not comfortable with their children singing, what my teacher in charge will do is to call them and assure them that their child will not miss out in terms of CCA points or whatever. I also tell the student it's okay not to sing because there will be other opportunities to sing together.

Me: How about the school's response to your choirs singing carols and sacred music?

Noreen: I think in recent years my school choirs have stopped looking for carolling gigs. I don't think it's because it's the religion thing, but I think mainly because the schools are being more pro-active in making sure that teachers and students get to enjoy their holiday. But for concerts and competitions, my schools are okay with selecting repertoire... doesn't matter to them if it's sacred or not.

Me: I see.

Noreen: I can tell you it's probably because I'm a *laojiao* [literal translated: 'old bird' – meaning a veteran in the field]. I've been conducting for a long time, and I've been with some of the schools for a long time also. What helps is having a good relationship with the school teachers and the HOD and the principal. If there is trust between us, then it's easier to work. I have a good rapport with the students and their parents too, and they know where I'm coming from.

Noreen also shared the religious connotations of each piece are not very important to her, and she emphasised the technical aspects of each piece as a means to explain why the songs are used to achieve her choirs' overarching developmental goal. While she continues to produce excellent results in both SYF as well as international competitions, she explains that her focus is to ensure that her students grow and develop to become good individuals first. She believes that when a person has a good moral foundation, he or she will definitely be able to become an excellent chorister. This cultivation of a sound philosophical approach towards music-making has earned her deep respect and trust with the school leaders and stakeholders, and they are more ready to allow her free rein in selecting music. Furthermore, she has a framework to deal with the possible tensions in sensibilities, which I would posit is a good strategy that eases the aesthetic decision-making process.

A reasonable objective for any performing arts group is to be able to perform in public. From here, I outline the pursuit of external performances as another aspect of aesthetic choices and one that has potentially high returns along with high opportunity costs. I asked my informants about what they think regarding the public performances for their choirs. Many of them believe that putting up a concert on their own carries many economic and socio-cultural risks.

I spoke to Zoe, who is a music teacher as well as a choir conductor. She shared the following:

A full-length concert isn't something you would want to commit to lightly. It's not just about the money, although the cost of putting up a concert in Singapore is very high. As a conductor, you got to know why you want your choir to put up a concert in the first place. How does this help your choir and your choir members develop? How will you also grow from performing the concert? What sort of repertoire will you be sharing with your audience? How is the concert-going to help the school and the community? When you put up a public ticketed concert, you're putting yourself, your choir and your school under public scrutiny.

Zoe's response helps us to understand why public performances (in this case, a full-length concert) are aesthetic choices but are also subjected to financial and administrative constraints. The concert is not just a summation of performing pieces and creating a visual outcome. The aesthetic choice is about the where and when of a performance. Listed below is the projected cost of putting up a concert in the preferred venues in Singapore⁴⁴:

No.	Venue	Total Projected Cost	No of Seats
1	Esplanade Concert Hall	\$16,680.00	1601
2	Singapore Conference Hall	\$7,454.00	884
3	SOTA Concert Hall	\$11,348.00	628
4	Yong Siew Toh Concert Hall	\$19,400.00	573
5	NAFA Lee Foundation Theatre	\$5,320.00	380
6	Esplanade Recital Studio	\$3,560.00	245
7	Victoria Concert Hall	\$6,980.00	673
*Venue cost includes manpower cost (Ushers/Tech crew/etc) and COMPASS performing permit.			

Table 6.4 – Projected costs of choral performance
Source: Courtesy of Vox Camerata (2016)- with permission

⁴⁴ These venues are preferred spaces for choral music performance due to the quality of the acoustics, which is more suitable for the choral sound.

There are school choirs that actively put up annual ticketed public concerts. Some examples would be the Anglo-Chinese Junior College Choir's 'An Evening with Friends' and Victoria Junior College's 'Symphony of Voices' which are usually held at the Esplanade Concert Hall. These sold-out annual concerts are a mainstay on the local cultural calendar. Superficially, we can attribute the success of these concerts, in terms of ticket sales, to the choir's cultural value to the scene and successful cultivation of a pool of loyal audiences. These choirs are capable of producing cultural value for their performances to be readily consumed by the public.

Many of my informants are mindful that putting up a concert requires the school choir to not only be artistically ready but also to have the school and the wider community be receptive in supporting the choir's endeavour. It can be very demoralizing to the students if they perform to an empty hall. Trying to sell tickets is another daunting enterprise. In order to fill a concert hall, the school choir needs to be able to do two things. Firstly, each choir member needs to tap into his or her individual personal networks to come and support, which essentially forms the captive audience for the choir. That said, not every school choir has the potential to command the presence of the captive audience. This is very much dependent on the socio-economic background of the choir members, or for the school choir to have enough cultural capital so that 'knowledgeable' members of the public would have the desire and impetus to attend such concerts, as in the case for the two junior college choirs mentioned earlier.

We understand that due to the economic cost, putting up full-length concerts is not a viable endeavour for many school choirs. Fortunately, school choirs have other options to choose from in terms of public performance

opportunities. Usually, these performances are much shorter in duration, ranging from 10 to 30 minutes' worth of performance time. These opportunities vary in terms of audience outreach, quality of space as well as cultural value and prestige. An example of this would be community events organized by grass-roots organizations. The event organizers often reach out to schools and community arts groups to perform as part of the festivities. These performances do not receive much, if any, remuneration. However, the performing groups take these opportunities up for various reasons, such as exposure, community outreach, or even market penetration.

Another example would be festivals organized by cultural institutions. Two examples of this would be the Esplanade and their festivals programming like 'Voices', 'Limelight' and 'Tapestry', as well as the 'Singapore Rhapsodies' organized by the National arts Gallery and the National Museum in conjunction with the SG50 Fund (The Esplanade Company Pte LTD 2018; The National Museum of Singapore 2018). These festival organizers have selection criteria for potential performers, and they usually field out groups that demonstrate the potential for quality performance. School ensembles usually apply for the opportunity to participate in these festivals; they gladly perform in these spaces due to the associated cultural prestige of the space. These opportunities reduce the opportunity and economic costs to the performing groups; the shorter performance duration and free performance platforms allow the performing arts groups to better pursue their own developmental goals.

Another dimension of external performances that is part of the repertory of aesthetic choices would be that of competitions. The variances of choice in selecting competitions is dependent on several factors, but the desired outcome

in choosing to compete is twofold. In Chapter Four and Five, I discussed how schools and CCA instructors use competition outcomes as concrete evidence of attractiveness. This would be the primary motivation for participation, at least on the part of the conductor and that of the school. The second outcome would be to measure the aesthetic and technical capability of the ensemble in relation to performance. The premise here is that these competitions would have expert judges presiding over the performances and that their feedback would inform the ensemble of their current standard, and the ways in which to improve their performance.

Schools consider participation in the MOE-organized national SYF competition to be mandatory and this provides a baseline in producing cultural capital for performing arts CCAs since CCAs who do not compete in the SYF will have a difficult time in justifying their continued existence. Other than participating in the SYF, schools with promising performing arts CCAs would seek out competitions that have significant cultural value due to their high standards and prestige. These competitions play a key role in generating a presence in both the local and international arts scene. For example, according to the world choir rankings website maintained by the *Interkultur* Conglomerate (2018), Singaporean choirs have done very well for themselves. In fact, two Junior College choirs appear within the top 50 positions – Hwa Chong Junior College Choir at the 39th position, and Victoria Junior College Choir at the 45th position (Interkultur 2018).

Bearing in mind the economic cost, competing at the international level is not something that many school ensembles can afford. In 2010, MOE provided funding to schools for the purposes of funding overseas learning opportunities

and named the ‘Trips for International Experience’ (TIE) fund (Durai and Mao 2010; Prime Minister’s Office 2014). Since its inception, more than 70,000 students travel on more than 2,000 school overseas trips yearly (Ministry of Education 2017b). Schools could also tap into this fund to support students going to overseas competitions, and used internal contingency funds to further support students in need of financial assistance (Ministry of Education 2007, 2016). Based on the recommendations made by the Ministry of Finance (MOF) in 2017, MOE reviewed the policy governing the internationalization fund, in view to sensitize the current students to the targeted growth areas within the ASEAN region as well as China, South Korea and Japan (Ministry of Finance 2017c). To that effect, the ministry has strongly encouraged schools to travel within Asia, and this extends also to fielding out for competitions.

6.6 – Aesthetic choice as part of the repertory of strategies

This chapter addresses how aesthetic choices are an integral part of the choral music practitioner’s repertory of actions and behaviours. It also shows that the constraints on individuals when making aesthetic choices are related to the person’s positionality – the social and cultural capital one has in relation to access to plays an important part in determining what types of choices are made available to the individual. In relating this finding to my overarching puzzle of why there are ongoing tensions between the state and arts practitioners, I find that the large part of the subjective experience of each choral music practitioner is significantly influenced by the state, especially in terms of how the state maintains and reproduces its multi-cultural and multi-religious space both within schools and outside of schools. My informants have a distinct sociological

imagining of this, and attribute this back to MOE and its pursuit of excellence. Their sociological imagination stops at the point where they began telling themselves that this is the ‘Singaporean reality’, borne out of our ideological foundation of meritocracy and multi-racialism. Hence, the frustration of working in a landscape that privileges some schools and disadvantages others, at least in their own understanding of what inequality is, becomes a source of frustration between themselves, and between the schools. When these frustrations culminate, their own limited sociological imagination and insight orientates the source and cause of these frustrations to the state, irrespective of whether the state is responsible for these incidences or not.

In the three previous chapters, the empirical findings provide us with examples of how neoliberalism is often masked by the façade of the open market. I have observed two things when I examined how arts instruction is being bartered as a commodity via GeBIZ. Firstly, when state bodies and government ministries enter the market as participants, they tend to dominate other players through the vast resources at their disposal. It is through this domination that the state bodies coerce the other market participants in performing the neoliberal rationalities that the state has adopted.

Secondly, I realised that the free market facilitates the reproduction of inequality amongst arts practitioners. When we see how the senior choral conductors have ease and greater autonomy of artistic choices than the rest of the choral conductors, we can surmise that those with more capital (social or otherwise) will be in a position to negotiate their terms easier than others. These senior choral conductors can do so because most of the time their artistic choices,

such as difficult repertoire and extended works, can be executed with success due to the capacity of the schools and the students they teach.

Yet, arts practitioners have also demonstrated how they curate certain actions and behaviours as part of a repertory of strategies that would allow them to make the best out of the working situations that they experienced. I discovered that choral music practitioners construct the spectrum of strategies borne out of their lived experiences in dealing with the state ancillaries and the public. While some see this very strategically in terms of building on past and current projects to make better their own positionality, others take on a survival mode instinct and subsequently make aesthetic choices in order to survive and maintain their current positions in schools.

The bulk of the discussion in this chapter addresses how the arts practitioners' perceptions of their relationship with schools and the larger public as audiences inform their artistic choices. By focusing on the production of artistic labour in schools, I set out to show how artistic choices are a negotiated decision-making process between the arts practitioner and the school stakeholders. The choices thought to be available to both parties are informed by their perception of what is acceptable and/or desirable by the state, especially in terms of how the state maintains and reproduces its multi-cultural and multi-religious social spaces, in addition to their imagining of the responses by the school stakeholders. The perceptions of both parties are also based on their own subjective understanding of the state; it should not be construed to be truly reflective of the state and its desires. Furthermore, as discussed in the previous chapter, arts practitioners consider the school administrations to be civil servants and are part of the state bureaucracy. Hence, it is understandable for arts

practitioners to construe that the decisions made by school administrators are what the state desires.

The examples described in the three sections make explicit how the arts practitioners' perception of the state informs them in making artistic choices. These artistic choices are strategic and instrumental in fulfilling the requirements set out by the schools and institutions rather than the aesthetic fulfilment on the part of the arts practitioner. Thus, I found that choral music practitioners are compelled to deal with the bureaucracy, and when they do, decisions are made on instrumental rather than artistic terms. My findings suggest that arts practitioners not only make artistic decisions based on institutional requirements and preferences, but they also utilize artistic choices as a strategy to produce their own relevancy and value to institutional stakeholders. Furthermore, institutional requirements and preferences vary across institutions, and arts practitioners are required to navigate these differences when negotiating the selection and production of creative work outputs.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

Finding choices and making decisions as strategies of survival

7.1 – Recapitulation of research purpose

At the beginning of my thesis, I highlight that the tension between arts practitioners and the Singapore state is the contestation of the ownership and means of producing the arts. The objective of my thesis was to better understand the sociological puzzle of why the tensions between the state and arts practitioners continue to exist, despite the various attempts made by the state to ameliorate the arts. I used the case of choral music practitioners working in schools as a means of examining how the perceptions of arts practitioners, in relation to their individual and collective relationship with the state, inform them of the ways they allow themselves and the arts to be governed.

Throughout my thesis, I have shown that these perceptions are derived from two distinct sources. Firstly, arts practitioners rely on their own sociological imagination to examine their own lived experiences of arts making vis-à-vis the state as well as their personal interactions with state agents and state bodies. Secondly, they rely on this imagination derived from their collective social memory of experiences of other arts practitioners – stories of successes and failures in both mundane and aesthetic aspects of the arts practitioners' lives. From these tropes, the arts practitioners build an imagining of what the state desires, which to them is a key component in gaining opportunities and resources for arts making. Subsequently, they then curate a repertory of possible strategies, interventions, attitudes, and behaviours that they can use interchangeably when dealing with challenges in both professional and personal aspects of their lives,

especially when having to deal with state bodies and state institutions. These repertoires collectively form the aesthetic culture of arts practitioners who work in schools in Singapore.

I attempted to answer two questions, (1) where is the state in the production of aesthetics culture in Singapore, and (2) why are there still ongoing tensions between the state and arts practitioners despite the state's change of attitude towards the arts and arts making?

I found that the Singaporean arts practitioners see the state maintaining a contrary presence in their consciousness and in their daily lives. My informants tend to articulate their imagination of the state as 'the government' – a monolithic body that is practically omniscient, pervasive, and whose span of control encompasses the minutiae of the lives of the citizens. My informants are also aware that the tropes on which they rely speaks of a different trajectory about how they operationalise the state and its presence. In these tropes, the state, through the schools that hire them, is an employer, an arbiter of content as well as a potential source of resources and opportunities. In their own sociological imagination, the state has a contrary nature and function: sometimes the state can be supportive and benevolent, and at other times oppressive and unsympathetic towards the arts practitioners and artistic production.

More interestingly, I found that for arts practitioners, the state is made more real than just an imagined collection of ministerial bodies and cultural institutions. To them, their imagining of the state is also informed by the personalities occupying bureaucratic positions within the schools that they meet and interact within the course of their professional and personal lives. The ways in which these bureaucratic personalities react and behave in their day to day

interactions are often construed as an extension of the attitudes and desires of the state. Their reasoning for this is that they regard the bureaucratic personalities as gatekeepers to resources that the state disburses. In many ways, their relationship with these personalities is used as a proxy for their personal relationship with the state.

Herein lies the crux of why there are ongoing tensions between the state and the arts practitioners. On the surface, the state has since seemingly moved away from the overt modes of control that utilizes outward and visible enactments of laws and the police on most artforms.⁴⁵ However, the state's control over the arts has instead become more subtle and invasive; control made real through arts and educational policies, and the ways these policies are interpreted and practiced as localised school practices, which then impact the bulk of the professional work done by arts practitioners working in schools. Consequently, I found that the state does not just affect the arts – it influences the ways in which arts practitioners themselves think about and make choices on the ways they make the arts.

So how has their perception of their relationship with the state shaped the ways in which culture is produced? My findings determined that the notion of *attractiveness* is central to understanding how state and arts practitioners' relations are a nexus for the production of aesthetic culture. *Attractiveness* as an act of legibility is not just imposed by the state (see also Scott 1998), but also reproduced by the arts practitioners onto themselves (see also Teo 2015). To the

⁴⁵ Here, I qualify that there have been some arts practitioners who have had direct run-ins with the police because of their specific arts performances or interventions that are deemed to be contravening public order. Two recent and notable cases are Priyageetha Dia's Golden Staircase installation in a HDB block (See Tan 2017), and secondly Seelan Palay's performance art piece titled "32 Years: The Interrogation of a Mirror" performed in front of the Parliament Building (See Koay 2019).

arts practitioners, the dimensions of *attractiveness* are the means of articulating how an individual or a collective is considered worthy of accessing resources awarded by the government and employment opportunities given by the schools in particular. In trying to operationalise what is and what is not deservedness, the arts practitioners would rely on their own imagining of what the state desires. From these perceptions, they reproduce this desirability in themselves and the arts that they create as a strategy to further participate and promulgate their arts medium in Singapore.

7.2 – Summary of findings and contribution to research

My work explains how choral music practitioners create a cultural toolkit that provides a variety of strategies that they can use interchangeably in the course of dealing with the daily grind of a being a cultural worker within the school system. In doing so, my work moves away from the discourse on the state's direct oppression of "content" production, and examines other issues arising out of being employed by the state. I am not suggesting that the issues on censorship and the policing of content production, such as internalized self-censorship, are absent or no longer relevant in the study of the arts and the state in Singapore. Rather, by offering an ethnographic account of how these arts practitioners go about in deliberating and producing said content, I show how these individuals construe their own understanding of what agency and autonomy means to them within a larger framework of coercion and control.

As I examine the state's roles in the production of the arts in Singapore and where the state positions itself in the lives of arts practitioners, my findings are largely consistent with the works of scholars such as Chong (2014), Wee

(2003, 2007, 2010), as well as others I cited in Chapters Two and Three of my thesis. My findings similarly suggest that the state, primarily through the Ministry of Education as well as the National Arts Council, is a significant driving force that determines the production of the arts in Singapore. Furthermore, I also found that the state, through these two institutions, utilizes a vast array of mechanisms, statutes, and policies to determine both content and output of the arts practitioners, as argued by scholars such as Hoe (2019; 2015; 2015) and Tan (2013a, 2015, 2018). The examples illustrated in my thesis, such as changes to the SYF policies as well as the policies that govern CCA travels, make explicit how arts making is subordinated to be a strategy for the state's developmental model outcomes — the first being the channel in which to produce citizens for the global city economy, and the second being an extension of 'soft' or cultural diplomacy.

When I attempt to describe how arts practitioners construe their relationship with the state, my data suggests that this relationship is seen in two ways. First, many arts practitioners, especially those who work as CCA instructors, do think of themselves as 'casual' employees of the state. For these arts practitioners, this notion of casualness is understood with implicit undertones of precarity, even though they themselves may not have the vocabulary nor conceptual understanding to articulate it clearly and succinctly. They understand casualness from the contractual nature of their employment as CCA instructors. Whilst these arts practitioners do experience some semblance of job security, they also know that they do not have the same employment rights and privileges as civil servants and other state employees. Furthermore, their job recruitment processes are subjected to the stringent requirements framed by GeBIZ, as with

anything else that is associated with state expenditure and employment. The nature of casualness is also made apparent since their positions are operationalized as services procurement by schools and institutions. These issues are discussed in chapters Five and Six of my thesis.

Secondly, the arts practitioners think of themselves as a social group within Singaporean society vis-à-vis the state. Like any social group within Singapore, they are subjected to the hegemonic influences of the state. However, the arts are often used as a medium for social commentary, and these works are often pre-emptively seen as being critical and contrary to the official political stance of the state by both state actors as well as some quarters of society. This then gives rise to arts practitioners being regarded as unsupportive to national programmes and interests. Whilst this particular position has been captured by other scholars who study the arts in Singapore (See Chong 2011; 2014; 2017 and Wee 2003; 2010), my study examines how this is construed by arts practitioners in terms of how they choose repertoire and genres vis-à-vis their imagination of the state's desires. This is discussed in chapters Three, Five and Six of my thesis.

The status of this relationship is built on distinct power relations as well as on an economic basis predicated on free-market (neoliberal) forces. The arts practitioners are cognizant that desirable (creative or otherwise) output allows them to create market value for themselves so that the institutions that will want to hire or keep them. Arts practitioners know that the state becomes their sources of employment through the schools and institutions. If they want to be employed, they would need to position themselves to be as attractive as possible. Whilst the state has a significant say in what attractiveness looks like, each arts practitioner can employ different strategies to produce attractiveness. Furthermore, different

arts practitioners have different points of entry that are determined by their personal social and cultural capital; these forms of capital also determine the types of strategies that they can access and employ. These are discussed in chapters Three, Four and Five of my thesis.

The perceptions of this relationship provide arts practitioners with a subjective understanding of what the state is, how it functions and what are its desires. This subjective understanding is by no means a comprehensive (or even necessarily completely accurate) reflection of the nature of the state. Yet, this subjective understanding of the state and its desires informs arts practitioners of the ways to formulate and enact strategies, interventions, attitudes and behaviours that would be more aligned to the state's interests, thus increasing their attractiveness and suitability to state institutions and increasing their chances of employability.

While they are clear that their subjective understanding of the state is limited to these instances of tropes and experiences, they also firmly believe that this aspect of the state represents the totality of the state. From my own perspective as a researcher, I do understand that their views and perceptions do not adequately capture the complexity of the state. Neither do I make claims that this thesis seeks to do so as a research directive. However, in accounting for their subjective understanding of the state, the data suggests that there are some common themes across all my informants – such as the state's pervasive control and the state's preference to tangible outcomes as opposed to integrity to aesthetic forms. Furthermore, my data suggests that the differences amongst my informants' subjective understanding is dependent on their own positionality within the choral music scene vis-à-vis the schools and MOE's bureaucracy –

those choral music practitioners who are situated within the school structures (as opposed to the ‘freelance’ CCA instructors) are privy to more information of the workings of MOE, but not necessarily the larger picture of how MOE policies fit into the larger RCP policy cluster framework.

My data suggests that the arts practitioners’ array of experiences with different schools and institutions allows them to use these state bodies as proxies of the state. Within their range of experiences, there are times where different state institutions have demanded different outcomes. It may appear that this is caused by different institutions having different institutional requirements, as acknowledged by the arts practitioner. However, it should not be dismissed that these institutions lack effective communication of their needs. Thus, the variances of experiences feed to the imagining that the state can be contrary and opaque about its own articulated goals.

On the whole, my data suggests that despite experiencing real and perceived barriers to employment and arts making, arts practitioners have found ways via their cultural toolkit to make sense of the difficulties they face in life, and to find newer ways and means to ameliorate their day to day living. The discussion of the disruption to the cultural forms and pathways to success threads across my empirical chapters, where in order to address this change in producing value in the eyes of schools, choral music practitioners now need to re-invent strategies and interventions to reframe their employability value within state institutions. Throughout, I have observed how many Singaporean arts practitioners exhibit a sense of tenaciousness and creativity when it comes to finding ways and means to survive and to make arts in times of uncertainty, which in my thesis is represented by the changes made to the SYF and school policies

circa 2012. Some of my informants are cognisant that the issues they face stem from policy and demographic changes. These experiences have influenced how they perceive their relationship with the schools they work in, their personal preconceived notions of camps as well as other choral music practitioners. They also understood that the nature of their profession was undergoing a fundamental change due to the implementation of these policies. They are also aware that the old tropes of progression, specifically how they position themselves within their networks in order to gain access to professional development and mobility, are becoming outmoded and irrelevant. Individually, they first needed to reflect on how to future proof themselves as private citizens, and then think of ways and means by which they can preserve their arts forms. In their moment of unsettledness, many of them came to the realisation that as choral music practitioners, they would need to come up with newer approaches in order to make sense of and survive these changes. What is at stake here is whether they can continue to successfully sustain themselves when working in schools, given that the ways they find jobs and the ways they keep their jobs have irrevocably changed. As new situations arise, so do the ways in which they curate their toolkit of strategies, interventions, attitudes and behaviours to best deal with the current issues they face.

Despite having compatibility in some findings with previous scholarly works in terms of acknowledging the power relations and dynamics between the state and arts practitioners, I find that there are some areas in which my findings diverge from the works of others. Superficially, it would be easy for me to simply position my own research as an ‘opposite’ or ‘other’ in relation to these mentioned works. In this, I am informed by Haraway (1988), who cautioned that

there is a danger in creating false dichotomies when making claims of uniqueness and objectivity vis-à-vis the works of others. She suggests instead that the episteme of social constructivism is often reproduced along the lines of “location, positioning and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims” (Haraway 1988:589). Hence, rather than framing the divergences my work has with others as a binary, I would suggest instead that my research should be positioned within a framework of webbed accounts vis-à-vis the works of other scholars. While these scholars frame their works at the position of state enactments and thereafter unforeseen or unintended consequences, my own framing is from the position of the arts practitioners as actors themselves - how they make sense of their lived reality where the state is seemingly omnipotent and pervasive but is also regarded as an entity that is arbitrarily and contrarily both benevolent as well as harsh.

I illustrate divergences by drawing on a few points of comparison between my work and that of Chong (2014). Where Chong (2014a) argues that the “bureaucratic imagination of the arts” (p.23) adopted by state bureaucrats is largely drawn from the sensibilities of the political elites, my findings indicate that for the arts practitioners, the bureaucratic imagination of the arts is reflective of how the arts practitioners themselves imagine what is desirable by the state bureaucrats. While Chong (2014) also argues that the state’s utilisation of coercive mechanisms shapes the ways in which arts are produced in Singapore, my data shows also that it is the arts practitioners’ own understanding of state mechanisms, both coercive and benevolent, that drives the production of the arts in Singapore.

I should stress that my study has primarily been using choral music practitioners who are in local schools as a case of the arts practitioners in Singapore. In looking at state and arts practitioner relations, my analysis has focused on how these relationships play out within the context of employer and employee relations, rather than the abstract and distant imagining of what state and citizenry mean to my informants. As such, I have addressed only the specifics of arts production in relation to arts employment by the state, and not the pursuit of independent arts making or *l'art pour l'art*. As mentioned in Chapter One and Three, I make clear that I have deliberately not included the political elements of art-making – i.e, the arts as a medium of critique and a platform for social commentary, as these have already been discussed and critiqued at length by the works of other scholars (Chong (2014), Kong (2000), Kwok (2003), Lee (2010, 2014), Wee (2003, 2007, 2010)). These political issues are more inherent in some arts forms (such as theatre and literary works) than others (such as dance and music). Not talking about politics and the arts doesn't mean that the issue is irrelevant or doesn't exist. Rather, I posit that my work allows others to understand that their relationship between the state and arts practitioners is a complex one, a nesting of a multitude of roles played by both sides which are simultaneously synergistic as well as disruptive.

Throughout my work, I have addressed how there are several commonalities in the production of strategies within the cultural toolkit of arts practitioners – where aesthetic culture is an almost *habitus*-esque consolidation borne out of social memory and shared tropes. That said, throughout my empirical chapters I also highlight and comment on instances whereby class and religion intersect with the aesthetic and mundane work of these choral musicians.

A caveat is appropriate - by no means I make any claims that my work is a critique of, or contributes to, the scholarship of said domains. Instead, I frame the issue of strategies being primed in a limiting dichotomy of homogeneity and heterogeneity – there are common strategies to be had, but not all strategies are useful, applicable or even accessible to individual arts practitioners when dealing with professional and aesthetic issues.

From the discussions in chapters 5 and 6, I found that there is indeed an aggregation on the types of strategies that individual choral music practitioners have access to. These differences are largely dependent on where they are in terms of their own career progression (which I describe in chapter 4), and also their own social and cultural capital. This finding can be mapped unto the larger discussions on the neoliberal practices used by schools and my argument about attractiveness – where the more attractive you are, the more options you have to make choices and decisions.

In Chapter 6, I interrogate the issues coming out of the discussions on artistic autonomy and integrity. I discuss the issues of repertoire choices and performances as a case for negotiating artistic autonomy and integrity. That said, I do want to acknowledge and highlight the matter of material interest versus artistic output. The medium of the artform has direct implications on whether there is an option or choice for the arts practitioner to make a choice in the first place. To exemplify this, while a writer or a visual artist may obtain the materiality of their medium (e.g. canvas, paint, paper, etc) without state resources, a conductor or a choreographer needs performers to practice their art. In this, the school not only controls the access to resources in terms of wage and remuneration, it also controls the medium – i.e. the student performers. By

controlling the medium in terms of access (and to an extent, quality), the state through schools have a larger control on what forms of aesthetic expressions are allowed or disallowed. Artistic integrity almost becomes a moot point, and these arts practitioners would have to come up with innovative ways in order to express their own artistic expression albeit within the confines of these constraints.

And finally, I see my work as a commentary on the paradoxical consequences of Singapore's neoliberal practices of the arts. By showing instances of how the work and the art form come under the purview of the state's neoliberal economic frames, I find the state does not control the arts directly as a regulator, but as a market participant. Herein lies the paradox; although the state seems to allow for more freedom and less regulations against the art works and practices in Singapore, it eventually has greater opportunities to control the production of the arts, as the arts practitioners are more willing to 'attract' the state's financial support and to conform to its regulations. Such paradox allows us to understand how the state can influence the production of the arts and culture in multiple and complex ways. Hence, my work engages the corpus of knowledge on the state's power and the arts in Singapore by challenging the "false dichotomy" between subordination and resistance in relation to the nexus of state's power and coercion, shining a light on the aspect of individuals' agency to choose their own strategies to deal with uncertain conditions.

7.3 - Limitations of the thesis

My thesis uses choral music practitioners working in schools as a case for arts practitioners in Singapore. Earlier, I mentioned that this categorization is based on a generalization that the Singapore arts practitioners negotiate their

relationship with the state vis-à-vis through work and through the practice of arts making. I sought to encapsulate as many variations of these experiences as I was able to, given the time that I had in the field. However, there may be other modalities in an arts practitioners' life that I did not encounter during my time researching, and therefore are not represented in my thesis. Most notable of these are the faith-based arts practices that operate within religious institutions, which have a different dimension in negotiating their identity and purpose vis-à-vis the state. By focusing on choral music, my study did not capture the experiences of practitioners of other arts forms and genres, which may contain distinct variations unique to their art-form. Furthermore, when it comes to discussing about ethnicity of the arts practitioners, I find this discussion problematic because of the nature of my population of interest. The number of non-chinese choral music practitioners is very small, and any further descriptions of such individuals will likely and unfortunately compromise the anonymity of some of my informant(s).

Another limiting aspect of my thesis that needs to be highlighted is that my work directly deals with how arts practitioners perceive their own relationship with the state. I note that they present to me a subjective understanding of their own lived realities – this subjective understanding should by no means be construed as a complete or accurate description of what the state is and what the state does. Furthermore, scholars such as Jerolmak and Khan (2014) have noted that research participants may not necessarily share the 'factual' aspects of their experiences. It may be that the information that I obtained from my informants are not necessarily accurate or reflective of the larger relationships. Yet, I am also informed by other scholars such as Cerulo (2014) and DiMaggio (2014), who counter-argued that informants may not necessarily lie, but rather offer

perspectives that are true in the context of their own situated positionality – what is true for them may not necessarily be true to others.

Coming back to how I negotiated my own positionality I refer to Bourke (2014), who suggested that a researcher's positionality may influence the ways in which the researchers relate to and understand the subjects of the study. This positionality is derived from the researcher's own subjectivity and is constructed from the various social categories prescribed by the researcher. Scholars such as Olive (2014) suggest while tensions between the emic and etic perspectives are inevitable, a researcher needs to be conscious of how each facet of a researcher's positionality potentially affects the research project in two possible ways. Firstly, a researcher's positionality could create resonances and affinities with the informants, thus allowing greater access to information and insight. Secondly, it could work against the researcher and create barriers and feelings of antipathy from the informants, which would prove to be challenging in eliciting detailed or accurate information from them.

Bring back to the discussion of my positionality at the first chapter of my thesis, my intersubjectivity is constructed from not just my ethnic and class categories, but also from my own personal expertise, experiences and former position within the networks of choral music. This bears repeating: I am a male Malay Singaporean researcher who is also a practicing musician in my own right. My previous education includes being trained in classical music, and in particular, choral music. I was formerly employed by MOE and formerly managed the aesthetics department in a local school. There were occasions during fieldwork that my positionality was a hindrance as well as a privilege. Hindrance came about from my informant's *perception* of my own experiences and

education. Bearing in mind the arguments made by Jerolmack and Khan (2014), some potential informants did not wish to speak to me for fear that I was trying to elicit secrets or information on behalf of MOE, or even to use the information for my personal gain as an arts practitioner. Another aspect of hindrance was where my informants imagined me to be socially positioned within the community; the notion of camps and factions are still very strong, and the lack of familiarity of me had caused these potential informants to position me in an opposition camp.⁴⁶ These conceptions initially made the choral musicians with whom I spoke to often to be guarded in their response.

There are, however, instances where I benefitted from my positionality. One of the benefits is being able to locate and access certain information and processes in the arts practitioner experiences in Singapore, such as the GeBIZ portal and the ministerial documents that are made available to the public. I was also privileged to be able to speak to school and ministerial administrators where former colleagues of mine, who did not see a conflict of interest with my research and their own positions within MOE. I acknowledge also that I might have an unconscious bias towards some of my informants. This is due to my lifelong interactions with them as first a student within the MOE system, and later as an education officer and a school department head. Personally, I do have good and cordial relationships to most of the senior personalities within the scene, and they have been a great help in convincing others to talk to me and be open about sharing their life experiences. I sought to mitigate these biases by adhering to the structured interview model, re-analysing my data and triangulating the interview data with other data from primary and secondary sources.

⁴⁶ I discuss the notion of camps and factions in chapter four of my thesis.

In the course of my fieldwork, I did not encounter any political or ethical issues that I anticipated prior to beginning my fieldwork. However, in the duration of my candidature, I have come across issues of bullying, which is actually quite pervasive within the arts scene (Quigg 2011). I was, however, privileged to be able to listen to issues shared by my informants regarding their difficulties at work. While I am ethically bound to not to go beyond the scope of my research method in intervening on their behalf, I adapted and used the peer support and counselling techniques that I acquired whilst being an education officer in MOE. I listened attentively to their concerns and shared coping strategies that they could use in dealing with certain issues.

Some of my informants also asked information regarding whom I contacted and further asked information regarding specific individuals within the scene. While I did share whom I spoke to so that there is no duplication of snowballing, I declined to share any other information offered during the interview. That said, I shared with all my informants that I would make a copy of my thesis available to anybody who would want to read it. While adopting such a position potentially might have prevented me from gaining more opportunities to gain insider information, all my interactions with interested individuals have been very fruitful and collegial. They also understood and respected my need to refrain from sharing data as it was a requirement within the ethical guidelines of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the university.⁴⁷

Some of these arts practitioners are themselves individuals who work within the state bureaucracy. I kept in mind that clarity regarding state policies is usually from the senior leadership of the bureaucracies, but even the senior

⁴⁷ A brief outline of the ethical considerations of my study can be found in Annex E.

leadership sometimes does not get clarity from the state (Koh 2015b; Liew 2015). With the understanding that the state is not a monolithic entity, there will be disjunctions in between how the state articulates its position on the arts and how different state bodies view and deal with the arts. There are dissonances between what seems to be the state's overarching rationality and how different state bodies operationalise this rationality differently. These dissonances add to the uncertainty that we expect during changes in state policy and add to the ambiguity that the arts practitioners would have to deal with and negotiate in their daily lives.

7.4 – Contribution to research

In addition to providing some direction to how both researchers and practitioners can re-examine the arts practice in Singapore, my work speaks to different debates that are ongoing in the domains of culture as well as the state and the arts relations in Singapore. Within the domain of culture, my work negotiates the differences between Sewell (1992) and Swidler (1986), where my empirical findings show how culture, which in this instance is the aesthetic culture of Singaporean choral music practitioners, is both a system as well as a practice. Within the domain of the arts and state relations in Singapore, my work explores another aspect of this relationship, and forefronts the position of the arts practitioners in terms of enacting their agency via the assemblages of cultural toolkits. Hence, my study has made two significant contributions to the corpus of knowledge, and more specifically in relation to choral music and the arts in Singapore. Research in these areas is still relatively new and the related literature especially concerning choral music in Singapore is still somewhat limited.

Thus, my first contribution to research is the empirical study of the cultural production of cultural workers of an artform, inasmuch as there has not been a sociological study of choral music in Singapore. Previous works relating to choral music in Singapore have mainly been limited to historiographical studies, as in the works of Tan (2014) and Chia (2014), as well as survey studies focusing on the teaching and learning aspects of choral music, as in the works of Tan (2000) and Yee (2003). I build upon their works and use ethnographic evidence to further add to the ‘webbed accounts’ that constitute the situated knowledge pertaining to the lifeworld of choral music in Singapore (Haraway 1988).

In situating my thesis into the broader discourse of empirical studies on the culture of arts practitioners, my findings are congruent to how other scholars have described the curation of strategies and actions by arts practitioners in relating to the changes made to cultural policies in urban and national spaces (See Christel Köhle-Hezinger 1999; Lim 2016; Schneider and Ingram 2005; Segers et al. 2010; and Woddis 2014). More specifically, my work concurs with their own findings that where cultural policy changes are concerned, the arts practitioners are clued in to how these changes and shifts impact the way they function as cultural workers, and subsequently they make strategic choices towards how they get hold of the resources they require in order to produce art. We also find that the success of the individual arts practitioners is also tied to how they as individuals have access to economic and social resources, and how their respective arts ecosystems support or hinder individual or collective autonomy in arts making. Much of how our works differ from each other is determined by the orientation of the state and other hegemonic players that dominate the artsworlds

of the various locations mentioned in our individual works. For my thesis, the state is forefronted as regulator, employer and funder, and not many spaces that share the same orientation as Singapore.

Secondly, my contribution to research is theoretical, where my study primarily builds on the understanding of the ontology of culture and cultural production. The primary theoretical contribution I make is that for arts practitioners, their aesthetic choices become incorporated as part of the strategies used to deal with their daily work for the state. Furthermore, my findings indicate that the networks of relations also play a part in the production of aesthetic culture. Where Swidler (2001) operationalises the notion of practice as actions that fit into larger or greater systems with differentiated levels of logic or coherence, my position extends the relationship between practice and systems further. My findings indicate that culture is not merely a by-product of socialization vis-à-vis being acculturated by the larger or greater social structures but is also a conscious construction by the individual as a means of negotiating the aspects of life in his or her lived reality. Furthermore, the notion of practice also encompasses how an individual can code-switch and borrow from various sources, and to transform the original ideas or concepts into something that can be utilized in the localized context or space.

7.5 – Implications of findings / Future Directions

When I first began on this project, I asked myself if the state has done its best to serve the needs of the arts practitioners in Singapore. As I moved further into my research, I shifted my initial question to ask if the relationships that the arts practitioners have with the state are ideal for the production of the arts and

culture in Singapore. My study offers evidence that Singaporean arts practitioners are conscious of the structural limitations that they face in practising and creating the arts, and they use this understanding as a guide in strategizing the mundane and aesthetic decisions they make on a daily basis. Through the use of examples shared by my informants that describe the structural limitations they face and the choices they made; I have shown that aesthetics culture is both a system as well as a practice. In my opinion, Singaporean arts practitioners are resilient as well as innovative; they have a good grasp in understanding that in spaces such as Singapore, social and economic changes happen very quickly. They understand (sometimes somewhat begrudgingly, as most Singaporeans do) that they have the means and tools to adapt, survive, and in some cases thrive, in light of these changes. In the case of choral music practitioners, what they lack in formal training, cultural traditions and history, they more than make up for by being adaptive, pragmatic and accommodating.

In reflecting on the conclusion of my thesis, there seem to be two questions that warrant further enquiry: (1) what is the span of universality towards this mode of cultural production for the arts practitioners, and (2) what does an ideal relationship between the state and arts practitioners look like? In order to find answers for the first question, we need to remind ourselves that despite whatever claims aesthetics and the arts have towards being a universal form of human expression, arts practices are heterogenous and are stratified geographically as well as socio-economically (See also Abbs 1989; Becker 1982; Dissanayake 1992; Stewart and Campbell 2008) As such, we would then need to consider doing comparative studies between artforms as well as doing comparative studies across countries, especially those who practice funding

structures that primarily come from the state. The former trajectory holds many promising possibilities in terms of discoveries. When we use the same lens across artforms and genres, there is a possibility for us to uncover hidden and embedded inequalities within the arts in Singapore. I suspect that explanations of these inequalities, especially pertaining to the allocation of funding, resources, and exposure, are found in how the larger political economy of the arts plays out along lines of ethnicity and class rather than aesthetic sensibilities.

In looking at the later trajectory, I came to the realisation that there will never be an ideal relationship with the state. Yet, such relationships should not necessarily be antagonistic. The state will always continue to pursue its own developmental interest, and it is also up to the arts practitioners to capitalise on the serendipitous moments where their own interests and the interests of the state are aligned. Just like how arts practitioners have to lay to rest the ideological dream of *l'art pour l'art*, in order to do so they need to move away from the naïve dream of having an arts utopia within the city-state.

The biggest challenge that Singaporean arts practitioners face now is the need to start dreaming of a life without the state. By this, I mean that if arts practitioners desire to have the autonomy to create their arts as and when they choose, they would then need to wean themselves away from state resources. The challenge here is also not to change the existing structures but to re-imagine new ways and build new network pathways that would allow arts practitioners to tend to their economic and material needs so that they are no longer beholden to conform or be co-opted by the state.

I would like to believe that arts practitioners are not looking for free meal tickets. Like everybody else, they would like to have the work they do be

remunerated in a way that commensurate the value of the work they produce. We need to acknowledge that there is a deficit of economic value of the arts in Singapore, which in many ways is being reproduced because the cost of arts making is covered and paid for by the state rather than its citizens. Looking for possible solutions to this challenge can be daunting, especially when the state has made itself a powerful arbiter of what is or is not *good art* through the overt and covert apparatus of censorship and funding.

So, what can we collectively do about this? Currently, we tend to instinctively rely on the more senior members of the arts scene with the expectation that they need to be the ones to take charge of initiating change. We tend to perceive these personalities as cultural brokers since they are more visible to other sectors of society and to industries and have been vocally advocating for meaning and value for the works of arts practitioners. Personally, this is where I feel the problem lies; that as Singaporeans we take too much stock on seniority as well as individual social and cultural capital as pre-requisites to make any effective change, and consequently downplay our own individual agency in the process. Every arts practitioner needs to get involved, get organized and help set the guidelines and parameters for the social and financial engagement of arts making with other industries and sectors of society.⁴⁸

On top of that, it is not just arts practitioners who need to be the ones to advocate change – all sectors of society would need to galvanise and pool our

⁴⁸ One can argue that the National Instructors and Coaches Association (NICA) movement within NTUC is a form of ‘self-organization’, but I feel it is currently problematic in two ways: (1) the movement concerns itself with labour policies and practices via government bodies (as opposed to setting standards and practices to the arts as an industry proper) and (2) their focus is primarily on self-help via insurance financial instruments, which in many ways perpetuates the communitarian ideology within the arts ecosystem but not improve the current structures and conditions of the lives of arts practitioners. That said, this is a personal opinion based on my own impression of the movement thus far and my current observations may not necessarily properly represent the newer developments of the movement itself.

collective resources in what we know to be important. I strongly feel that success, at least where creating an ideal arts ecosystem is concerned, can only happen when Singaporeans as a society are able to express value in the arts, not just through artistic appreciation, but also as an economic and social investment. What a successful arts ecosystem without the state looks like, at least in my own opinion, would be when Singaporeans understand that material value and meaning are intertwined; success is where everyone supports the arts through subscription of concerts and programmes, through fundraising and material support (such as co-sharing spaces after office hours, donation of materials, etc.), and through the commissioning of personal and communal art works. The culmination of these endeavours would not necessarily result in an arts utopia (of which I mentioned earlier that this ideological dream has long passed its due date), but it would make for a more equitable ecosystem that will sustain growth and integrity to our arts and culture.

ANNEX A – INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Interview Themes	Interview Schedule script and questions	Rationale
Introductory and Background Questions	<p><i>Hello! Thank you so much for agreeing to be part of my study. I hope to ask you a series of questions that would give me a better picture of the choral music scene in Singapore. Before we begin, I would just like to say that you are not obliged to answer any question I ask...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Tell me more about yourself.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>How old are you?</i> ○ <i>How long have you lived in Singapore?</i> • <i>How did you get interested in choral music?</i> • <i>When was this?</i> • <i>Which choir did you first join?</i> • <i>What about after that?</i> • <i>Do you still sing in a choir?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Which choir is this?</i> 	The introductory questions are in the opportunity to establish rapport with the informant and to field the questions sequentially to build ease and a sense of trust.
Identity, spaces and relationships – Part 2 (For teachers also)	<p><i>Let's talk more about the people who are in your choir.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Which choirs do you currently work with now?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>What type of choirs are they?</i> ○ <i>*Are they registered under ROS or incorporated?</i> • <i>How often does your choir meet?</i> • <i>How large is/are your choir(s)?</i> • <i>What is the age range of your choir members?</i> • <i>Are there any non-Singaporeans in your group?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>If yes, which nationalities do they come from?</i> • <i>Which language do you use during rehearsals?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Does your group have any non-native speakers of the language?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>If yes, how do they cope?</i> • <i>What is the ratio of men and women in your group?</i> 	This set of questions are in direct response to getting data for RQ1 – “Where do they (the arts practitioners) position themselves in the space of cultural and arts production in Singapore”. This focus is to have a better understanding of the people that are involved in the group. This set also explores age,

Interview Themes	Interview Schedule script and questions	Rationale
		ethnicity and gender identity markers.
<p>Arts Production and Value</p> <p>(For teachers also)</p>	<p><i>Let's talk more about choral music-making.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What is a good choir?</i> • <i>What makes a good choir?</i> • <i>What is a good choral conductor?</i> • <i>How does a person become a good choral conductor? Can you share with me what is your artistic process like for your choir?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Do you create artistic goals for yourself and your choir?</i> ○ <i>Is there anyone else involved in this process?</i> ○ <i>How successful have you been in achieving these goals?</i> ○ <i>What resources do you rely upon in planning and executing these goals?</i> 	<p>These questions are in direct response to getting data for RQ1 – “How do the choral music practitioners describe the way their arts is produced?” Here, the focus is to have a better understanding of arts creation. It also allows for the participant to share how the arts becomes the loci of interactivities .</p>

Interview Themes	Interview Schedule script and questions	Rationale
<p>Arts, Audiences, Networks and Communities</p> <p>[*Only ask if the informant works with non-school choir]</p>	<p><i>Choral music-making is not just about having an audience to watch and listen to your choir performances. Sometimes, a choir belongs to or identifies closely with other social groups. This identity sometimes facilitates in building networks that become part of the choir's way of being. Let's talk more about it.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>How often does your choir perform?</i> • <i>How long does it take for your group to prepare for a performance?</i> • <i>Where do these final performances usually take place?</i> • <i>Do performances require non-members/non-performers to contribute as well?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>If yes, who are they?</i> ○ <i>If yes, how do they contribute to the performance?</i> • <i>*Are there any non-arts groups or organizations that support your choir and its activities?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>What types of groups are they?</i> ○ <i>How do they contribute to your group's activities or aims?</i> ○ <i>How did you get to work with them?</i> • <i>Who usually comes to watch the choirs perform?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>How do they get to know about these performances?</i> ○ <i>How many audience members are from the public?</i> ○ <i>How many of them are regular audiences?</i> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><i>Why do they come regularly?</i></p> 	<p>These questions are in direct response to getting data for RQ2(b) “What other influences are present in the lives of the artist(s)? In what ways do these influences have an impact on the arts and on the artist(s)? What specific evidence and incidences would the arts practitioners use to describe these enactments?”</p>

Interview Themes	Interview Schedule script and questions	Rationale
<p>Arts and artists -</p> <p>[*Only ask if the informant works with non-school choir]</p>	<p><i>The idea of the arts community has been around for quite some time. Many of the arts forms in Singapore have a sense of support networks with practitioners of the same arts forms as well as the communities at large. I'm more interested in how arts groups exist and work together. Let's explore this idea.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Is it easy for your choir to work with other choirs?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Are there opportunities for your choir to work with other choirs?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Can you share with me why do you think this is so?</i> • <i>*Do you feel that there is enough 'space' for the choirs to exist together in Singapore?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>*Can you tell me why do you feel that way?</i> • <i>Currently, are there any associations or co-opts or support groups for your discipline?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>What does it do?</i> ○ <i>If Yes, are you a member of any of these groups?</i> ○ <i>Why so?</i> 	<p>These questions are in direct response to getting data for RQ2(b)</p> <p><i>“What other influences are present in the lives of the artist(s)? In what ways do these influences have an impact (both positive and negative) on the arts and on the artist(s)? What specific evidence and incidences would the arts practitioners use to describe these enactments?”</i></p>

Interview Themes	Interview Schedule script and questions	Rationale
<p>Arts and the Government – 1</p> <p>[*Only ask if the informant works with non-school choir]</p>	<p><i>Singapore as a country is trying to create an image of a premier arts hub for itself. The government is trying very hard to make this happen. Over the past few years, there have been a lot of changes to arts and cultural policies, and new buildings and spaces for the arts have emerged. One of the issues that some of the arts practitioners' face is the way the government runs and manages the arts. Let's talk briefly about this.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>How aware are you about government policies relating to the arts?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Why is this so?</i> • <i>Do you think the government can influence the way your choir runs?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Which part of the government do you mean?</i> ○ <i>How does it specifically affect your choir?</i> ○ <i>How has it affected choral music?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>How so?</i> • <i>Have there been any decisions or policies made by the government that has a direct impact on choirs?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>What do you think is the government's goal?</i> • <i>If there is one word to describe the relationship between your group and each of the government bodies you have interacted with, what would it be? (One word per agency)</i> • <i>What are your thoughts regarding the current practice and performance venues made available in Singapore?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Are they conducive to choral music?</i> • <i>In what ways do you think the government can help improve the physical spaces for the arts?</i> 	<p>These questions are in direct response to getting data for RQ2(a). “In what ways do governmental institutions and policies enact or carry out things that have an impact (both positive and negative) on the arts and on the artist(s)? What specific evidence and incidences would the arts practitioners use to describe these enactments?” These questions focus on the participants' view on how the active and passive ways in which the government affects the arts.</p>

Interview Themes	Interview Schedule script and questions	Rationale
Arts and the Government – 2 (For non-school arts practitioners)	<p><i>The National Arts Council (NAC) is one of the government bodies that most of the arts practitioners should work with. Let's talk more about the relationship between arts groups and the NAC.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What is your perception of the NAC?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>What makes you think so?</i> • <i>What do you think is the NAC's view on choral music?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>What makes you think that way?</i> ○ <i>Do you think that different arts forms are seen and regarded differently by the NAC? Could you share some examples of this?</i> • <i>Have you applied for grants from the NAC?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Was it successful?</i> ○ <i>Can you tell me about the experiences of the grant application?</i> ○ <i>If there is one word to describe your experience of the process, what would it be?</i> • <i>In what ways has the grant application process influences your group's operations?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>What about the art-making process?</i> • <i>How much leeway do you have to deviate from your original proposal to NAC after receiving the funding from them?</i> • <i>After the production, does NAC require anything from you?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>What sort of information do they require?</i> ○ <i>Why do you think they need that information?</i> • <i>If you don't receive grants from the NAC, would your group still be able to practice your arts?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>How so?</i> <p><i>Would there be other sources of support that your group can tap on?</i> <i>Could you share with me in what ways you would like NAC to help you and/or your choir?</i></p>	<p>These questions are in direct response to getting data for RQ2(a). “In what ways do governmental institutions and policies enact or carry out things that have an impact (both positive and negative) on the arts and on the artist(s)? What specific evidence and incidences would the arts practitioners use to describe these enactments?”</p> <p>These questions focus on the participants' view on how the active and passive ways in which the government affects the arts. While the government is not reducible to the NAC, the bulk of the interactions and tensions between the state and arts</p>

Interview Themes	Interview Schedule script and questions	Rationale
		practitioners is situated here.
The practice of Arts in Singapore	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Has Singapore as a society become more receptive to the arts?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>How so?</i> ○ <i>What about choral music specifically?</i> • <i>What are the major issues that are troubling you as an arts practitioner in Singapore?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>What are the sources of these issues or tensions?</i> ○ <i>How long have these tensions been around?</i> ○ <i>Do you think these issues or tensions can be resolved?</i> <p><i>If there is one way, to sum up, all these tensions, how will you describe them?</i></p>	<p>These questions are in direct response to getting data for RQ3(a) “What spans of control do external agencies have on the arts practitioners? What are some of the possible issues or difficulties that inhibit or prevent arts practitioners from speaking or sharing freely?”</p>

Interview Themes	Interview Schedule script and questions	Rationale
Personal Agency and the Arts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>How free (in terms of being able to practice) do you feel here in Singapore?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Can you elaborate more?</i> • <i>Do government decisions and policies have more impact on certain arts forms than others?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Are there any arts forms that you feel that the government supports more?</i> ○ <i>What about the opposite? Is there any arts form that the government doesn't favour?</i> <p><i>Are there any choirs that you think the government supports? Why do you say so?</i></p>	<p>These questions are in direct response to getting data for RQ3(b)</p> <p><i>“What sort of agency do the arts practitioners have? How do the arts allow for the practitioners to exhibit or enact agency?”</i></p>

ANNEX B – DATA TABLE

Type of Data	Unit of Analysis	Description of Unit of Analysis	Examples of Unit of Analysis
In-Depth Interview (Primary Sources)	Professional Choral Musicians	Individuals who are professionally engaged/ employed to make choral music	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choir Conductors • Choir accompanists • Vocal tutors/coaches
	Choir Administrators and members	Individuals who run the daily affairs of choirs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appointed Executive members of community choirs • Arts Managers of choirs • Ordinary Choir members
	Government administrators (MOE)	Officials who administrate and enact policies and processes, which includes the employment of choral musicians.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choir teachers in Charge • Heads of departments • Ministry admin officers
	Choir festival Administrators	Individuals who help organize choir festivals of which Singaporean choirs participate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Festival Manager

Type of Data	Unit of Analysis	Description of Unit of Analysis	Examples of Unit of Analysis
Direct Observation (Primary Sources)	Choral Music Making activities	Choral music-making activities that occur in public spaces in Singapore, and are part of the performative behaviour of choirs in Singapore	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public concerts • Choral competitions (Local and international) • Non-concert performances (e.g.: Carolling in shopping malls)
	Choral (and personal) Administration activities	These activities are part of the essential non-musical day to day activities of the choirs and choral musicians that impacts the production of choral music-making.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grant applications • General meetings • GeBIZ (Job applications) • Ticketed public Concert planning and administration • Sourcing of gigs

Type of Data	Unit of Analysis	Description of Unit of Analysis	Examples of Unit of Analysis
Documentation (Primary and Secondary Sources)	Governmental Policy and related materials	Documents that provide information regarding social and cultural policies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Official government websites and statistics (e.g. MOE, MCCY, NAC, ROS, etc) • SYF Website and Results • ASCR Report • Renaissance City Plans Documentation • Memos from MOE regarding SYF
	Administrative process (Government) related materials	Documents that provide information regarding admin processes that deal with interacting with governmental bodies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guidelines for grant applications (NAC, NHB, MCCY) • Guidelines for licensing (e.g.: PELU, COMPASS) • GeBIZ Application
	Administrative process (Non-Government) related materials	Documents that provide information regarding admin processes that deal with interacting with non-governmental bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Venue hiring documents • Application/correspondences of gigs • Notes of Meetings / Email summaries

Type of Data	Unit of Analysis	Description of Unit of Analysis	Examples of Unit of Analysis
Documentation (Primary and Secondary Sources)	Secondary data sources	Sources that discuss or describe choral music and the arts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newspaper articles • Blogs • Social Media • Interviews transcripts published on newspapers/websites • Communiques (WhatsApp messages)
	Secondary Scholarly Works	Sources that have done empirical or theoretical work regarding Singapore and the arts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monographs • Journal Articles • Circulars

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