

the
Singapore

WAY

**STUDENT
GUIDE**

**The Role of Culture and the
Arts**

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1. Welcome & Purpose of This Case

Welcome to a Case About Building Identity Through Creativity

What makes people feel they belong to a nation?

For Singapore, the answer isn't just policy or progress—it's also **storytelling, shared memory, and celebration of difference through the arts**. This case explores how the government, artists, and communities have co-created a **cultural ecosystem** that gives identity a place to grow.

Whether it's a festival in the heartlands, a mural in a housing estate, or a performance on the Esplanade stage—Singapore has shown the world that **culture isn't a luxury. It's a foundation.**

Why This Case Matters to You

No matter where you live, your country tells stories about itself—some official, some forgotten.

This case invites you to ask:

- Who gets to tell those stories?
- What role do the arts play in unity—or division?
- What would your country's "Story of Us" sound like, look like, feel like?

Whether you're an artist, a strategist, or just someone who cares about how society works, this case helps you explore how **culture becomes civic infrastructure**.

You'll Explore:

- How Singapore designed policies, spaces, and platforms for cultural unity
- The role of **the National Arts Council, The Esplanade**, and community storytelling
- The delicate balance between **freedom and curation**
- How creativity supports trust, visibility, and a sense of nationhood
- What a shared cultural identity looks like in a diverse society

Thought to Begin With

"We are not just the buildings we build.

We are the stories we tell—and the space we give others to tell theirs."

This case is about how a nation chooses to be known—by its people, to its people, and to the world.

2. Case Background

Singapore's Creative Shift: From Survival to Storytelling

At independence, Singapore focused on **survival—housing, jobs, and infrastructure**. Culture was not an immediate priority.

But over time, leaders recognized a critical truth:

A nation without stories, symbols, and shared emotion has no soul.

So Singapore began to build not just its skyline—but its **stage, mural walls, museums, and festivals**. What emerged was a carefully designed **arts ecosystem** that helped unify a diverse society while celebrating its many roots.

Why It Matters Today

Singapore used the arts to:

- Celebrate **multicultural identities**
- Create spaces for **shared experience and civic pride**
- Build trust through **representation, ritual, and creativity**
- Support young talent, especially in **music, theatre, visual arts, and digital storytelling**

From National Day Parades to quiet kampong museums, from Tamil poets to Chinese opera troupes, Singapore made the arts **visible, supported, and strategic**.

Key Elements of the Cultural Ecosystem

System Layer	Singapore Example
People	Artists, tradition-keepers, students, youth creatives
Places	The Esplanade, community murals, heritage centres
Policy	Grants from the National Arts Council, arts education programs, multicultural representation funding
Platforms	Heritage festivals, Singapore Art Week, Our SG Stories, youth competitions, community theatres

Tensions & Trade-Offs

Even with success, Singapore faces key cultural questions:

- Can the state support the arts **without censoring voice**?
- How much should creativity be curated for cohesion?
- What happens when new generations want **riskier, rawer stories**?

This case explores how a nation walks the line between **unity and expression**, structure and soul.

Culture isn't a "nice to have."

It's **how a society says who it is—and who belongs**.

3. Learning Objectives

This case will help you see how **culture becomes a system**—one that holds memory, builds unity, and helps nations express who they are.

By the end of this case, you'll be able to:

Understand:

- How Singapore used **art, festivals, and storytelling** to support nation-building
- The role of **public policy** in making creativity visible and valued
- How cultural infrastructure supports **multicultural cohesion**
- Why emotional systems—like heritage, music, and memory—matter for public trust

Analyse:

- How governments and artists co-create identity
- The balance between **state support and artistic freedom**
- The risks and rewards of **designing national narratives through art**
- What's missing, silenced, or forgotten in cultural systems—and how that shapes belonging

Apply:

- Compare Singapore's cultural strategy to your country or city
- Design a festival, mural, or cultural platform for inclusion
- Reflect on your own identity as a **storyteller, audience, or creator**
- Propose a cultural system or policy to strengthen civic unity

You'll Be Ready to Discuss:

- What kind of culture helps people feel like they belong?
- How can nations support creativity without controlling it?
- Whose stories get told—and who gets to tell them?
- What would your national narrative look like if you helped write it?

This case invites you to move from **observing the arts** to understanding how they shape **power, pride, and place** in a modern nation.

4. Pre-Class Preparation

To engage fully in this case, you'll need to bring both **a curious mind and an open heart**. Culture is more than creativity—it's about who gets seen, heard, and remembered.

This section helps you explore how the arts shape identity, and what that means for your country, your city, and your voice.

What to Read

- **Chapter 14 of *The Singapore Way***
Focus on:
 - How Singapore structured its arts sector as part of national development
 - The role of institutions like **The Esplanade, National Arts Council, and Our SG Stories**
 - How festivals, murals, heritage trails, and youth arts programs support inclusion
 - The tension between **curation and creative freedom**

Optional Short Videos (Highly Recommended)

Title	Why It's Useful
<i>The Esplanade: More Than a Building</i> - CNA	Shows how design and access make art part of public life
<i>Singapore's Multicultural Festivals</i>	Celebrates how cultural rituals become national experiences
<i>Voices of Young Artists in SG</i>	Offers diverse perspectives on youth, identity, and storytelling
<i>Public Art & Belonging</i>	Explores the impact of murals, symbols, and shared visual language

Pre-Class Reflection Prompts

Choose 2–3 to reflect on in writing, art, voice note, or conversation:

1. What piece of art, music, or cultural memory represents your identity?
2. Is there a festival, space, or tradition that makes you feel like you belong?
3. In your country, who decides what is “national culture”?
4. What part of your story do you wish others understood more?
5. What do your country's symbols (flag, anthem, posters, murals) say about who's included?

Optional Ecosystem Sketch

Try to map your country's cultural system with four parts:

Layer	Your Country
People (creators, carriers)	
Places (spaces for expression)	
Policy (funding, education, strategy)	
Platforms (festivals, online spaces, programs)	

This will help you **compare your context to Singapore's**, and think about how systems shape voice and visibility.

Quick Check-In Questions (For Class Use)

- "What's a tradition from your background that deserves a spotlight?"
- "What kind of story would you want your country to tell about people like you?"
- "Do you think art can unify people—or just express difference?"

5. In-Class Participation

This session invites you to explore how **culture becomes a system—just like housing, education, or technology**. You'll use Singapore's story to reflect on your own identity, your country's narrative, and the role the arts play in making people feel seen, safe, and proud.

What to Expect

Segment	Purpose
Case Discussion	Understand how Singapore used art as public infrastructure
Cultural Ecosystem Mapping	Analyse the systems behind festivals, murals, museums, and storytelling
Festival or Platform Design Lab	Apply your creativity to a real-world system that supports inclusion
"Story of Us" Reflection Circle	Share and hear personal insights about identity and voice
Policy, Poster, or Mural Pitch	Propose how your country could celebrate or support diverse cultural stories

How to Participate Full

- Be ready to **connect facts with feelings**: policies with identity, stories with systems
- Bring insights from your own country, hometown, or lived experience
- Use the tools: cultural timeline, 4Ps of culture, mural boards, or identity matrix
- Respect others' voices—even if they challenge your own
- Get bold with your ideas: design something you'd be proud to see on a national stage

Sample Questions You Might Discuss

- What makes a cultural experience feel inclusive vs. performative?
- Should governments fund or stay out of the arts? Why?
- How is culture "curated" in your country—formally or informally?
- What's one story your society doesn't tell—but should?

What You Might Be Assessed On

	Criteria
	Using examples from the Singapore case to support your ideas
	Reflecting on your own cultural identity or national narrative
	Engaging in small group work (e.g. festival design, ecosystem map)
	Participating in creative or verbal sharing with openness
	Listening and responding thoughtfully to others' perspectives

Culture isn't just what hangs in museums or plays on stage.
It's **how we decide who we are—together.**

6. Assignments

These assignments help you move beyond case study into **creative action and reflection**. You'll explore how culture shapes identity, how systems support (or silence) stories, and how you might design new spaces for voice, visibility, and pride.

Choose the assignment format that best suits your goals or course:

Option 1: Cultural Ecosystem Essay – “How We Tell Our Story”

Length: 1,200–1,500 words

Prompt:

Using Singapore as a model, analyse your country or city's cultural system. What systems support expression and unity—and what's missing?

Include:

- A brief overview of your cultural landscape (people, places, policy, platforms)
- Analysis of inclusion and gaps (Who's represented? Who's invisible?)
- Proposal: a policy, space, or program to support creative unity
- Link to the Singapore case: What would you adapt, reject, or replicate?

Option 2: Design a National Festival, Mural, or Platform

Format: Poster, presentation, digital mock-up, or infographic

Prompt:

Create a new public space, annual celebration, or creative initiative that celebrates your country's diversity and builds a shared narrative.

Should include:

- Name, theme, visual identity (logo, slogan, symbol)
- Artistic forms featured (music, murals, dance, digital)
- Equity and inclusion strategy
- How it would build emotional connection and national pride

Option 3: “The Story of Us” Personal Narrative

Format: Written story (500–800 words), voice note, short film, or spoken word

Prompt:

Tell your personal story—about culture, voice, identity, or belonging.

You could explore:

- A cultural tradition that shaped you
- A moment you felt misrepresented—or powerfully seen
- A time you used creativity to connect across difference
- What kind of art or expression makes you feel most “home”

Option 4: Policy Memo – Culture as Civic Infrastructure

Format: 1–2 page brief

Prompt:

Propose a new policy, grant, or creative platform that would help your country:

- Build cohesion
- Support young or marginalized voices
- Elevate multicultural storytelling
- Reclaim lost memory or symbols

Use the Singapore model to explain feasibility, design, and public impact.

These assignments let you **build your own version of a national mural, a cultural system, or a creative policy**—because telling a better story starts with you.

7. Reflective Practice

In this case, you've explored how nations use art to define who they are. Now, take time to reflect on how **you define yourself**, and what it means to **be seen, heard, and remembered**.

Personal Reflection Prompts

Choose 2–3 to explore in a journal, art piece, audio note, or conversation with someone you trust.

1. **"The last time I felt fully seen in a public space was..."**
What made that space feel safe, inspiring, or home?
2. **"If I designed a symbol for my country, it would look like..."**
What colours, stories, or emotions would you include? Why?
3. **"When I hear the word 'culture,' I think of..."**
How has your understanding of culture changed through this case?
4. **"A tradition I carry that few people know about is..."**
Why does it matter? Who taught it to you?
5. **"I used to think national pride meant _____. Now I think it means _____."**
How have art, story, and identity shifted your view of patriotism?

Identity and Belonging Self-Check

Rate each statement from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree):

Statement	Score
I can name a cultural space or platform where I feel represented	
I believe my story contributes to the national conversation	
I feel encouraged to express my cultural identity in public	
I understand how systems (not just talent) shape creative voice	
I feel inspired to help design cultural spaces that include others	

Follow-up Prompt:

What score do you wish was higher—and what would help you raise it?

Final Reflection Thought

“The arts don’t just decorate our nation—they define it.”

What part will you play in shaping the next chapter of your country’s story?

8. Glossary of Key Terms

These terms will help you talk about **culture as a system**, not just as entertainment. Use them to deepen your essays, discussions, and creative projects.

Term	Definition
Cultural Ecosystem	The interconnected people, policies, places, and platforms that support creative expression and identity in a society
National Narrative	A shared story that a country tells about who it is, what it values, and who belongs
Public Memory	Events, figures, or symbols collectively remembered and shared through art, space, education, and rituals
Cultural Curation	The selective process of choosing which art, history, or stories are celebrated, preserved, or amplified
The Esplanade	Singapore's national performing arts centre, symbolizing access to art for all citizens
Multiculturalism	The recognition, celebration, and inclusion of multiple cultures within a single national identity
Our SG Stories	A storytelling platform launched in Singapore to showcase diverse voices from across society
Arts Policy	Government frameworks that support, fund, or regulate creative industries and cultural access
Heritage Trail	A mapped experience through neighbourhoods or public spaces that celebrates local history and culture
Creative Citizenship	The idea that individuals use art, media, and storytelling to shape community, belonging, and shared meaning

Pro Tip: Use at least 3–5 of these terms in your essay or pitch to show a strong grasp of both **culture as content and as system**.

9. Additional Resources

These resources can help you go deeper into how **Singapore—and other nations—use arts and culture to create unity, pride, and voice.** They offer tools, models, and inspiration for your own creative journey.

Recommended Readings

Title	Source	Why It's Useful
<i>Arts and Culture Strategic Review</i>	Singapore Ministry of Culture	Shows how Singapore sees culture as a key pillar of national growth
<i>Our SG Arts Plan</i>	National Arts Council	Outlines how access, engagement, and excellence are balanced in policy
<i>The Role of Culture in Development</i>	UNESCO	Explores how cultural heritage and innovation shape sustainable societies
<i>Creative Nation: Culture & Policy in Action</i>	Case studies	International strategies for inclusive, equity-based arts funding
<i>Designing National Narratives</i>	Comparative cultural studies	Looks at how nations shape identity through film, festivals, museums, and memory

Watch & Listen

Title	Platform	What It Covers
<i>The Esplanade: Nation on Stage</i>	CNA	How Singapore built its performing arts identity
<i>Singapore's Cultural Festivals: Harmony in Diversity</i>	Gov.sg	How different communities celebrate together
<i>Young Artists Speak Up</i>	YouTube / CNA	Voices of Singaporean creators on identity, truth, and risk
<i>Why Monuments Matter</i>	TEDx / National Museum	How public memory and space shape civic emotion
<i>Rewriting the National Anthem</i>	Short film series	Creators reimagine national symbols for today's generation

Online Platforms

- <https://www.nac.gov.sg> – National Arts Council of Singapore
- <https://www.roots.gov.sg> – National Heritage digital archive and oral histories
- <https://ourstory.gov.sg> – Public storytelling and cultural reflection platform
- <https://unesco.org/culture> – Global cultural policy frameworks
- <https://www.esplanade.com> – Events, artist features, and educational resources

Countries to Compare or Explore Further

Country	Why It's Relevant
New Zealand	Bicultural narrative with Maori and settler co-ownership of public symbols
Canada	Policies focused on multicultural inclusion and cultural equity
Brazil	Street art, music, and festivals as civic power and protest
Rwanda	Post-conflict storytelling and unity-building through theatre and public rituals
South Korea	Export of national identity through K-pop, drama, and digital art with state support