

LITERARY ARTS

Literature is more than words on a page. It captures our stories, experiences, aspirations, and cultures – in short, literature is an important expression of our Singaporean identity. To support the growth of the literary arts in Singapore, the government announced the first Literary Arts Plan in 2010 with an injection of \$24 million.

As part of the Arts and Culture Strategic Review (ACSR), funding has since been geared towards growing Singapore's literary arts scene. NAC's Creation Grant scheme has supported Singaporean writers to develop new works that have added to the diversity of Singapore literature, especially in long-form writing such as novels. Creative writing residency partnerships between NAC and local organisations such as Nanyang Technological University and National Parks Board, and foreign residency partners like the University of Iowa's International Writing Programme, have increased opportunities for writers to develop their creative practice. The Singapore Writers Festival (SWF) became an annual event in 2011 and is now a highlight of the Singapore arts calendar. Its 2017 edition attracted over 25,000 attendees.

► ANALYSIS OF CURRENT STATE

Strengths

More Singaporeans are reading literature, with 44%¹ of the population having read at least one literary book in 2015 as compared to 30%² in 2005. The inaugural National Literary Reading and Writing Survey in 2015 indicated that Singaporeans had positive attitudes towards reading. The literary scene has grown: there are now more writers; greater volume and diversity in

literary content; healthy growth in the number of intermediaries from English and Chinese literary publishers; and new non-profit organisations to address issues such as writer development and public engagement.

Weaknesses

Although the literary scene is now more vibrant, awareness and appreciation of Singapore literature is low – just one in 10 Singaporeans read Singapore literature³. We need more quality literary arts experiences to interest Singaporeans who are not familiar with Singapore literature. The decline in language proficiency in Chinese, Malay, and Tamil means there are fewer people who can read and write well in these languages. Opportunities for cross-cultural understanding will be diminished without quality Singapore literature written in Chinese, Malay, and Tamil.

Opportunities

Literature, with its ability to improve readers' capacity for empathy, can promote understanding of our heritage and culture. Several literary arts events exist in Singapore today, but few encourage cross-cultural interaction and community building. By translating Chinese, Malay, and Tamil works of historical and social significance into English, a wider reader base could gain a deeper appreciation of our heritage, along with greater understanding between language communities. New trends and developments in communication technology such as augmented reality, virtual reality, and audiobooks also provide opportunities to attract new readers and deepen engagement for existing readers.

Threats

As society becomes more diverse, cultural sensibilities are needed to manage increasing social complexities, and to build a more inclusive society. We need to work hard at articulating a Singaporean identity and to enlarge common spaces for diverse communities. With the advent of new technologies, traditional publishing companies must grasp the full impact of industry disruption brought about by the sharing and streaming economy, as well as other shifts in consumption patterns caused by technological trends.

► ENVISIONED STATE AND OUTCOMES

By 2022, NAC envisions a vibrant literary arts scene where Singapore literature provides shared experiences for people of diverse backgrounds. Literary arts practitioners have the support they need to produce quality literary content and experiences that Singaporeans can relate to, and are proud of. The literary arts draw people together, bridge differences and build connections in the community. Domestic and international readers and critics admire and appreciate Singapore literature for its distinctly Singaporean content that can appeal to readers.

From 2018 to 2022, NAC will build on the literary sector's many accomplishments to promote greater appreciation of Singapore literature, while raising qualitative standards over the next five years. NAC will:

- a Use a more targeted approach in literary engagement, with a priority on increasing appreciation for Singapore literature and fostering cross-cultural understanding by promoting interaction across language communities;
- b Run targeted developmental programmes for literary arts practitioners at different stages of development to hone their craft, and for intermediaries to professionalise with an emphasis on Chinese, Malay and Tamil literary writers and stakeholders; and
- c Develop a more diverse literary arts scene, with a focus on promoting literary exchanges within Southeast Asia and research and writing on Singapore literature.



Strategic Thrust 01: Inspire Our People

Nurture a pool of talent with emphasis on grooming talent writing in Chinese, Malay, and Tamil, and across genres and forms that would appeal to diverse readers

NAC will nurture talent who are committed to creating quality literary content, while developing strategies to address the challenges faced by the Chinese, Malay, and Tamil writing communities. NAC will also look into opportunities for writers at different stages of development to ensure they have access to skills and resources for continuous advancement of their creative practice. This will include residency partnerships and manuscript critiques to help writers hone their craft, and training in professional skills such as pitching and networking.

NAC will study issues across the whole value chain, including publishing, retail and readership, and work with key partners such as academic institutions, the National Library Board (NLB), media and literary arts intermediaries to address them.

1 2015, National Literary Reading and Writing Survey.
2 2005, Population Survey on the Arts.
3 2015, National Literary Reading and Writing Survey.





Strategic Thrust 02: Connect Our Communities

Cultivate shared interest in and appreciation of Singapore literature through engaging forms such as multidisciplinary adaptations and transmedia platforms

NAC will give priority to underappreciated or out-of-print seminal works. Greater emphasis will be placed on translation to promote shared appreciation of Singapore literature across our language communities, and to provide readers with an avenue to engage in meaningful conversations on cross-cultural issues and different perspectives. NAC will partner key organisations such as NLB, National Heritage Board, People's Association, and the language councils. To effectively reach out to the public, NAC will conduct research in reading, engagement, buying patterns and trends.

Nurture a love for literature and deepen public engagement of Singapore literature through pinnacle engagement platforms such as the Singapore Writers Festival and the development of a key literary centre

The Singapore Writers Festival (SWF) is the pinnacle engagement platform in Singapore's literary arts scene with programmes that cater to a wide range of readers' interests. Moving forward, SWF will play a larger role in developing readers of Singapore literature, and prioritising deeper engagement with interested attendees. It will also feature distinctive programmes and socially-inclusive programming. NAC will develop literary intermediaries, including positioning The Arts House as a literary centre, where literary activities can take place all year to support the SWF. This centre will complement NLB's literary events to cultivate a greater appreciation for Singapore literature, and evolve into a cornerstone

of Singapore's literary scene: one that supports the vitality of literary activities, builds communities around the sharing and appreciation of stories, and focuses public interest in Singapore literature.

Encourage early exposure to and sustained interest in Singapore literature, within the literature curriculum and beyond, amongst children and youth

Literary arts in education continues to be a priority to develop the next generation of writers and readers. Opportunities for children and young adults to encounter and engage with Singapore literature should start from home and in schools and extend beyond the literature curriculum. NAC will encourage early and sustained exposure to Singapore literature from young and in schools, working with the Ministry of Education to incorporate more Singapore literature into the curriculum with supplementary teaching and student resources. This includes developing literary texts and teaching resources in the four official languages, with new emphasis on online resources. NAC will also broaden schools' access to quality literary programming directly via the Arts Education Programme, Words Go Round, etc., and support literary organisations that offer school programmes.

Leverage technology to create, digitise or adapt Singapore literature for targeted demographics

As part of NAC's efforts to improve accessibility and awareness of Singapore literature, NAC will support the capability development of literary arts practitioners and intermediaries to equip them with skills needed to integrate technological developments with the literary arts. NAC will also support digital projects that use technology in the creation, digitisation or adaptation of literary works, focusing on art-making with technology (e.g. co-creations using technology) and the distribution of Singapore literature with technology (e.g. digitisation of Singapore literature texts, transmedia adaptations, etc.)



Strategic Thrust 03: Position Singapore Globally

Establish Singapore as a key enabler of exchanges between the Southeast Asian literary communities

Southeast Asian literature provides Singapore an access point to cultivate greater cultural appreciation of the region’s complexities. Singapore has deep historical, social and economic ties with many communities in the region. Singaporeans can gain a better understanding of themselves by gaining insights into the region via literature. Singapore can do more to showcase the region’s culture and provide a new platform for the exchange of ideas in the following two ways:

a **Positioning SWF as a presentation platform for Southeast Asian literature and discovering literary talents from the region**

SWF will enhance its focus on Southeast Asian literature and talent, including those from Singapore. SWF also plans to include programmes that take on a developmental role to engage and educate the Singapore public on Singapore literature alongside Southeast Asian literature.

b **Promoting exchanges between Southeast Asian literary communities to raise Singaporeans’ understanding of our neighbours**

Discourse about Southeast Asian literature improves Singaporeans’ understanding of our neighbours. Possible collaborations with local and regional cultural institutions and think-tanks include the translation and publication of seminal Southeast Asian literature.

Encourage literary discourse on Singapore literature

A thriving literary arts sector is sustained by critical discourse on a country’s literature, its history and development, which deepens people’s understanding of Singapore literature. This will lead to more meaningful engagement between the literary community and the general reading public, and to the development of a more confident cultural identity. We will also encourage a wide spectrum of writing on Singapore literature, such as book reviews and academic essays, to start conversations on Singapore literature across diverse reading groups. NAC will work with partners to foster writing on Singapore literature, and to develop critical writing skills.

► SUMMARY

The sectoral plan will guide Singapore’s transformation into a city of readers who are proud of Singapore’s literary culture, and of writers whose stories continue to inspire Singaporeans. Through literature, Singaporeans will gain a better understanding across communities.

In summary, efforts in literary arts development will go towards:

- a** Making engagement programmes more targeted, with a priority to increase appreciation of Singapore literature and social cohesion by promoting interaction across language communities;
- b** More targeted support of developmental programmes for practitioners to hone their craft and a greater focus on professionalising leading intermediaries; and
- c** A more diverse literary arts scene with a focus on Southeast Asia and literary discourse and criticism.

