

Partner South East Asia

Connections that count

Report: March 2022

Highlights

- ***Partner South East Asia: Arts and Culture Matters***, a series of online forums to strengthen cultural ties between South East Asia and the UK, featured over 60 speakers from the arts and culture ecosystem. **Connections That Count** was the live networking session.
- Artists and arts organisations that want to explore new markets should understand their audiences and media landscapes. Making the right connections with people, organisations and government agencies can provide a smoother entry into new markets.
- International collaborations are important to give artists and arts professionals new perspectives and ways of thinking. They also foster longstanding and mutually beneficial relationships. Platforms that facilitate international collaborations include the Edinburgh Festival in Scotland and Book Nook in the Philippines.
- **Connections Through Culture South East Asia** is a bilateral grants programme that funds cultural exchanges between artists and arts organisations from the UK and six South East Asian countries.

Overview

This live networking session was part of the British Council's series of online forums to strengthen cultural ties between South East Asia and the UK. *Partner South East Asia: Arts and Culture Matters* ran from 22 to 25 November 2021 in the UK, Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma), the Philippines, Thailand and Việt Nam.

The event explored the rich and diverse arts and culture scene of South East Asia. It featured over 60 speakers from South East Asia, UK and other parts of the world. They included artists, creative leaders, researchers, government officials and other people in the arts and culture ecosystem.

A key message that came up strongly in the many conversations was the value of international collaborations. They're important because they give artists and arts professionals new perspectives, new ways of thinking, and opportunities to reflect on their practices, exchange ideas and learn from their peers. Understanding and celebrating differences also help form longstanding friendships and collaborations.

One of the objectives of this event is to facilitate people-to-people connections. Despite the inability to hold face-to-face meetings during Covid-19, the online networking session enabled interactions and connections between all participants. This is a summary of three breakout sessions.

Watch the session introduction [here](#).

Looking for artistic collaborations

Room One was for people interested in UK and South East Asia artistic collaborations. It was facilitated by **Joel Mills**, Senior Programme Manager for Music at the British Council in the UK, and **Camelia Harahap**, Head of Arts at the British Council in Indonesia.

The British Council has a range of programmes to broker relationships between artists, arts practitioners and organisations. One of the them is the [Connections Through Culture](#) grants programme for collaborations between South East Asia and the UK.

Seventeen people joined this session to make connections. They came from Indonesia, Malaysia, Việt Nam, the Philippines and the UK. They included people from sectors such as publishing, music, dance, gaming, art, puppetry, theatre and academia.

Watch this session's recording [here](#)

Looking to develop market audiences

This room attracted people who want to develop new markets or expand audiences in the UK or South East Asia. **Giulia Crossley**, Senior Program Manager for Creative Economy, and **Florence Lambert**, Head of Arts and Creative Industries at the British Council in Malaysia, facilitated the connections.

The participants were:

- **Joanne**, a volunteer with YWCA in Kuala Lumpur.
- **Lani** from Humanhood, an international dance company based in Birmingham.
- **Sue Lyn**, an art therapist from Malaysia.
- **Dave**, an underground music event organiser based in Hanoi.
- **Stephanie**, a freelance project manager and cultural producer based in London.

Giulia stated that the biggest challenge in developing new markets is understanding the audience and market. She asked the participants about what they wanted from their target audience and vice-versa.

She added that the British Council can provide support through insights on the ecosystem. For example, it has mappings of digital and tech hubs, and co-working spaces.

Lani mentioned her organisation's challenge in reaching faraway networks. Florence shared that UK organisations can contact the British Council, which could connect them to the right people and organisations. The British Council could also give them a better understanding of local markets.

For example, the challenges of growing an audience in Malaysia is the lack of appreciation for the arts. This stems from the school education that prioritises science, technology and business sectors as they're better pathways to employment.

Additionally, the British Council in Malaysia could connect them to government agencies like [Creative Economy Development Agency \(CENDANA\)](#).

Florence also raised a question about the channels used to reach the audience. Organisations that want to make inroads into new markets must study the local media landscape.

Stephanie, who has worked on US projects that involved Audio Visual and electronics, spoke about her experience being in Malaysia for a year during the pandemic. She found it difficult to get funding for AV work in South East Asia.

Florence pointed out again that the British Council could direct arts practitioners to the relevant agencies and organisations that could support their work. For example, in Malaysia, creative industries are parked under the [Ministry of Communications and Multimedia](#), which drives the digital economy and also funds CENDANA and [Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation \(MDEC\)](#).

Sue Lyn circled back to Florence's comment about the low appreciation for the arts and spoke about the challenges she faces in her work. Art therapy is a new concept in Malaysia. It is not categorised under arts, nor does it come under the Ministry of Health's authority. Mental health is intangible, and the arts is seen as an 'artsy-fartsy' pursuit. It is difficult to sell art therapy as something that gives positive impact to the community without getting people to experience it for themselves.

Giulia mentioned that the British Council and UN agencies can play a part in influencing policies for the creative economy. They have statistical evidence that shows the impact of creative industries and informal workers on the economy. Besides monetary impact, arts have a positive

impact on people's well-being and mental health. In fact, the UN declared 2021 as the [International Year of Creative Economy for Sustainable Development](#).

Watch this session's recording [here](#).

Looking for insights and knowledge

This room was for people who wanted to gain insights and increase their knowledge of arts and culture in the UK. It was moderated by **Dominic Hastings**, Arts Manager Scotland and **Nguyễn Phương Thảo**, Head of Arts Việt Nam.

The six participants in the room were:

- **Pema**, originally from Western Australia but now working with a small press publisher in London.
- **Randy** from Marinduque island in the Philippines.
- **San Oo**, a doctor in Myanmar who uses arts as an intervention at a mental health space.
- **Joanne**, a UNESCO facilitator based in Scotland.
- **Corales**, a first-year student from the University of the Philippines.
- **Nga** from the British Council Viet Nam art team.

The participants and facilitators each shared insights into their work as well as the arts and culture scene in their countries and localities. The following are a few highlights.

Dominic spoke about the [Edinburgh Festival](#) that takes over Scotland's capital city every August. It features performances and exhibitions held in venues such as galleries, theatres, public spaces, pubs, bars, restaurants and even the streets. Another Scottish festival is [Celtic Connections](#), which celebrates traditional and folk cultures, as well as their contemporary interpretations. It is held in Glasgow in February.

Thảo's highlight for Việt Nam is Hà Nội's [Monsoon Music Festival](#). It's a magical experience as the event is held in the imperial citadel. The festival features up-and-coming and indie bands. A favourite place of hers is the [Factory Arts Centre](#) in Hồ Chí Minh City, which showcases the works of young emerging artists.

Pema shared her excitement about London's zine¹ scene as a casual way of passing information. Dominic then introduced her to the [Glasgow Zine Library](#), a self-publishing library, archive and community space.

Randy spoke about the launch of 52 [Book Nook](#) reading spaces across the Philippines by the National Book Development Board. He also shared about *putong*, a unique ritual of Marinduque where guests are welcomed with a celebration and crowns placed on their heads.

San Oo revealed the challenges of creative freedom in Myanmar. She also shared about her interest in arthouse films, particularly the Vietnamese film [Cyclo](#) that introduced her to the genre. She highlighted two Myanmar arthouse films, *The Man With Beard* and [The Monk](#).

Joanne spoke about writing a book on practitioner perspectives on intangible cultural heritage. Commissioned by Routledge, the book will be out in 2023.

Corales shared about the Singkaban festival in Bulacan. '*Singkaban*' means 'decorative bamboo arch', which is used as a welcome signage of a town or city.

Nga talked about her British Council work on developing a heritage storytelling toolkit for five local communities to encourage them to retell stories about their cultural heritage. The communities are also trained in photography and videomaking skills to support their storytelling. Nga is also working on a website to collect heritage stories.

Watch this session's recording [here](#).

¹ A zine is a self-published, DIY magazine produced in small numbers for limited circulation.