

Transcript

00:00:10 Carla Castle

Hi everyone. This is Carla and Esther. Participants of this year's (2023) [Arts Journalism Matters Fellowship](#) with the Asia-Europe Foundation or ASEF in short. For context, throughout September 2023, we were mentored by Singapore based cultural policy expert and educator Audrey Wong, who is also coincidentally our lecturer at LASALLE College of the Arts. And as part of this residency, we covered the inaugural [ASEF LinkUp | Asia-Europe Cultural Diplomacy Lab](#), which happened right here in Singapore. So, this podcast is one of three total outputs we've created because of this residency, and I'll let Esther introduce herself.

00:00:48 Esther Yeon

Hi everyone. I'm Esther and I'm currently a final year student in LASALLE majoring in Arts Management. Also, one participant of the *Arts Journalism Matters Fellowship* by Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) and the [European Network on Culture Management and Policy \(ENCATC\)](#). So, I joined this residency in hopes of learning more about arts and culture from a diplomatic point of view. What about you Carla?

00:01:13 Carla Castle

So as Esther's classmate, I'm also a student of the Arts Management degree and I like to consider myself an emerging arts manager and writer. So, I joined this residency because I thought, it would be a great opportunity to have a more nuanced learning of cross-cultural interactions beyond the classroom.

00:01:33 Esther Yeon

And yes, so this is one of the three outputs. The other two outputs are our individual articles that will be published on the [Culture 360 website](#) and hopefully in the ENCATC magazine as well.

00:01:47 Carla Castle

So today, we're going to be talking about the cultural diplomacy lab that took place from 24th to 27th October 2023, which happened in Singapore. It was part of the Asia-Europe Cultural Festival as well. And as its inaugural edition, I think it kept true to the word lab. So rather than being straightforward, I thought it was experimental. We saw 24 artists, diplomats and cultural attachés over the four days of the lab.

00:02:18 Esther Yeon

And the best way to describe this podcast is a mix of a recap and personal reflections from us about the lab. For this lab, we had arts professionals that joined us from all over the world. And there were five* themes that the participants tackled in their own groups during the lab. Some of them were ***The Balancing Act***, ***The Collective Mindset***, ***Finding Beauty in Difference*** and ***The Great Divide (and At the Risk of...)***.

00:02:53 Carla Castle

I thought that was interesting that throughout the lab, they talked about these topics. And, you know, just really discussed and responded to it, there were no real set objectives.

00:03:05 Esther Yeon

And these are quite big topics to tackle, and I think everybody tried their best and they also tried to find out different perspectives from the members in their groups of how they viewed these topics and what can you bring to the table for all of this?

00:03:26 Carla Castle

Yeah. I guess maybe it's a good time to segway into the two main talking points of this podcast. First would be *what cultural diplomacy is to us and what's in it for the artists*. And afterwards, we're going to discuss the *main takeaways we had from this lab*.

So I guess on to our first point, talking about what cultural diplomacy is to us and what's in it for the artist. To me, to be frank, I didn't really know how to define it. It was just another form of diplomacy – a way for nations to form relations in a more relatable way, and that helped inform and inspire my article, which was just me being really curious about how other people saw it, specifically artists. So I was always just wondering during the whole lab, as someone who's still navigating their career and being told to reflect on cultural diplomacy. It can appear a little bit grand, right? So, it naturally would make someone ask, like, what's in it? What's in it for me in regards to cultural diplomacy? I don't really have an answer myself about what cultural diplomacy is. I do explore that in my article and I tried to get artists and creatives to really respond to that, just so that I could give a more rounded view of what it could mean to many different people.

00:04:50 Esther Yeon

Same thoughts about like you know, cultural diplomacy being a big term that we have to tackle, and I think I didn't really give much thought about what culture diplomacy is, or what it really meant before joining this residency. And I guess from the lab, what I keep seeing come up is the (element of) cross cultural exchange on a very formal level, and it almost always involves in a political advancement between two countries or more.

And my impression of it is often only reserved for the VVIPs of the nation. You know, like the ambassadors or whoever is being sent as a cultural attaché. And people have very little say. I mean, the people of the country have very little say in what is involved in the national narrative of what is said to be a nation's culture.

So, I mean, these are just some thoughts that I had about cultural diplomacy, and I think putting the political side of things away, it is something that I feel, it **plays out in the everyday community**, that maybe might not be very formal environment where people give exchanges of how their culture, maybe it could just be a way of eating food and stuff like that. But I do see it as a very organic way of cultural exchange and maybe even culture diplomacy on a very layman term.

00:06:39 Carla Castle

Yeah, on the ground. I do like that you said that because I would say that's actually one of the main takeaways for me. Because I was really expecting something to see or learn something that was so complicated that I wouldn't understand it, but. At the end of the day, it really was just about having this human-to-human connection. It was something that wasn't even about being professional to one another. It's just about being a decent human being.

So, it was interesting because that meant that no one in the lab was really focused on whose label is what, professionally and, it really was just a great reminder that at the end of the day, **diplomacy and cultural diplomacy is just a series of many, many entangled relationships, albeit on a much larger scale**. So, you know, if you know how relationships work between your friends and family, it all features the same things. **Compromise, active communication, listening and a healthy amount of empathy for each other's circumstances**.

00:07:41 Esther Yeon

And I think, what's great about this is lab is that we actually see the artists and the diplomatic sector coming together to work on something that is relevant for all fields and all sectors in ways that maybe we have not explored much before, you know?

00:08:03 Carla Castle

Yeah, it really did give us a different perspective of how things work rather than how we're always assuming or speculating happens behind the scenes.

00:08:12 Esther Yeon

Yeah, and I thought that our participants from the diplomatic sector also had quite a refreshing session throughout the few days. And I think one thing that I was really impacted by, was Anna's response to how she sees cultural diplomacy after this lab. Here's what she said.

00:08:59 Anna Szumanska-Teodorczyk (Poland Public Diplomacy Officer)

Yes, I mean for us as a public diplomacy officer, we are supposed we are supposed to promote our country here and it's quite difficult because we do not have too much ties with Singapore, looking back at our history. So these workshops (during the lab) helped me to realise that we do not need to look back at history. **The important thing is just to identify the things that are important for us now, at this moment.** These can be the things that we can work on together. Like the problems that both Singapore and Poland struggle with and try to find the common platform to work together on this, within different teams or just to work together or whatever.

But there is a starting point and it's up to us – how big, how much you want to develop it and how many resources we need to put in it. But I think it's important just to try. Not to only to come here and say, OK, I want to show you this Polish thing, or this Polish and this Polish because it's hard, yes? **You need to have something that resonates with the other party.** So, I think that this is the factor that you can find some common platform or common topics. It is very important.

00:10:09 Esther Yeon

And (after) hearing from Anna about how she had a paradigm shift of thoughts after attending this lab, it also reminded me of Hasnan, who shared a little bit about his line of work coming from an arts background before entering the UNESCO office in Indonesia and sharing his take on what a cultural diplomat could be.

00:10:35 Muhammad Hasnan Habib (UNESCO Jakarta Multisectoral Regional Office)

Coming from an arts background, I held the belief that cultural diplomats should not just be like this, very rigid and tight public officers, right? So, I strive (for) myself to, **put on this image of more community, street smart type of relaxed and flexible type of working person and it's very refreshing being here.** I'm also meeting with similar minded cultural workers, cultural officers or diplomats, which is good; because you know the public sector is filled with so much rigidity and this kind of professionalism that doesn't allow for good communication with sectors like the arts. So, it's good that I'm seeing like-minded people here. And my view of a cultural diplomat has not changed, but **it has been reinforced that this is like the good way to go.**

00:11:44 Carla Castle

I'm not sure if you felt this before the lab as well, but I felt a little bit intimidated before it started and afterwards, I felt a lot less intimidated when I think about, us or everyone in relation to cultural diplomacy. Because as we've mentioned already, we were just kind of reminded during the whole lab that behind such a grand sounding concept was just people at the end of the day, and we should just

treat it and treat people working within that field, like how we would approach any normal working relation.

00:12:22 Esther Yeon

Yeah, actually it did feel a bit intimidated, especially when I feel like I didn't know much you know about it. It was also just nice that in this semester that we also talked a lot about arts policy and there was something that I've always thought, from my frame of mind, it's always been a very academic thing. And you know, it's something that we must read up a lot more about because there's so much we don't know.

I think coming to this lab when everything is not very academic and I was just having that conversation with Alexander, one of the facilitators for the lab. And I asked him, so why is it not academic at all? And he said that, you know, this is precisely what the lab is for. You know, it's not for us to consider theories and stuff, but it's really for us to explore on a very human basis and really have that network across sectors to see how cultural diplomacy can evolve.

00:13:26 Carla Castle

I think the best example of that is the Experiential Theatre workshop that we observed. And to give a brief explanation of what it is – each person actively participating in it was given a specific role. For example, the European Union (EU) or local governments, heritage and youth. So, within that space, everyone was just invited to move within a set time, thinking as if they were like the embodiment of these specific roles. And in real time, everyone was figuring out and navigating, how would their embodied role move?

And it was very interesting because it started playing out like how we would expect in real life. But how everyone acted was also based off their own personal interpretations. I think that made a very deep learning point for us that really can't just be explain with just theory, where it really just illustrated how complicated cultural diplomacy can be, because of how many moving actors and parts are happening at the same time, how each person is motivated can deeply affect other people trying to work with them as well.

00:14:51 Esther Yeon

Yeah, and I really enjoyed the Experiential Theatre workshop as well. Even though we were not active participants. But we saw how the participants really took on the roles, actually the roles that they chose for the lanyards, and that they wore, which were not related to their field or expertise at all, so it was interesting to see how they responded. Also, one thing during the wrap up of this Experiential Theatre workshop that was conducted by [Heng Leun](#) from [Drama Box in Singapore](#). He said that **“Workshops are romantic.”**

And I thought that there was a really nice way of putting things into perspective because even though, they can respond or they can move in a way that is very similar to what we see in real life, but whatever they showed was just within the context of the workshop. It has no actual real impact. These are ideals that we hope to see in real life. **But the real work starts after the workshop.**

00:16:15 Carla Castle

It was a very quick or relatively quick, digestible simulation of real life, but I think it had a great impact on the participants, right? I think you had some sound bites.

00:16:30 Esther Yeon

Yes, Soe Yu, who is one of our artists participants also shared, what she took away from the lab.

00:16:37 Soe Yu Nwe (Myanmar Artist)

So, I think cultural diplomacy, I guess, like I understand it more now, as being more than just about international relationships. During the whole presentation, event and programme building, a lot of the concerns and emphasis that people put on is the **interpersonal relationship, human to human contact**. So, I think **what will make cultural diplomacy effective is this human touch. Being personal in the community building or outreach.**

So yes, that's my take on it. And the artist's role in it could be designing and organising events. That would encourage these encounters and behaviours. **For example, socially engaged art – where the art itself is not an object, but rather it's the engagement. And the meeting with people, the confluence of different identities, meeting points in this little gathering, that art is just a process, a tool or the invitation to gather in one place.**

00:17:58 Esther Yeon

On the last day of the lab on 27 October, we were all gathered at the Asian Civilization Museum to see how each group who were exploring the themes for the past few days, responded to them. Whether it is in a performance or in a presentation method, that was up to them.

I think 1 presentation or performance that I felt was very impactful was by **The Collective Mindset** team that consists of Luvenia, Anna, Kamilah and Micah. This was especially memorable because they had this visual of pouring into the jug with whatever that was in their cup. And each time they poured, it was not a very heavy pour, but just a sip of water into the jug, but it still adds to the jug. And it really translates to, no matter how small you think your part might be in adding to the conversation of cultural exchange or cultural diplomacy, it still makes a difference, and it is still important.

00:19:15 Carla Castle

I did really love the performance from *The Collective Mindset*. What stuck out to me and has lasted longer, was the presentation by the team who did **Finding Beauty in Difference**, just because the video they made was so absurdly funny. The whole premise was using fortune telling, and each member of the team would approach Antonin, the fortune teller in the video, to ask for solutions for complicated problems and there would be a response using that fortune telling method. To me, that video was telling us that, you know, things can't be solved as easily. But at the same time, sometimes the solution does seem weirdly simple when you spell it out.

I like that the video just reminded all of us and ended off the whole programme by, telling us that **laughter is a really good solution at times. Because sometimes problems are very complicated to solve and maybe taking a laugh, taking a break to just humorously joke with each other helps a little bit in these tense situations.**

00:20:31 Esther Yeon

And I think that is something we can all embrace more in real life.

00:20:43 Carla Castle

Esther and I would love to go on and share a lot more candidly about what we've learned. This is where I'm just going to do a little call to action to invite everyone to have a look at our articles because we worked really hard on them. And I think it will give a much better view of what we experienced. And I wanted to say thank you to everyone for listening to this short podcast. I hope you enjoyed it and found something to take away from what we learned in the ASEF LinkUp event.

Just to summarise, while we've talked a bit about cultural diplomacy, I hope everyone goes someone takes away that, **It's not just about cultural diplomacy, but about human relations and people to people relationships that we have with each other.**

00:21:35 Esther Yeon

And I think that is also a very meaningful time where you can come together and really get to know people, whether is it in the diplomatic sector or in the arts sector. And even though you might be in the diplomatic sector, but you may not have cross paths with certain individuals because...of life (*laughs* that just don't pan out that way).

00:22:01 Carla Castle

We wouldn't always get the chance to (meet people) from different backgrounds.

00:22:07 Carla Castle and Esther Yeon

So, again, thank you to ASEF and ENCATC for this great opportunity. Thank you to Audrey Wong. We love you. Thank you so much and see you guys at our articles. Bye!

About Organisations Mentioned

[Asia-Europe Foundation \(ASEF\)](#)

ASEF is an intergovernmental not-for-profit organisation which brings together the peoples of Asia and Europe to address common global challenges by:

- advancing mutual understanding and collaboration between the people of Asia and Europe through opportunities that enable an exchange of ideas;
- acting as the civil society outreach of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), and works as a platform for Asia-Europe dialogue to stimulate permanent networks that reinforce Asia-Europe bi-regional relations;
- acting as an interface between civil society and ASEM governments and consequently, contributes to the ASEM process by generating unique recommendations for officials' consideration
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[European Network on Culture Management and Policy \(ENCATC\)](#)

ENCATC represents, advocates, and promotes cultural management and cultural policy education, professionalizes the cultural sector to make it sustainable, and creates a platform for discussion and exchange at European and international level.

[Drama Box \(Singapore\)](#)

Founded in 1990, Drama Box is a socially-engaged theatre company known for creating works that inspire dialogue, reflection and change. By shining a spotlight on marginalised narratives and making space for the communal contemplation of complex issues, it seeks to tell stories that provoke a deeper understanding of Singapore's culture, history and identity.

Drama Box is a charity and Institution of Public Character (IPC) registered in Singapore, supported by the National Arts Council under the Major Company Scheme for the period of April 2023 and March 2026.

Participant Bios

DIPLOMATIC SECTOR

ANNA SZUMANSKA-TEODORCZYK

Anna has been Public Diplomacy Officer at the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Singapore. She looks after bilateral relations and Polish interests, promoting Poland's rich cultural heritage. She has organized the last three editions of Poland SHIOK festival, among other notable cultural events.

MUHAMMAD HASNAN HABIB

Muhammad Hasnan Habib is the Project Assistant of Culture Unit at the UNESCO Jakarta Multisectoral Regional Office for Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Timor-Leste. He is engaged in projects involving capacity-building for youth entrepreneurs, amongst others.

ARTS PROFESSIONALS**SOE YU NWE**

Soe Yu is teaching at Studio Nwe, the first teaching space in Myanmar solely dedicated to clay art which she has founded to share the joy and knowledge of clay to Myanmar community.

Facilitator Bios**DR ALEKSANDAR BRKIĆ**

Aleksandar is a scholar in the field of cultural/arts management, creative entrepreneurship and cultural policy, with significant experience as a creative producer and arts manager, working in the intersections of performing arts, visual arts, and design.

KOK HENG LEUN (DRAMA BOX)

Kok Heng Leun is a prominent figure in the Singapore arts scene, having built his artistic career as a theatre director, playwright, dramaturg and educator. He is known for engaging the community on various issues through the arts, championing civic discourse across different segments of society.

Heng Leun's contributions to the arts have landed him awards from the National Arts Council, Singapore – the Young Artist Award (2000), Cultural Fellowship (2014), and the highest artistic accolade, the Cultural Medallion (2022). He also served as a Nominated Member of Parliament from 2016 to 2018, representing the arts sector.