

COSTS RECOVERY IN THE SICC: A DIFFERENT REGIME

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The recovery of legal costs and disbursements (“costs”) by one party against another, after the substantive merits of a case is determined by the court, is a common feature of common law systems². Historically, common law courts had no inherent jurisdiction to award costs and the right to seek recovery of costs was a statutory remedy first introduced in England in the 13th century³. Statutes on costs gradually evolved over time⁴ to become the costs regime that is known today.

Two of the most important principles in the recovery of costs are that (i) as a general rule “costs follow the event”⁵, that is to say, that the costs of legal proceedings are usually awarded to the successful litigant; and (ii) costs are in the discretion of the court⁶. The question of recovery of costs in legal proceedings in the Singapore International Commercial Court came into sharp focus in the recent decision of *CPIT Investments Limited v. Qilin World Capital Limited and another* [2018] SGHC (I) 02 in which Ramsey J had to consider whether recovery of costs in legal proceedings in the general High Court and recovery of costs in the SICC proceeded on different principles. Ramsey J’s answer was in the affirmative and, in doing so, he set out useful principles and guidance for future use by litigants in the SICC.

In the *CPIT Investments* case, the plaintiff sued two defendants in legal proceedings commenced in the general High Court, which were then transferred to the SICC. The result of the litigation was not a success for the plaintiff on all fronts⁷. The plaintiff failed to establish liability on the part of the first defendant. The plaintiff succeeded on one of its causes of action against the second defendant but failed to succeed in its second and third causes of action. The plaintiff sought recovery on the basis that it was, on the whole, successful in the litigation and if any discount was to be made for the failure in some of its causes of action, then such discount ought to be no more than 15%. The plaintiff also asked for costs on an “indemnity basis”

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² Except for litigation in the United States of America

³ Jonathan de Vries, *The Law of Costs – A Brief Overview*, 2009; Mark Orkin, *The Law of Costs*, 2nd ed. looseleaf (Aurora: Canada Law Book, 1987) at 1-1; John Baker, *The Oxford History of the Laws of England*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) vol. 7 at 376. But see Pollock & Maitland, *supra* note 2 at 597; William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1765) vol. 3 at 399. Prior to statutory enactment, plaintiffs might have been recovering costs on a regular basis by simply subsuming them under relief in the form of damages. The relevance today of such a mode of recovering costs is the subject for another article.

⁴ And by transmission of English law to Singapore via the Second Charter of Justice and subsequent Singapore legislation culminating with Section 18 and First Schedule, paragraph 13 of the Supreme Court of Judicature Act (Cap.322), and the Rules of Court

⁵ Rules of Court, Order 59, r.3(2); Order 110, rule 46(1),(2)

⁶ Rules of Court, Order 59, r.3(2); SICC Practice Directions, paragraph 152(1). Strictly speaking, the wording in Order 59, r.3(2) refers to discretion in terms of the court exercising its discretion on whether or not to order costs to be paid. However, by case precedent, it is generally accepted that courts also have a discretion in relation to what costs to order: *Soon Peng Yam & Chan Ah Kow v Maimon bte Ahmad* [1995] 1 SLR(R) 279 at [31]). Also see *Lipkin Gorman v Karpnale* [1989] 1 WLR 1340, 1389-1390

⁷ *CPIT Investments Limited v. Qilin World Capital Limited and another* [2017] 5 SLR 1; *CPIT Investments Limited v. Qilin World Capital Limited and another* [2018] SGHC (I) 02 at [2]-[4]

because it had served an offer to settle on the defendants and had obtained a substantially better result from the court's judgment⁸. The defendants accepted that the plaintiff was the successful party but argued that it should not be entitled to recover the whole of the costs because it failed on some of its causes of action. The defendants submitted that an issue-based approach should be adopted and argued that the plaintiff should only recover 40% of its costs⁹. Ramsey J considered the specific and detailed arguments of the parties. His decision, rearranged here in litigation sequence to aid understanding, contained the following principles or guidelines:

- (1) If proceedings are commenced in the general High Court the costs rules relating to litigation in the general High Court¹⁰ and the costs guidelines in the Supreme Court Practice Directions¹¹ apply until such time when the case is transferred to the SICC¹².
- (2) When a case is transferred from the general High Court to the SICC, the general High Court or the SICC may direct that the costs guidelines in the Supreme Court Practice Directions apply or the parties may agree that the costs guidelines apply¹³. The costs guidelines in the Supreme Court Practice Directions do not apply automatically to SICC proceedings¹⁴.
- (3) Absent any direction from the general High Court or the SICC that the costs guidelines in the Supreme Court Practice Directions apply, the SICC can (but is not obliged to) take the costs guidelines into account¹⁵.
- (4) In relation to legal proceedings in the SICC (and subject to the foregoing), the basis for costs orders in the SICC was the costs rules relating to proceedings in the SICC¹⁶ and not the costs rules¹⁷ relating to proceedings in the general High Court¹⁸.
- (5) This was because the costs rules for the general High Court contained a separate regime for costs in the general High Court, including the definition of "standard" and "indemnity" costs and also the manner in which costs might be ordered, which differed from the costs rules of the SICC¹⁹.
- (6) The costs rules for the SICC were supplemented by the SICC Practice Directions²⁰.
- (7) The rules on costs in relation to offers to settle were intended to operate in the context of the costs rules for the general High Court and do not apply to SICC proceedings. However, the SICC can take the fact of an unbeaten offer to settle into account in determining costs recovery²¹.
- (8) In all litigation, it is not unusual for there to be an element where the successful party has been unsuccessful²²; but it is only matters that the SICC court determines has

⁸ *CPIT Investments Limited v. Qilin World Capital Limited and another* [2018] SGHC (I) 02 at [5], [9]

⁹ *CPIT Investments Limited v. Qilin World Capital Limited and another* [2018] SGHC (I) 02 at [6]

¹⁰ Order 59

¹¹ Paragraph 152

¹² *CPIT Investments Limited v. Qilin World Capital Limited and another* [2018] SGHC (I) 02 at [23]

¹³ *CPIT Investments Limited v. Qilin World Capital Limited and another* [2018] SGHC (I) 02 at [24]

¹⁴ *CPIT Investments Limited v. Qilin World Capital Limited and another* [2018] SGHC (I) 02 at [21]

¹⁵ *CPIT Investments Limited v. Qilin World Capital Limited and another* [2018] SGHC (I) 02 at [25]

¹⁶ Order 110, rule 46

¹⁷ Order 59

¹⁸ *CPIT Investments Limited v. Qilin World Capital Limited and another* [2018] SGHC (I) 02 at [12]

¹⁹ *CPIT Investments Limited v. Qilin World Capital Limited and another* [2018] SGHC (I) 02 at [15]

²⁰ *CPIT Investments Limited v. Qilin World Capital Limited and another* [2018] SGHC (I) 02 at [16]

²¹ *CPIT Investments Limited v. Qilin World Capital Limited and another* [2018] SGHC (I) 02 at [30]-[31]

²² Hence the general philosophy in costs recovery that an issue-based approach should not be adopted unless the case is unusual or if a particular issue has unnecessarily or unreasonably protracted or added to the costs or complexity of the proceedings: *CPIT Investments Limited v. Qilin World Capital Limited and another* [2018] SGHC (I) 02 at [9],

- materially affected time and legal expenditure in litigation that should move the SICC court to make a provision or discount of the recoverable costs²³.
- (9) An SICC Court can take an unbeaten offer to settle into account and, for example, allow recovery of costs from the date of the unbeaten offer as if the successful party did not fail in any element of its case²⁴.
 - (10) It is essential that the SICC Court is provided with a sufficient breakdown of the costs so that the paying party can make appropriate comments on the reasonableness of the costs and understand the work carried out for those costs, better still if there was an identification of the work with costs broken down into hours spent at hourly rates²⁵.
 - (11) An SICC trial judge may himself or herself assess the quantum of costs and disbursements recovery for interlocutory proceedings for which no independent costs order was made as well as costs and disbursements recovery for all other parts of the proceeding.²⁶

Ramsey IJ's decision draws a clear distinction between costs recovery for general High Court cases and costs recovery in the SICC, emphasizing that practitioners should be alive to the fact that there is a different costs regime in the SICC. This is evident from his pointing to the absence of the "standard" and "indemnity" bases²⁷ for awarding costs in the SICC costs regime and the presence of the rule that the unsuccessful party must pay the "reasonable costs" of the proceedings²⁸. In order to appreciate the full importance of what Ramsey IJ has said it is necessary to understand it in context. The SICC was created to enhance Singapore's status as a leading forum for legal services and commercial dispute resolution by creating a platform to catalyze the further growth of the legal services sector and the internationalization of Singapore law²⁹. The object was and is to draw upon the attributes, which have enabled Singapore to become a leading Asian seat for international arbitration, to establish new dispute resolution offerings for international commercial disputes within a court setting³⁰. The term "reasonable costs" should be understood in an international context rather than a purely domestic context where there might be social policy concerns of lack of access to justice³¹.

Order 110, rule 46(1) provides that "[t]he unsuccessful party in any application or proceedings in the Court must pay the reasonable costs of the application or proceedings to the successful party, unless the Court orders otherwise". Costs recovery expressed in terms of an "unsuccessful party" having to bear the "reasonable costs" of the "successful party" unless the

²³ *CPIT Investments Limited v. Qilin World Capital Limited and another* [2018] SGHC (I) 02 at [33]-[36]

²⁴ *CPIT Investments Limited v. Qilin World Capital Limited and another* [2018] SGHC (I) 02 at [37].

Note that it is not so much a principle as an expression of what could happen in the exercise of the SICC court's discretion

²⁵ *CPIT Investments Limited v. Qilin World Capital Limited and another* [2018] SGHC (I) 02 at [41]

²⁶ *CPIT Investments Limited v. Qilin World Capital Limited and another* [2018] SGHC (I) 02 at [42]-[53]

²⁷ Order 59 rule 27

²⁸ Order 110 rule 46(1)-(2)

²⁹ Report of the Singapore International Commercial Court Committee dated 29th November 2013 at [4(a)], [55]

³⁰ Report of the Singapore International Commercial Court Committee dated 29th November 2013 at [10]

³¹ *Then Khek Koon and anor v. Arjun Permanand Samtani and anor* [2014] 1 SLR 245 at [151], [158], [166], [172], [174]; *Marayani Sadeli v. Arjun Permanand Samtani and anor* [2015] 1 SLR 496 at [34].

The social policy continues: see the work of the Civil Justice Review Committee, one of whose areas of review is "[e]nsuring that legal costs are not an impediment to access to justice, and that the cost of litigation is proportionate to the value of the claim": Ministry of Law press release 18 May 2016 <https://www.mlaw.gov.sg/content/minlaw/en/news/press-releases/committee-to-recommend-reforms-to-enhance-access-to-justice.html>

Court orders otherwise is far easier for those unaccustomed to common law litigation to understand than common law terminology such as “costs follow the event”, “costs in the cause”, “costs in the application” and costs on a “standard basis” and on an “indemnity basis”. It is also language that is familiar to those involved in international arbitration. Some civil law countries refer to the costs of arbitration being “borne by the unsuccessful party”, the allocation of costs by taking into account the “outcome of the proceedings”, an order that one party “compensates” the other party. Procedural rules in arbitration may also refer to the costs of arbitration being borne “by the unsuccessful party”, to costs awards reflecting “the parties’ relative success and failure in the award or arbitration” or having regard to “the outcome of the case”³².

The full importance of Ramsey IJ’s distinction that there is a different costs recovery regime comes to light when one considers that just as litigation in the SICC can be conducted by Singapore-qualified lawyers on both sides, it can also be conducted by Singapore-qualified lawyers instructed by international law firms on one or both sides. It can also be conducted by foreign lawyers who have registered with the SICC, including barristers and Queen’s Counsel on one or both sides, or with registered foreign lawyers and Singapore-qualified lawyers as co-counsel. This may be demonstrated by comparing the characteristics of the *CPIT Investments* case itself with a hypothetical case involving other characteristics. In the *CPIT Investments* case, the parties were both represented by Singapore law firms³³. It followed from this that Ramsey IJ thought fit to refer to the various ways in which the costs guidelines for general High Court litigation could apply or be taken into account in SICC litigation. Indeed, Ramsey IJ took the costs guidelines into account in the *CPIT Investments* case when he assessed some aspects of the quantum of costs³⁴. However, the costs guidelines for general High Court litigation may not always be as relevant as it was in the *CPIT Investments* case. It may be seen from the other ways in which SICC litigation may be conducted that the costs guidelines for general High Court litigation, which are designed with litigation conducted by Singapore-qualified lawyers only in mind, may not be as relevant or may be completely irrelevant in other cases. In such instances, it may be relevant to refer to other sources of costs recovery, such as the recovery of costs in international arbitration or the recovery of costs in other international commercial courts in persuading an SICC judge what costs to order.

It is a principle in international arbitration that costs are recovered through the concept of reasonableness and proportionality. The UNCITRAL Arbitration Rules, for example, provides for costs recovery “to the extent that the arbitral tribunal determines that the amount of such costs is reasonable”. Other arbitration rules provide that in making an award, the tribunal may order a party to pay “the whole or part of reasonable expenses incurred by the other party in presenting its case”³⁵. Arbitral tribunals also employ the concept of proportionality and keep in mind that costs incurred should not be disproportionate with the value of the claim. This is an acknowledged concept in costs recovery in general High Court litigation and is linked with

³² For a useful survey of such legislation and procedural rules, see Ong & O’Reilly, *Costs in International Arbitration*, 2013, p.70-73

³³ Although both law firms have associations with international law firms, it does not appear from the judgment that the litigation was conducted in a way that was unusual to the way Singapore law firms would conduct litigation in the general High Court

³⁴ *CPIT Investments Limited v. Qilin World Capital Limited and another* [2018] SGHC (I) 02 at [45]

³⁵ It has been said that even where the concept of “reasonable” costs are not mentioned expressly in a set of procedural rules in arbitration, tribunals would read such a principle into the rules and that the legal fees, fee rates, number of lawyers and hours/days spent should be reasonable in all the circumstances (but not judged in hindsight). In the case of witnesses, experts and other costs heads, equivalent considerations apply: see Ong & O’Reilly, *Costs in International Arbitration*, 2013, p.101

the concept of reasonableness of costs³⁶. It would not be surprising, therefore, that the concept of proportionality features in costs recovery in SICC litigation.

Future cases on costs recovery in SICC litigation are likely to develop and refine the texture of the traditional indemnity philosophy in costs recovery that “[c]osts as between party and party are given by the law as an indemnity to the person entitled to them”³⁷. Cost recovery scenarios yet to be explored and determined include (i) whether the costs of instructing solicitors to Singapore counsel are recoverable in SICC litigation, particularly if the instructing solicitors are not a Singapore firm and need to work with a Singapore firm to file papers in the SICC, and (ii) the extent to which the costs of counsel and co-counsel or between a solicitor and the costs of an external counsel might be regarded to be overlapping. For now, litigants are well advised to pay close attention to the guidance given by Ramsey JJ.

³⁶ *Lin Jian Wei and anor v. Lim Eng Hock Peter* [2011] 3 SLR 1052 at [56]

³⁷ *Harold v. Smith* (1860) 5 H&N 381 at 385. For a full discourse on the indemnity principle see *Then Khek Koon and anor v. Arjun Permanand Samtani and anor* [2014] 1 SLR 245 at [153]-[161].