

KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY DR WONG TIEN HUA
AT 2020 ARTS & CULTURE RESEARCH SYMPOSIUM
ON 21st JULY 2020, 3.00PM
ZOOM VIDEOCONFERENCING

1. Pleasant afternoon ladies and gentlemen, and warm welcome to our Arts and Culture Research Symposium organised by NAC. I'm indeed very happy and honoured to be able to speak to you this afternoon and I'd like to thank NAC for the kind invitation, especially to Sharon Chang and Geneve Yeo for organising the seminar. This year it is timely indeed that our theme is on arts and health.

2. An article appeared in the Sunday Time, on June 14 that reported the results of a survey commissioned. Entitled "Essential or not", the Sunday Times asked some 1,000 respondents which are the jobs that are most crucial in keeping Singapore going, and also how much more they will pay for essential services so that workers in the sectors will get a wage increase.

3. The survey of 1,000 people was conducted by consumer research firm Milieu Insight. You can see that one of the things that was outstanding wasn't the fact that doctors and nurses like myself topped the 5 most essential jobs, but of the top 5 non-essential jobs the artists ranked highest. The survey revealed that 71% of the respondents thought that artists were one of the most non-essential occupations, followed by telemarketers, social media managers and PR specialists.

4. You can see that the response from the arts practitioners on the same day, on Sunday, was swift and robust, taking a form of creative defeatism. You can see 4 examples here. The one posted by Mr YEOLO on social media showed that his thoughts went out to the poor artist who had designed the ST infographic.

5. Since it's a research symposium, I looked at the Milieu webpage where they posted an immediate response the next day on June 15 to clarify what they have studied in the Sunday Times poll.

6. Let's go through the methodology. It was an online panel, sample size was 1,000 with adult population, and the work dates was from 12 June to 15 June. They asked 19 questions which took approximately 5 minutes. First, responders were presented with the following definition at the beginning of the survey: in this survey, we are going to be asking your opinion about essential workers in Singapore, and by "essential workers" we mean someone who is engaged in work deemed necessary to meet basic needs of human survival and well-being such as food, health, safety and cleaning. After that the respondents were shown two questions. The first one was, please select the jobs that you think are most essential from the list below. They provided a list of 20 pre-scoped occupations. This is my own table, so it is easier for you to see, but there are 20 of them there and it was shown to the respondents in random order. It is no surprise that most respondents selected options that fit the definition that was given. The second question was, now select which of the remaining jobs you think are absolutely not essential. Based on what has already been pre-selected, there were 15 Choices left and of course you know, artists, business consultants, human resource managers and PR specialists got the brunt of what was deemed non-essential. So how do we analyse this simple survey?

7. The first is that there was some context in the poll. The poll was done in a circuit breaker lockdown environment. Secondly, there was a response bias. A specific definition of essential was already given: someone who is engaged in work deemed necessary for human survival. Also, some exclusion bias. Respondents were not shown an exhaustive list, nor were they allowed to key in an open-ended response. They were only shown 20 jobs. Finally, I think what is important is how do you define what is essential versus what is of value. I think most of us would agree that in terms of essential, certain occupations are indeed essential. But does it mean that we value artists any lesser? I think there's a big difference in terminology here.

8. I will let Professor Tommy Koh, who was our founding NAC Chairman, to have the last words in his opinion article in the Straits Times a few days later. He said that during this circuit breaker period, many Singaporeans kept themselves sane by reading books, listening to music and watching film, television shows and concerts online. It's not right to regard our art workers as not essential. Without them, Singapore would be a cultural desert.

9. What is the role of research in the arts, especially in terms of healthcare? It is revealing that this survey has reinforced certain negative stereotypes of the low status of artists, indeed these perceptions are universally resented by all artists. If you want to hurt them, you can just tell them that they are non-essential. It hurts to the bone. We therefore have a problem of perception, what is the role of arts in society? How do we value artist? In terms of education, how do we educate the public about the critical role the arts play in society and in health? Research provides us with the information and the knowledge to help us and the public increase our understanding of the arts, and to change perceptions.

10. Cultural context is especially important for local research because of the highly contextual nature of culture and the arts. We need to understand the needs of the community.

11. In the area of health, what is the status of Singapore? The most important trend is that we are facing an aging population; a silver tsunami. People are surviving chronic diseases and cancers, and we are going to have more seniors with mental health issues in future.

12. Health in Singapore. Our life expectancy at birth has risen, from 83.2 years in 2010 to 84.8 years in 2017. It is one of the highest in the world, we are neck and neck with Hong Kong and Japan. However, the health adjusted life expectancy at birth is increased somewhat from 72.9 to 74.2 years. It means that we are living about 10 years of our life in ill health or poor health. For every 10 years we live, we actually spend more than 1 year in illness. The mortality rates due to cancer, stroke and heart disease, have reduced significantly from 16% from 2010 to 2017. However, as we

open doors to longest survival, we reach other obstacles that can challenge the elderly.

13. One of the main ones is dementia in Singapore. Dementia is an illness characterised by abnormal brain changes. These changes trigger a decline in thinking skills, such as cognitive ability, that impair daily life and independent function. They affect behaviour, feelings, and relationships. Alzheimer's disease, accounts for 60-80% of cases. Someone who has dementia can suffer from a variety of underlying illnesses of which Alzheimer's disease is the main cause, and there are other causes such as vascular dementia. Dementia comes with a lot of behavioural and psychological symptoms, what we call BPSD, including that of agitation, insomnia, breathlessness and hallucinations, anxiety, and depression.

14. The prevalence of dementia is actually rising in Singapore. In 2015, we had about 40,000 persons suffering from dementia. This year in 2020, we expect 53,000 and by 2050, 187,000. Therefore, I want to say that is indeed heartening to note there is a strong focus on dementia, Alzheimer's disease, and mental health in our research symposium today. A local study, the Wellbeing of the Singapore Elderly (WiSE) study conducted in 2013 found that the prevalence of dementia was 10% in those aged 60 years and above. Another local study conducted in 2017 found that the prevalence of symptoms of dementia (BPSD) was 67.9%, which is quite high.

15. What is the role of the arts in interventions for dementia? Well, the first thing to say is that we do not really have very effective pharmacological treatments. There is certainly a role for arts intervention. There is a variety of interventions for reducing symptoms, for increasing levels of well-being, providing pleasure and cognitive stimulation. For example, there are emotional oriented therapies such as reminiscence therapy that involves discussing past experiences, especially those that are positive and personally significant. Sensory stimulation therapies include music therapy for playing music, singing, moving, and dancing. Of course, a community arts-based intervention program also involves both patients and caregiver, has the potential for building social bonds and giving more meaning to the caregiver relationship.

16. Looking beyond dementia and mental health, there are also plenty of other areas of research. WHO published a scoping review in November 2019 and reviewed

over 900 publications that covered over 3000 studies on the evidence of role of arts in improving health and well-being.

17. Linking arts with health. Arts activities can improve health because they are interventions that involve aesthetic engagement, involvement of the imagination, sensory activation, evocation of emotion, cognitive stimulation, and social interaction. There are lots of roles that arts interventions can play, for example in prevention and promotion. Arts can affect the social determinants of health, child development, health-promotion and even caregiving support.

18. Finally, arts have a role in management and treatment. Findings show that the arts can help people with mental illness, help in acute conditions and neurodevelopmental and neurological disorders, and even end-of-life care support. We can see from here that there is indeed so many areas of research that is available for arts research in a local context.

19. But today we are going to start with dementia and mental health, and with that, I thank you for your participation.