

I'm no rabble-rouser

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Some people have criticised former Nominated MP for the arts Audrey Wong's quiet approach.

Depending on whom you ask, Audrey Wong was either a credible Nominated MP for the arts community or a timid one who failed to bring up important issues such as censorship.

The soft-spoken former artistic director of the Substation arts venue was the first Nominated Arts MP and had a tough job acting as the representative for a diverse group of artists in Singapore.

The 43-year-old, who has finished serving her 21-month term and is not seeking re-nomination, said that being a pioneer was a heavy responsibility.

'Among the most recent batch of NMPs, I'm the one who has been under the most public scrutiny.

'I think that's because of two reasons. One, the arts community 'voted' for me, so I have to be accountable to the community.

'Two, artists tend to be more articulate, politically aware and they critique things more than the average citizen.'

She said her greatest achievement is in changing the perception of artists as 'noise makers'.

She 'showed the policy-makers and the powers-that-be that we do have talent, intellect and people who care about Singapore in the arts community'.

This is helped by her peaceable approach.

'I showed that one can be critical and comment on policies without being anti-government,' she said. 'I tend to be constructive and look towards 'how do we solve an issue or problem?''

Ironically, it is her quiet approach that has attracted criticism from some members in the arts community. They thought that she had been too quiet and demure.

Notably, she was silent on what some in the community had flagged as a key concern: censorship.

They were disappointed that she did not bring up the issue of censorship in Parliament, especially when the Censorship Review Committee, convened by the Government once a decade, issued its report last year.

Wong was part of ArtsEngage, a group of artists, arts managers and observers who lobbied for an end to censorship and asked for regulation, which meant classifying content instead of editing or banning.

Yet she did not bring up the position of ArtsEngage in Parliament.

She had said in previous interviews that she did not bring it up because she did not want to be seen as too partisan - as she came from a background of English-speaking contemporary arts - and as too much of a personal activist.

Yet, as TheatreWorks general manager Tay Tong, 48, said: 'As an Arts MP lobbying for a certain interest group, you will always be seen as partisan anyway.'

Professor C.J. Wee Wan-ling, an arts observer and academic, said Wong has highlighted practical issues such as the working conditions of freelancers, but 'sensitive issues such as censorship could have been directly addressed in Parliament'.

On why she was silent on censorship, Wong said with almost a sigh: 'People were saying the same old things, 'we need to protect our children' and 'some people are not ready for such a liberal stance'. These were the same arguments we were going through at the last CRC. I'm more interested to know, 'How can we move on?''

Was it hard staying true to herself, given that so many people have different ideas about her role? She said: 'It's not that big a deal. At the Substation, I had a lot of people telling me what I should be doing. I'm used to it.'

In any case, she said being a confrontational, rabble-rouser sort 'is just not me'. She added: 'I tend to be more of a 'Let's construct something' person. I'm a negotiator. I won't be convincing taking up any extreme position.'

Accordingly, the issues she brought up in Parliament had a pragmatic stripe. For instance, she highlighted the poor working conditions of freelancers, who work in the Wild West of the freelance creative economy and are at the mercy of their employers, who may give late or no payment. Freelancers also enjoy few benefits and poor opportunities for skill upgrading.

She raised the issue of protection for freelancers, which number 29,000 in the creative industries, according to a 2007 survey by the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts.

She said the ministry has started looking into the issue. She herself is spearheading a report on the sector which will be ready by the end of the year.

Fashion show director and part-time actor Daniel Boey, 45, said her work in highlighting the issue of freelancer protection is an important first step.

He was among the cast and crew of *Victor/Victoria* left high and dry when the musical lost money in 2009 and the company directors quit.

Wong has been working with Six Degrees, a network of creative professionals, which is trying to organise the fragmented group of freelancers into one unit.

Besides speaking up for freelancers, she also acted as a bridge between the bureaucrats and artists.

For example, when the National Arts Council convened focus group discussions with artists to gather feedback on arts housing, it invited her to facilitate these meetings.

Although she will not be seeking re-nomination, she said she will still be feeding information from artists to policy-makers as she sits on the Arts and Culture Strategic Review Committee, which is tasked with shaping Singapore's cultural policy for the next 15 years.

The call for nominations for the new batch of Nominated MPs will probably come after Parliament's first sitting in the later part of the year.

A programme leader of arts and cultural management at Lasalle College of the Arts, Wong said that she wants a more balanced life and to spend more time with her parents, especially since her sister, a law professor, is in the United States.

Her father, director-playwright Leslie Wong, 71, and actress mother Joanna Wong, 72, are veteran figures in the Chinese opera scene.

Despite the criticism, TheatreWorks' Tay Tong said that Wong was a 'positive beginning as the first Arts NMP'.

He added: 'It's tough work. She's an open target. You can never please everybody.'

Wong has her own take on her track record. Citing the title of her recent talk at the Institute of Policy Studies - *One Foot In*, she said: 'The arts community sent me in as the first wave, the scout, the reconnaissance mission.'

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On her track record

'I showed that one can be critical and comment on policies without being anti-government. I tend to be constructive and look towards 'how do we solve an issue or problem?' Ms Audrey Wong, 43, former artistic director of the Substation arts venue who has finished serving her 21-month term as the first Nominated Arts MP.