

Arts NMP! Audrey Wong's foot! A post-mortem!

Mayo Martin

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Yesterday, the NUS' Institute of Policy Studies held the seminar *One Foot In: An 'Arts NMP' On Politics And Activism in Influencing Cultural Policy*. It was mainly about ex-NMP Audrey Wong talking about her experiences in Parliament for 21 months. Yes, ex-NMP. Time flies doesn't it? Totally slipped my mind that her term had ended after the Parliament was dissolved before the General Election. Gosh, we thought it'd go on forever! During the talk, Wong described her experience of having "a foot in the door" as "still a tiny foot". Of her work with The Substation as providing vital training for her involvement in politics. Of entering the Parliament as an "unknown" and constantly trying to reconcile her position of being either an "activist" or a "politician" inside the House. Of the benefits of being a so-called Arts NMP. After her talk, I had the sense that the so-called "(tiny) foot in the door" was also one that walked on tiptoes. "I couldn't just go out there and wave a flag and 'We must do this, we must do that'," she recalled, which resulted in a more low-key approach of having to "pick my battles" and being strategic in pushing for arts-related agenda. An example she gave was her ongoing research work on freelancers in the creative sector (along with assistant/theatre producer Terence Tan, who seriously deserves credit for being, as far as I know, the *only one* who stuck to his promise of helping Wong when she was "voted" in during that "election" by the arts community a couple of years ago.) Anyway, yes, the freelancers. Wong said she delved into it during a time when "creative industries" was the buzz word among her (ex) colleagues. I thought about putting down the Q&A that transpired after, but decided it was more important to actually post what she had said and let the chit-chat in the comments section begin (which I've again probably jinxed by simply mentioning it). After all, one of the things the ex-NMP mentioned was the difficulty in getting media to pick up on certain things, and heck, we'd previously posted her entire speech during the Budget debate so might as well right? Except for one very interesting comment by playwright and IPS dude Tan Tarn How. I'm not sure if there has been a full-blown discussion on what exactly an Arts NMP should be doing in Parliament. But I do recall that one of the comments about Wong was that she was too soft-spoken, non-confrontational and basically all the things that made her such an approachable and amiable figure at the Substation. But does that really work in Parliament? In his comments, Tan pointed out that there was a sense that Wong's approach was, as an outsider who came from a sector that the government has arguably been distrustful of, to slowly win the trust of the government. His "mad theory" was Wong did *not* need to do so. Rather than trying to integrate into a kind of theoretical all boy's club and make them feel comfortable with her presence, Tan pointed out that maybe she should've made them feel "extremely uncomfortable". "It's better to be hated and be listened to than liked and

be ignored," he said. The Arts NMP thing is new territory for not only Wong but the arts community as a whole. And now that our first "champion", as one commentator called Wong, has, well, survived 21 months in the lion's den so to speak, it's time to assess. Have a read below and do share your thoughts about Wong's term as NMP. Would you have wanted a more vocal NMP? Does her quiet style of work suit you? Do you think she made any impact in Parliament or outside of it? Should the arts community take this as a sign to put forth another candidate or was it an experiment that fizzled out? We cheekily asked her to rate her performance as NMP and Wong gamely gave her stint as an "almost four" out of five stars. How would you rate her?