

## An Interview with Dr Andy Hau Yan Ho

*Principal Investigator, Project Artisan*



Andy Hau Yan Ho

Image Credit: Andy Hau Yan Ho

<b>Culture Academy</b>	Would you introduce yourself and what you do for our readers?
Andy Ho	I am Associate Professor of Psychology and Medicine at Nanyang Technological University. I am also a social scientist who aspires towards community empowerment and societal betterment through empirical research, education and intervention that support and advance the potential of individuals and families. A psychotherapist by training, I like to explore the intersections of

	<p>different counselling models and how they can be creatively integrated to form new programmes with enhanced therapeutic effects. Over the past decade, I have founded a number of innovative and clinical robust psycho-socio-spiritual interventions for mental health promotion. These include Mindful-Compassion Art-based Therapy (MCAT) for burnout prevention and resilience building among caregivers; Family Dignity Intervention (FDI) for advancing holistic palliative end-of-life care; Narrative e-Writing Intervention (NeW-I) for augmenting paediatric palliative care and parental bereavement services; and Aspiration and Resilience Through Intergenerational Storytelling and Art-based Narratives (ARTISAN) for citizen empowerment and loneliness alleviation.</p>
Culture Academy	<p>Could you tell us more about “Project ARTISAN” and what inspired you to address loneliness through intergenerational storytelling and art-based narratives?</p>
Andy Ho	<p>Loneliness is a major public health concern in our modern world, affecting both the young and the old. With changing family structures and the advent of social media, our relational lives have been forever changed. In Singapore, the rise in nuclear family households have seen increasing numbers of seniors living alone, lacking social connections and coping with isolation. Research has shown that 51% of local seniors report feelings of loneliness, with 19% being lonely most of the time and 32% feeling lonely some of the time. For youths, they often find themselves feeling alone and unsupported with mounting pressure to succeed in a highly competitive education system and labour market, and while they aspire to find meaningful connections through social media, most are left disappointed with hollow relationships and constant negative social comparisons. To bring these two generations together under the skylight of cultural and heritage spaces, providing them with a carefully crafted intervention for creating real human connections through their personal stories told through expressive arts, could be a real gamechanger in alleviating loneliness in our society. This is the story behind ARTISAN – Aspiration and Resilience Through Intergenerational Storytelling and Art-based Narratives.</p>
Culture Academy	<p>How does loneliness and isolation from communities / tribes impact a person’s sense of national identity?</p>
Andy Ho	<p>I believe some of the main causes of loneliness lies in our inability, unwillingness or lack of opportunities to form genuine connections with others and be active participants in our community. Cultivating compassionate citizenship among all members of society, in which we are motivated towards uplifting and improving our collective lives with deepened empathy, concerns and kindness towards the wellbeing of another other, can serve to address the problem of loneliness at its root. To do this, we must find a way to unite people, and the answer may well lie in connecting individual stories with national stories to form a sense of unity, a shared responsibility to each other, and a national identity that helps define our individual and shared personhood.</p>
Culture Academy	<p>In your earlier 2018 study, you mentioned that engaging in storytelling fosters nationhood. Could you tell us more?</p>

Andy Ho	Collaborating with the National Museum Singapore, we conducted a gold standard Waitlist Randomized Controlled Trial of the ARTISAN intervention in 2018 with 34 pairs of senior and youth participants recruited from the community. We found that participants in the treatment group experienced significant increase in life satisfaction compared to participants in the waitlist-control group immediately after completion of ARTISAN. We also found that at 5-weeks post-ARTISAN, treatment group participants experienced significantly improvements resilience and reduction in loneliness compared to baseline. For youth participants specifically, we found that ARTISAN brought about an enhanced sense of social support, national identity and nationhood. Finally, the qualitative data generated through expressive writing and group sharing among research participants provided clear experiential and narrative evidence of ARTISAN's efficacy in loneliness alleviation and citizen empowerment. A 23-year-old participant wrote about the ARTISAN journey, "I get to learn about the past of Singapore, our forefather's contributions and how Singapore (got) to where it is today." A 71-year-old senior participant also wrote in the final session, "I realize that even at this age, there is still so much I can learn, and (I) find more confidence in trying new things, creating new things." Another youth participant shared, "I feel that these five weeks has ( <i>sic</i> ) taught me how to better communicate with the elderly and not to disregard our differences but to celebrate them." A senior participant resonated with this view, "I have a greater appreciation of working together with youths... ARTISAN has broken the intergenerational barrier."
Culture Academy	What does citizen empowerment mean to you? And what are some strategies to empower citizens through arts-based narratives?
Andy Ho	Stories, stories and more stories. Human beings are meaning-seeking creatures, and if we are able to see the similarities between our stories as well as experiences and emotions behind those stories, we will be able to connect with one another on a much deeper level. This will in turn allow us to see the true nature of our interconnectedness, interdependency, and common humanity. To tell our stories is not always easy as our experiences and emotions can be so profound that we may not be able to find the words to articulate them properly. The arts provide us with the means to explore, reflect and express our stories in ways that transcend the barriers of language, making the intangible tangible, and empowering us to unite as one people filled with kindness and compassion.