

Chapter 6

The Challenges in Senior Citizen Arts: The Case of a Senior Citizen Wind Band

Ka Chun Lin

Introduction

The concept of creative aging was introduced in the 1960s. As opposed to the disengagement theory which claims that it is natural and acceptable for older adults to secede from society, creative aging is an aging policy idea that highlights the creativity of older adults to prepare individuals or the community to face years of later life (Andrzej 2017, 608).

The rapid growth of the elderly population in the last decade is projected to be a trend for the next few decades. This is partly due to longer life expectancies. Between 2015 and 2050, the proportion of the world's population over 60 years will nearly double from 12% to 22%. The pace of population aging is much faster than it was in the past. Thus, it is important that social systems are ready for the demographic shift. One of the most popular discussions for the past decade is creative aging. Generally, older people have better health these days--thus the longer life expectancies. Even at a retired age, older people these days are still fit (World Health Organization 2021).

Moloney (2006) and Ehlert et al. (2010) believed that seniors benefit from arts and creative expression intervention programs. First, seniors can achieve personal fulfilment, a sense of meaning, new competencies to cope with daily challenges, new social relationships, and opportunities to maintain and improve health. Second, when art organizations develop and implement senior arts they can engage older artists, access new audiences, contribute to the development of learning communities, and

create new program funding opportunities. Third, creative aging also increases health benefits for seniors resulting in fewer visits to doctors and less depression.

The engagement of seniors in creative activities can increase the quality health benefits for seniors resulting in fewer visits to doctors and less depression. The engagement of seniors in creative activities can increase the quality of life, improve retention of personal, facility communication for visitors, increase social cohesion, and develop volunteering. Creative aging also contributes to the promotion of intergenerational solidarity, the evolution of positive senior's role models, the development of cooperation between different parties of society, and creation of new strategies to reach different groups of senior citizens in the society (Andrzej 2017, 609).

Senior Citizen Arts in Hong Kong

Generally, in Hong Kong, the development of senior citizen arts have become more structured over the past ten years. Before this, most of the elderly services focused on rehabilitation and hospices. Senior citizen arts began with interest classes run by non-profit organizations and managed by social workers. There were various forms of interest classes such as cycling, cooking, calligraphy, dancing and singing. The objective for these interest classes was mainly to serve as "time-killers" for senior citizens where they could be occupied and have some entertainment.

Public perception of senior citizens is stigmatized because of myths and stereotypes associated with being old. Aging relates to the signs of disease or discredits and negative evaluations, such as memory loss, sickness, and functional impairment. These negative evaluations become the core of senior identity, and it is implanted into their body and soul. Therefore, senior citizen accept being devalued (Phelan et al 1982).

In this article, I will be sharing some of the observations that I made a service provider in the field of senior citizen arts. In previous professional experience, I came to learn that there are various forms of senior citizen arts such as theatre, dance, orchestra, and fine arts. I was working on a senior citizens music project, in which members learn musical instruments and do ensembles together. There are few senior music projects that are more popular such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church Social Service--Hong Kong Men In Jazz, Tung Wah Group of Hospitals E Major and A Cappella singing group. These projects are owned by large-scale non-

profit organizations and managed by social workers.

Apart from senior citizen art projects that are owned by non-profit organizations and managed by workers, there are smaller independent senior citizen art projects that are run by art organizations and these projects are managed by art administrators. To name just two, the Men of Winds and the Golden Aged Theatre.

Perception and Challenges of Senior Citizens Arts in Hong Kong

It is very common that the public shows little respect during performances or art programs that revolve around senior citizens. I experienced this on several occasions where senior art groups were invited to perform at annual events. Instead of appreciating and valuing the performance by these senior art groups, the public tend to applaud their performances or artwork out of sympathy. The public simply sympathize with their old age and have no admiration that these elderly members and their quality artwork.

One example of this occurred when the senior citizen band that I managed was invited to perform in an annual event organized by a non-profit organization. We were allocated 10 minutes of performance time. However, on the event day itself, I was informed that our performance time had been reduced to 3 minutes and possibly our slot would be removed completely as their program for the day had overran. The band was initially provided a performance slot to fill in the time gap for their program.

Thus, when a situation arises, organizers would remove the band completely to keep on schedule. It was not a good experience and was extremely disrespectful. Most organizers provide the opportunity to senior citizens to perform in order to score high on corporate social responsibility. I had reflected on the matter and if the band was a reputable band or any other reputable art group, the stage manager would not have considered reducing performance time or cancelling the performance altogether. Usually at these events, when the senior citizen band was performing, audiences do not show appreciation but they can be seen chatting or busy with their mobiles.

One of the debates that I had always had while working with music projects managed by social workers was the quality of art and the responsibility to deliver art to my senior citizens. In a social service setting, they are doing social services and not

music. I was told that the music project was aimed to have senior citizens acquire anew hobby--music, in this case--and to establish friendships. Thus, there is no need to improve musicality.

However, in my opinion, there is no contradiction between social services and music projects. High quality art does not impede or hinder social service purposes. Music in this context is a service. By providing high quality music (a service) to social service beneficiaries, it can be inferred that one is providing quality social service.

Furthermore, during my years working on senior citizen music, I witnessed the “impossible” as it is known to the public: senior citizens can produce quality arts as did with youth or professional artists. Quality here differs from level of difficulty. Senior citizens might not be able to achieve difficulty levels that equate to those of youths or professional musicians, but they are capable of producing quality music within their capability. Often the public would perceive that senior citizens cannot play difficult music pieces; therefore, the quality of their arts is lesser than that of other age groups. This is a perception that must change, so that senior citizen arts need to be extensively developed so that senior citizens have access to good artistic training.

Case Study - Men of Wind and Wind Band as a Senior Art Form

Wind bands originated from military music. Wind band was a created to promote safe, moral, and civic activities. Just like how the word *harmonie* in the French language refers to the orchestral *harmonie* which describes wind band and musical harmony, so wind bands can be described as tools to achieve social *harmonie* (harmony). Traditionally, people focus on the ancient social functionality of wind bands when they served as a communication tool to unite members of the society via music as compared to today, when wind band music is an art form. Being part of the wind band also enables members to create their own circle of community that shares a common interest (Vincent 2013, 13-14).

In the past 30 years, music therapists and music educators have started to provide music experiences for healthy seniors in their later years of life. Senior citizens have gone through almost a lifetime experimenting and experiencing different things in life. Therefore, they will be most willing to continue seeking experiences in music if they happen to enjoy it. Music can enrich and stimulate people of all ages; it is beneficial for healthy aging.

Relationships, a sense of personal well-being and accomplishment, and enriching recreation activities are essential factors in the quality of life of seniors. The wind band provides a desire for active music-making and socialization for seniors. Results from various researches report that “active music-making” and “socialization” are considered “very important” or “essential” to contribute to senior citizens’ quality of life. Senior band participants in the study had rated active music-making and socialization as “very important” or “essential”--as crucial as family relationships and good health are to them. These findings confirm that senior citizens actively participate in the band to improve social relationships, cognitive interest, and empowerment (Coffman et al 1999).

Men of Winds (MOW) is a non-profit, senior community wind band established in the spring of 2019 specifically to provide musical experience for men aged 50 and above and managed by art administrators. The band also helps these men explore and develop their musical talents by providing music education for those who had never played music and continuing music education for those who are amateur or already have existing music knowledge.¹

As mentioned earlier, the public do not expect that the elderly band will be able to produce quality music like regular community bands. This is mainly because elderly people are regarded as people with limited ability due to aging. It is also the exact reason why I founded MOW.

I still remember the first rehearsal was disastrous. The members could not start the first bar together, but it was an impossible task to reach the final bar together. They needed some Western music background and I spent a lot of time training them with my limited music knowledge. I saw significant improvements. They started off being able to play only with simplified scores and managed to advance to Grade 3 American standard pieces i.e. *Blue ridge Saga* and *Centuria* by James Swearingen. It was unfortunate that many did not agree with me and had a fixated perception that the elderly population cannot produce quality music.

For this case study, there are two observations which I would like to discuss. The first observation concerns the management of senior citizen arts by art administrators as opposed to social workers. From a personal perspective, senior citizen art groups managed by art administrators produce more quality artwork. When MOW first started, the members were only able to play primary school standard wind band pieces. After a half year’s training, the band was able to play competition pieces. This

¹ Men of Winds, “Home,” Facebook, accessed May 9, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/menofwinds>.

was because proper music training was given to band members. Materials used in the band were carefully selected based on the standard music training of the American band system. As a result of proper music training, the quality and music standards of MOW were much higher as compared to other music groups managed by social workers.

Another observation is that since the establishment of MOW nearly two years ago, there was a change in conductorship. It can be observed that the quality of music produced by the band increases in parallel with the level of musicality and conductorship. Profound improvement from aspects of tone, intonation, blending and rhythm can be observed.

From the standpoint of professional musicians who have worked with elderly people, these elderly members have the same goal to achieve better music like all other professional musicians. They possess similar passion in music. Their attitude and determination in pursuing music is no less than that of professional musicians. One of the examples that I can share here is the story of one of our members. This member lives offshore on an island, namely Peng Chau. He would travel four hours round trip to rehearsals on a weekly basis. His main reason was because MOW is a senior wind band that plays good, quality music.

It is natural that the learning progress for elderly people is slower than that of children, youths, or younger adults. However, with a systematic method and guidance, it is not impossible to enable elderly learners to achieve a higher level of arts and produce good artwork – as with the case of MOW where they progressed from primary standard music band pieces to competition pieces equivalent to secondary school standards.

Conclusion

Senior citizen art is still developing in Hong Kong with immense growth potential. Hong Kong has one of the fastest growing elderly populations with long life expectancy. Therefore, it is imperative that more initiatives should be carried out to help the society to cope with the demographic shift. For these initiatives to work, it is critical that the public changes its perspective towards elderly people. Art is a critical tool to implement social change. Senior citizen art therefore holds a critical role in contributing to societal change. An example of a senior citizen project that I find admirable is the *Silver Arts Festival* hosted by the National Arts Council of

² Lin, Ka Chun. Interview with Lai Tak Chun. Personal communication. Hong Kong, May 4, 2021.

³ Lin, Ka Chun. Interview with William Shiu. Personal communication. Hong Kong, May 5, 2021.

Singapore. It is an international festival where senior art groups worldwide could participate and showcase their work. The festival promotes the idea of creative aging for citizens to pursue art and demonstrate their capability and potential.

It is extremely challenging to develop senior citizen arts. This is mainly due to public perception that links being old to physical deficiencies and capability issues. This perception becomes a barrier to the development of senior citizen arts. This is because goals for senior citizens were already pre-set with lower thresholds. It is true that these limitations of senior citizens are naturally occurring and that they cannot be reserved, but that does not mean that arts for senior citizens cannot be of quality. Systematic and professional training can be tailored for senior citizens to ensure the delivery of quality arts. It is with no doubt that the potential in senior citizens can be unlocked if the society sees value in this population.

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