

CHINESE SINGAPOREANS' FAMILY VALUES AND LEISURE

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Singapore was an immigration island for many individuals from Southeastern China during the 19th century. Traditionally, family has always been crucial in the Chinese society. However, the socio-cultural, socio-economic, and socio-political changes in Singapore have altered the familial environment. Industrialization, urbanization, and modernization over the years have affected family structure (Ong & Isralowitz, 1990) and possibly, values. In fact, the Singapore government has stepped in to promote transmission of Chinese culture. For example, the intergenerational co-residence scheme is provided by the Housing Development of Singapore. This is to encourage married applicants to apply adjoining public housing so that they can live with their parents. The Singapore Mandarin Campaign, which is conducted on a yearly basis, is intended to transmit the Chinese cultural values to the Chinese Singaporeans. "Singapore Family Values" have also been promoted by the Ministry of Community Development extensively since 1994. Programs, such as family camps, plays, storytelling, and essay writing contests for children, besides a mass media campaign, have been organized each year since its inception. Although the Acom Market research in 1996 indicated that Singaporeans are not losing family values because home-based leisure is popular now and more Singaporeans are staying at home, whether there is any form of communication among family members was not detected. Xie's (1996) study suggested that the younger adults are not looking at family interaction for recreation satisfaction, and, night leisure has become dominant in their lives.

Thus, a further examination on the types of leisure activities that Chinese Singaporeans conduct at home, and whether they view the importance of family over their personal leisure should be taken in order to justify whether Chinese Singaporeans are losing family values. Furthermore, the Chinese Singaporeans have the largest aging population due to longer life expectancy and lower fertility rate among other ethnic groups (Phillips & Barlett, 1995), and thus more of them could be left with more free time. The increasing conflicts between the older and younger generations and the changing familial environment may now be the obstacles to family cohesion. Thus, an investigation of the intergenerational perception of leisure is crucial in order to understand to what extent the Chinese culture has changed before we encourage integration of generations in leisure activities.

The purpose of this study was to examine today's Chinese family culture in Singapore, to identify whether there is any gap in the intergenerational perception of leisure, and whether the importance of family takes precedence over personal leisure. Leisure was seen as a good tool to transmit culture and family values. However, the rapid socio-economic changes in Singapore have not only changed the family structure, but have also changed people's perception on Chinese culture and family values. Therefore, there is a need to investigate whether leisure is still a means of cultural transmission.

Four research propositions were generated for this study:

- 1) Individuals who feel family values are important will spend more time with family members.

- 2) Individuals who feel family values are important will sacrifice personal leisure for family.
- 3) Generation differences can be seen when looking at the intergenerational perception of leisure.
- 4) Chinese family culture has changed over time in Singapore.

Methodology

One hundred and five participants living in the middle to lower income residential areas were involved in this study. Out of the 105 participants, 35 were individuals born before World War II, another 35 were subjects between thirty five to fifty-four years old, and the rest were interviewees between twenty to thirty four years old. Using the historical and family generations' definitions (Bengtson, 1993), they were classified as the first generation, second generation, and third generation respectively. Face-to-face interviews were used to gather information. The convenient sampling was used at residential parks, coffee shops, a community centre, and void deck (an open space below flats), although the first ten participants were the researcher's neighbours. Each interview took about half-an-hour to one hour, and a dialect interpreter was used when the participants of the first generation chose to speak various dialects. The questionnaire was divided into four sections, and the data were coded in terms of themes and research propositions. The sections were categorized according to the four research propositions. Three of the 11 codes suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (as cited in Langenbach, Vaughn, & Aagaard, 1994) were used. They were the activity (leisure involvement), situation, and relationship codes (family values and intergenerational perceptions of leisure), and change in culture.

Findings

These findings appear to contradict the first research proposition. Many of the participants in the second group had family member(s) as their common leisure companions) even though they did not value "family" the most. In addition, not all participants in the first and third groups who valued "family" the most would spend more time with family members). The second research proposition was only true for the individuals of the second generation. All the participants in the second generation, who valued "family", would sacrifice their personal leisure for family regardless of whether they viewed leisure as very important or slightly important. The results also revealed that the intergenerational gap on the perception of leisure existed. Many of the participants of the third generation were not aware of the first generation's leisure. On the other hand, individuals in the first and second groups felt that the individuals of the third generation were not spending enough time at home during their leisure hours. A change in the Chinese family culture was also revealed in the findings. Many of the younger adults of the third generation today have total freedom of choice, in terms of choosing their own leisure activities. However, individuals of the first and second groups felt that the third generation is losing family values, giving reasons that the young adults were rude to the elderly and not family-oriented.

Discussion

For the individuals of the first generation, although they may see family values as important, they did not really spend more time with family members. This could be because they would only choose activities that are not dependent upon others for transportation or assistance (Gibson, 1995). Thirty-one out of thirty five individuals of the second group reported family member(s) as their leisure companion(s) when only 18 valued family the most. This could be because they were bowed down by family burden (Ikels et al., 1992), and they felt responsible to stay at home during their leisure hours because of family obligations (Acom Market Research, 1996). The findings of the third generation supported Xie's (1996) research that participants spent more time with friends during their leisure hours although they may view family as important.

The findings of the second research proposition supported the study conducted by Ikels et al. (1992). The middle-aged subjects in their studies exemplified responsibility and maturity; family to these individuals came first. The third proposition supported Hsu's (1985) comments that in the traditional Chinese family, family leisure and recreation were common, but the contemporary Chinese do not share the same view.

Ong and Isralowitz (1990) commented that the younger adults have more autonomy now in deciding their own leisure activities. Chia (1996) also suggested that contemporary working parents have no time for their children and thus, family values are not being transmitted. These supported the last proposition of this study that the Chinese culture in Singapore has changed over time.

Studies on the leisure behaviour of the younger adults with working parents could be further investigated because there is a question of whether they are too bored at home because of working parents as Chai (1996) said, or the young adults now tend to form loyalties to peers in school and at work (Ong & Isralowitz, 1990). In this study, the five individuals of the first generation mentioned one family activity and it was watching television programs together. They did not seem to conduct many other leisure activities with their family members. Therefore, a further investigation- on-family activities in a three-generation setting could be studied to see whether older individuals are still gaining respect or are being cast aside. However, one obvious problem encountered while collecting information from participants of the first generation was their incomprehensiveness of the word "leisure." Therefore, to hear them more correctly, researchers should relate their concept of "leisure", taking account of their Chinese traditional background instead of using the Eurocentric concept of leisure.

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