

Cultural Shifts Among Generations in Singapore

Katelyn Wentworth

All research was made possible by
Ignite Undergraduate Research Abroad

Abstract

I proposed to find the reason why there are such harsh cultural shifts among the generations in Singapore. I researched my topic through personal interviews and individual observations while in Singapore. I focused on the differences between the generations, not the differences in their culture from western culture. This line became less obvious as the generations continued. I have concluded that the oldest generation is trying to preserve what is left of their heritage. The middle generation constitutes the greatest shift as they attempt to improve their individual wealth and show their status to the community. The youngest generation is influenced by their parents, and therefore has lost most of the culture their grandparents share. These changes have made Singapore a country altogether different than other countries in Southeast Asia who still hold strong to their old traditions.



Introduction

My initial research brought to my attention the large differences between generations in Singapore. I found that outdated articles about the culture in Singapore were very different than current articles. The older generation, those aged 50 to 80, shared the same family values that have been found in Asian countries for many years. They are helpful to their neighbors, respectful of their elders, and encourage a love of the history and culture. Their children, however, are extremely focused on the five C's of Singapore; Cash, Car, Credit Card, Condominium, and Country Club. This generation is proud of their tangible wealth, whereas their parents cherished a person's character. Because this generation is currently the working class, they are continually renovating and improving the city, which includes taking down and demolishing old buildings that the oldest generation held important. It makes sense then that their children, anyone under 30, are influenced extremely by the west. These children hold respect for their grandparents, but the history behind this respect is lost. They focus on the same aspects that their parents do, as well as personal gain and individual attainment. The family and community life that their grandparents had has changed.



Observations

Taxi driver, aged 56, talking about the destruction of his historical city.

He complained that the new city is losing all of the beauty that Singapore once held. The new buildings are constantly changing and destroying everything around them. The only area of the city that is still pretty is the area protected as a historical site. If it wasn't protected he believes it would have been long gone by now.

Taxi Driver, aged 35, talking about the great improvements in his city.

He loves all of the new buildings and thinks that they represent progress. He knows that people his age are creating these massive structures and they make him very proud to be from Singapore. He also wishes that he had graduated high school. He says that he cannot move up from his current status without a degree and he feels that he could do so much more for the country than he is now.

College aged students from Embry Riddle Singapore.

These students acted just like us. They focused on their friends and their future careers. I didn't once hear them mention the old part of the city; they are very excited about the new buildings just like their parents are.

Ancestor tablets in a Chinese temple.

These tablets are customarily kept in the family temple. The name of an ancestor is inscribed on them. They are used as a physical representation of the ancestor and are brought food and offerings. Chinese families used to live with their extended family. This made it easy for the tablets to be kept near to the whole family. In Singapore families now live in nuclear settings, without extended family. In order to be able to bring offerings to their ancestors the tablets had to be moved to the city temple. This is a dramatic example of the cultural shift.



Conclusions

I have found that the traditions and customs historically found in Singapore are not as prominent as they were 40 years ago. This is because the generation who prizes these traditions is no longer in charge, and the adults today are focused on personal improvement and not the protection of historical places and ideas. Although this means a loss of culture, the people of Singapore have created a new culture. This culture is fast paced and moving toward the future. These people are responsible for making Singapore the strong country it is today and that would not have been possible if they did not strive to improve themselves individually. Their children now have hard working adults to look up to and that is part of the reason that so many children are committed to bettering themselves through education. Although the shift in culture has had a drastic effect on the lives of Singaporeans, many of these changes have helped to improve the country.



Methods

I conducted personal interviews with many different age groups while in Singapore. The older generations I spoke to were mostly shop keepers and taxi drivers. I also observed interactions among the generations at temples around the country. All of my observations allowed me to understand the differences and similarities among all of the different ages in Singapore.

