

18/3/02 On the Grapevine-Inter-Generation Programmes

Heard a lament on the grapevine the other day, that childhood nursery rhymes are extinct.

Nursery rhymes are icons of cultural transmission across generations.

Nowadays, they seem to be confined to the vaults of the Archives, not part of our lives.

Such is the hallmark of changing times.

Hi, welcome to On the Grapevine with me, Chong Ching Liang.

This week, we look at issues dredged up by a greying Singapore.

Earlier this month, the National University of Singapore hosted an international workshop on inter-generational programming in social services.

National University of Singapore's Assistant Dean of Arts and Social Science Faculty, Dr Thang Leng Leng.

ccl-InGen-1

"This is the first time ever that a workshop of such nature is being organised in the region although I think quite a few people may not be very sure what exactly is inter-generation programming apart from a vague knowledge that it is something to benefit different generations. And this is precisely the aim of the workshop. Its to introduce to the region, to people here, the concept and ideas of intergeneration programming, something which has been promoted in the US, in Europe and to a certain extent, in Japan. And more to impart to you ways to start a programme or activities for the purpose of bringing the different age groups together."

Why now?

Mayor of Central Singapore Community Development Council, Heng Chee How.

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"We live in fast changing times and many things are not what they were thirty years ago or even ten years ago. Global economic integration and technological progress has shrunk the Earth and that has a huge impact on the connectedness of societies. For example when fortunes can be made anywhere in the world, then the more ambitious members of societies will become more 'footloose'. Then the place of the family and the nations will also be impacted in new ways."

After Singapore became independent, it's sole resource was human.

To survive, the fledgling country sought to optimise how its citizens developed.

In 1979, Goh Keng Swee ushered in the modern education system.

A comprehensive study of education was conducted, but it was carried out by system analysts, not educationists.

Within a decade, the different generations were not merely separated by years, but, increasingly, language and education qualification as well.

Young Chinese Singaporeans no longer speak the language of their elders.

Does this make Singaporeans rootless?

NUS' Sociologist Dr Angelique Chan doesn't think so.

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"Whether there's a generation of rootless Singaporeans per se, we need to look at that a lot more closely because there may be a lot more inter-generational transmission going on then the media would like to pick up. If we look at the current rates of living arrangements, of the type of interactions that goes on, meals together, conversations. With those kind of high levels, there's got to be a there's a certain amount of transmission occurring."

Dr Chan says the future of grandparenting won't be static.

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"They are going to be some changes that we will see. For instance, there are going to be more women that have ever worked, therefore there are going to be more resources at their disposal. These future cohorts are more likely to want to do things like travel. For elderly that have more outside interests, they may be less likely to want to stay home and look after grand kids which tells us a few things. For future cohorts of elderly, they are different type of grand-parenting issues that will be involved."

And with a global greying of populations, there will be more grandparents.

Dr Chan says new problems and solutions will arise.

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"One of the issues is now that people are living so much longer, what are the relationships that are going to develop with the younger generations. If you have people living until a hundred, what are their roles? How are they supposed to interact, what do we want to get from them in society, if you think in utilitarian terms, and maybe one of the things is this transmission of values and helping us to raise a younger generation as the middle generation becomes more and more put upon, you know, the sandwich generation."

Mayor Heng agrees that a greying population is not necessarily negative.

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"Now on the positive side, as Singaporean society experience a rapid increase in elderly population, there's also evidence that most of the elderly are staying healthy and they come with higher education levels and they look forward to spending their retirement years in positive and meaningful ways. They therefore constitute a valuable resource to the community and their life experiences are particularly useful in helping to nurture the younger generations."

As Mayor Heng noted, more Singaporeans elders are educated and tend to speak more English.

Dr Angelique Chan says this will make bonding easier.

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"Yes, I think definitely that will help and also there's much more awareness now in the government sector for the need for this kind of programming. Uhm, when this kind of conference is put in place, it's not necessarily there's a problem but as Singapore is very good at pre-empting problems, that I think is the role of this conference."

Maybe the day will come when new nursery rhymes will be sung, in uniquely Singaporean form.

This is Chong Ching Liang, for Newsradio 938.