

Experiencing Leisure in Later Life: A Study of Retirees and Activity in Singapore

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Published online: 30 September 2006
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Abstract In a society faced with rapid aging and extended life expectancy, older persons in Singapore are just beginning to see retirement as a new era in their lives that can be quite different from the later life experiences of their own parents. Presenting an ethnographic case study of one of the first retiree activity centers in Singapore, this article will examine (a) how older persons cope with retirement, social, and cultural norms, and (b) the strategies older adults adopt in order to stay relevant in a fast-paced society. The ethnographic study shows that extrafamilial social support and opportunities for new experiences in learning and leisure contribute significantly to positive and active living in old age. Although the discussion of aging in Asia usually focuses on the problems of health, finances, and caregiving, the present study suggests the need for policy makers to pay equal attention to issues such as activity participation in old age. Participation in leisure activities may act as a preventive measure to delay the onset of aging-related problems, while at the same time enhancing life satisfaction among seniors.

Keywords Leisure · Life satisfaction · Retirement

Introduction

In Asian societies—and particularly among the Chinese, who make up 76% of Singapore’s population—the ideal retiree lifestyle is traditionally conceived in the concept *xiang qin fu*, which literally means “enjoying the fortune of doing nothing.”¹ Probably because of the existence of such an ideal, planning for activity after retirement has, until now, seldom been a concern to most people in Singapore. However, with an increase in both life expectancy

¹ This cultural concept of old age among the Chinese, in which traditionally the aged “are not to be bothered with the details of daily life” is described as *de facto* retirement by Levy (1949, p. 128–129).

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and the proportion of the population aged 65 and older,² individuals as well as the State have gradually come to face the reality that retirement is only the beginning of a new phase of later life that may extend for another 20 years or more.

The Inter-Ministerial Committee on an Ageing Population was formed in late October 1998 to achieve “successful ageing for Singapore.” In addressing the challenges posed by Singapore’s rapidly aging population, the Committee articulated that “At the individual level, older Singaporeans should be healthy, active, and secure. They should be able to age with respect and dignity, and should lead independent and fulfilling lives as integral members of their families and communities.”³ One of the initiatives to meet the vision of a successfully aging population is the Active Seniors Program. This program, overseen by the Ministry of Community Development and Sports, invites partners from among social service providers and community organizations to organize activities that promote active aging. As a result, Singapore has witnessed a growth in services and activities organized for healthy older persons. At the same time, in addition to day care centers for older persons who need care, centers catering to well older persons (be they casual drop-in centers or daily activity centers) have also started to emerge. The formation of such centers not only signifies an awareness of retirees’ need for dedicated spaces, but reflects the willingness among retirees to venture outside their own homes for companionship and fun.

This article presents an ethnographic study of one such activity center for retirees in an attempt to understand the significance of organized activities in both contributing to active lifestyles for older persons and helping give meaning to later life.

This research addresses the gap in studies of organized activities for older persons in Singapore. Despite increasing attention being paid to active aging in Singapore, studies on leisure and organized activities receive relatively little attention compared with research on the health, medical, and financial aspects of aging. This is probably because studying older persons who dance and sing may seem trivial against the stereotypical perception of aging as a problematic issue.

The same phenomenon is observed by scholars in the field of gerontology and leisure studies in the West. In a review of the organized contexts for activity for elders, Cutler and Danigelis (1993) concluded that although ideological prescriptions about the societal and individual benefits of organized activities abound, very few studies have systematically explained the causes and consequences of elders’ participation in organized activities. On the other hand, beginning with such pioneers as Havighurst (1957) and Cumming and Henry (1961), researchers have documented the important role involvement leisure activities plays in elders’ psychological and physical well-being. Thompson, Itzin, and Abensdtern (1990) found that among older persons in Britain, those who had very few leisure pursuits felt the most discontented and unhappy, whereas those who had developed special new leisure skills in later life found that involvement in these activities brought intense pleasure and meaning to their lives. Thus, far from being a trivial issue, participation in leisure activity should be perceived as a significant contribution to successful aging.

I begin this article with a brief description of an activity center in Singapore. Then I discuss characteristics observed among members at the center and examine some themes

² The population aged 65 and older has seen a gradual increase before the 1990s. After which, the proportion is expected to rise rapidly, from 7% in 1998 to 19% in 2030 (One reason relating to the aging of the population is higher life expectancy. Life expectancy at birth in Singapore has increased from 65 and 63 for women and men, respectively, in 1957 to 81.6 and 77.9 for women and men, respectively, in 2005. Department of Statistics, 2006).

³ <http://www.mcids.gov.sg/imc/>

helpful in theorizing the significance of leisure and organized activities in enhancing life satisfaction and giving meaning to later life.

Subjects and Methods

I will refer to the retiree activity center (RAC) where the ethnographic fieldwork was done as the Spring RAC.⁴ It is an experimental joint project open to persons aged 55 and older. It is operated by a volunteer welfare group (non-governmental organization) and funded by a community development council and a community club, where the center is housed.⁵ The concept of the RAC is a relatively new addition to the landscape of organized leisure activities for older persons in Singapore. Similar to day centers, senior centers, or senior citizens' centers in the West (e.g., Hazan, 1980; Krout, 1989; Myerhoff, 1978), the Spring RAC is a hybrid of social day care center and senior citizens' club or drop-in center. It has a similar concept to the social day care center: it provides older persons with full-day organized programs five times a week for a fee. However, whereas social day care centers focus more on maintenance programs for older persons (such as exercise programs for persons recovering from strokes), RACs provide a range of leisure activities in which all members belonging to the center are encouraged to participate. The center's use of the term "retirees" instead of "elders" or "senior citizens" denotes a deliberate attempt to promote a positive image of active aging among its members.

The Spring RAC occupies a big room of about 100 square meters on the second floor of a community club. It operates from 9 A.M. to 6 P.M., 5 days a week.⁶ The center has relied heavily on volunteers since its inception and has a total of 13 regular volunteers who come to the center to serve as course instructors, karaoke jockeys, or receptionists on various days.

Despite initial worries that the concept may not take off because healthy older persons might find a fee-charging organized leisure center too costly or restrictive, the Spring RAC achieved a stable attendance rate of approximately 30 persons in less than 1 year of operation and continues to maintain this near-capacity rate.⁷ In addition to hosting these 30 regular attendees, the Spring RAC maintains a casual membership base of 350 members who are kept informed of special activities at the center, such as outings, seminars, and other special social activities.

The average age of the regular attendees was 62, with the youngest being 55 years old and the oldest being 82 years old. The regular membership was composed of 81% older women. Women are generally more motivated to participate in social activities and

⁴ "Spring RAC" is a pseudonym for the field site. This study engages qualitative methods such as participant observation and formal and informal interviews with the regular members, casual members, and administrators. Fieldwork was conducted from 1999 to 2001, and a follow-up was conducted in June 2003.

⁵ Community development councils are local district administrations responsible for planning and managing community programs. There are five community development councils in the whole of Singapore. Community clubs/centers serve as a nexus connecting the State and the people in terms of dissemination of information and provision of services and programs to residents. There are 111 community clubs/centers dotting the island.

⁶ Spring RAC employed a full-time administrator to run the center until April 2003, when funding for the center was heavily cut. Since April 2003, the administrator has been running the Spring RAC part time after being transferred to another center.

⁷ Out of the 30 regular members, 25 are attendees who pay a full monthly fee of S\$80–\$100 a month (members who have joined since 2002 pay S\$100 per month), whereas the remaining five members come only on certain days for specific activities and pay a day rate of S\$7.

programs in Singapore. The findings of Mehta (2002) help to explain this phenomenon. She found that for an older Singaporean, retirement was seen as a time to relax and rest—a time to be cared for by the family. However, for a woman, “regardless of whether she was a full-time housewife or a working woman, retirement was a time to enjoy the ‘freedom’ from household responsibilities and dependent children” (p. 9). Her readiness to participate in activities outside the family thus signifies a woman’s freedom from the family.

The present study focused on the regular attendees (hereafter “members”), who shared similar characteristics with the wider casual membership. Among the 25 regular members, only five were men. The members came to the Spring RAC on their own; some lived within a 10-min walk, whereas a few lived in other towns, which required a bus and/or mass transit ride of about 15 min. The majority of members lived in the government-built apartments that house 85% of Singapore’s population; they lived with their families and received financial support from their working children. According to the 2000 census, 87.6% of older Singaporeans lived with their spouses and/or children.

Among the regular members, most of the women were marginally literate and many had been homemakers all their lives, although some had worked briefly in menial jobs to support the family. Among the men, there was a mix of blue- and white-collar workers, with previous occupations ranging from bus driver to manager of a big, multinational manufacturing company. All men were literate and had varying levels of education. The differences in past occupations and educational levels contributed to a subtle divide along class lines. The members were overwhelmingly of lower middle-class backgrounds.

Because all members were Chinese, the most widely used language at the Spring RAC was Mandarin. As is typical among older Singaporeans, many also spoke Chinese dialects such as Hokkien, Cantonese, and Teochew among themselves. Most of the regular members interviewed for this study claimed that before they joined the Spring RAC, they did not have any leisure pursuits except for watching TV. Thus, participating in the various organized activities offered by the center is a first experience for many. To some who had never been to school, it represented their first experience in a school-like setting with scheduled activities and learning curricula.

Based on a close following of the development of the Spring RAC and interviews with its members and staff, I will define three main characteristics of the members that in turn shape the activities and dynamics of the center.

Results

The Longing for a Place to Belong

Contrary to my expectation that older persons would be interested in joining a place only when accompanied by friends, most of the members indeed came on their own initiative after learning about the Spring RAC from sources such as pamphlets distributed to the neighborhood, notices at the community club, and news of the center’s recruitment drive posted in the community column of the newspaper. Occasional news features on the center—especially during the annual National Senior Citizen Week in November—with testimonials of members’ satisfaction and their smiling photographs also attracted new members.

Some members were actively seeking a place in which they could belong and did not hesitate to join once they learned about the center. This is partly because there are still so few centers in Singapore like the Spring RAC that are solely for active older persons. One

member claimed that ever since she stopped caring for her grandchildren, she had been searching for a place to belong and was really glad to learn about the center. She was also a member of the community club's senior citizen club,⁸ but said, "They only have occasional activities, and they are usually held in the evenings or weekends. What I really need is to occupy the day where I am all alone."

An older couple who joined as members after reading about the Spring RAC in newspapers were happy that the center organized different programs throughout the day to occupy their time. Although the husband had just retired and seemed to have developed his own routine of reading at the library during the day and jogging in the evening, he thought they needed to belong to such a center for his wife, who had always been a housewife and had recently been experiencing empty-nest blues since their two children had become working adults. He said:

I find that she always sort of tells me that we don't have anything meaningful to do, meaningful in the sense that nothing really occurs but it's day in day out, we just get up, take our lunch and then, like every routine, nothing. It becomes quite boring at times so I can understand her predicament.... So we were looking all over the place and we are very keen to join activities.

Another member, Mr. Lee, who was among the first to join the Spring RAC when it was established, readily signed up as a regular attendee after he read a pamphlet distributed to him when he was sitting around at the food center near the community club. He lamented how boring life had become after he was forced to retire from a transport company; he spent most of his waking hours at the coffee shop (open-air food court) "just sitting around doing nothing." He had tried looking for another job but had had no success due to his age (late 50s) and the bad economic climate; he realized that "people would slam down the phone after knowing my age." Since joining the Spring RAC, Mr. Lee had been an active member and was always zealous in introducing the center to newcomers. After joining the center, he seemed to come to terms with retirement and firmly identified himself as a founding member of the center.

The majority of the members who joined as regular attendees of their own accord were among the young-old (i.e., in their late 50s and 60s). In addition to this age group, which makes up about half of the regular members, the center has seen a gradual rise in the number of members in their 70s and even early 80s. These older people mostly came to the Spring RAC at the recommendation of their children, who had read about the center in the newspapers or publicity materials. Almost all members of this older age group lived with their grown children; some were taken by their children to and from the center on a daily basis. To the children, the Spring RAC played the role of a day care center for their older parents. More recently, the Spring RAC received two older persons with slight dementia as regular members. Initially the administrator was concerned whether this would change the dynamics of the center, or, worse still, drive away healthy and active members; over the months, these concerns proved groundless as healthy members readily took on the roles of providing support and encouragement to the weaker members. With the support of the healthier members, one of the members with slight dementia had even recently started singing at karaoke sessions.

Although the members in their 70s and 80s had not personally initiated the decision to join the Spring RAC, they share the same strong sense of belonging to the center as the

⁸ Most community clubs have a senior citizen club run by the staff of community club/center. However, most of these centers only organize occasional outings or other activities.

young-old members and see the center as opening up their horizons beyond the confines of the home and family. In certain ways, they are more loyal compared to the active, younger members, who, being more mobile and open to new challenges, may leave to join other centers.

The Desire to Learn and Try New Things

The Spring RAC differs from day care centers as well as many drop-in centers in the various scheduled programs it offers for members. Among the regular activities that have been conducted at the Spring RAC since its establishment are lessons in English, Chinese (because many older persons cannot write Chinese characters), cooking, dancing, karaoke, calligraphy, and physical exercises. Volunteers (mostly middle-aged ladies or retirees) teach these lessons. There are also lessons, such as computer literacy and swimming, that require members to pay a nominal fee because paid instructors are engaged.

Among the lessons offered at the Spring RAC, karaoke was the most popular and had, over the years, expanded to karaoke classes in both Mandarin and Cantonese taught by volunteer instructors. At the time of this study, karaoke sessions and classes took up most of the afternoons. Many of the members, especially the older ones in their 70s, only “discovered” singing after joining the center. Karaoke is considered to be a serious leisure⁹ by many of the members. Even those who cannot read Chinese will buy a recorder to record the songs sung at the karaoke lessons and then practice at home to memorize the song lyrics.

Karaoke, which originated in Japan, started to gain popularity in Singapore in the early 1980s when it became both a popular past time among young people and business entertainment. The result was the conversion of many bars and lounges to karaoke lounges with an expensive cover charge for drinks and bar hostesses.

By the mid 1990s, the karaoke craze had declined among the general masses and was shifting to housewives and older people. In Singapore today, karaoke classes are dominated by housewives, and older persons prevail in all community clubs; karaoke has become the “must-have” activity for older people. Although research on older people and karaoke is lacking, it is generally believed that karaoke has benefited the older people as it promotes learning and improves memory as singers have to read and memorize song lyrics; it also expands older persons’ social networks as elders now group together with others who have common interests.

At the Spring RAC, karaoke is one activity that attracts both men and women; some other activities however, such as handicraft and cooking classes, are segregated somewhat by gender. The cooking class, taught by a retiree volunteer, has failed to attract much participation; over time, it has become a time slot merely for cooking lunch in house (otherwise lunches are prepared by a paid cook). When asked why they were not interested in cooking activities, several women said that they had been cooking all their lives and wanted to do something new now. Hence, many were not keen to help in the kitchen. On the contrary, the older men seemed more willing to involve themselves with cooking. Nowadays, only the men are helping to cook lunch once a week. This role reversal parallels Gutmann’s (1974) proposal that with aging, men tend to reveal the more feminine side of their personality whereas women move away from theirs.

⁹ Serious leisure requires commitment, obligation expressed by regimentation (practice, rehearsal), and systematization (e.g., scheduling and organization; Stebbins, 1992, p. 9).

Besides daily classes, the Spring RAC also organizes monthly outdoor trips to various places of interest such as factories or exhibitions in town. There are also two or three big events a year, such as overseas trips to Malaysia by coach or cruise as well as occasional dance and singing performances at nursing homes, schools, and community events. Members of the Spring RAC also have opportunities to attend seminars relating to later life, such as those on health matters, interpersonal relations in the family, safety, and grandparenting. Some of these seminars are organized by the center and are open to the public, whereas others are invitation-only events organized by other organizations. The members at the center are also invited frequently to participate in community events such as selling their handicrafts for fundraising or contributing to dance or choir performances. In a way, the Spring RAC is conceptually similar to a school, in that members are nurtured in various forms of learning ranging from language, art, music, dance, sports, recreation, and personal growth, albeit with a great degree of freedom and fun.

Dynamics in Interpersonal Relationships

Not only does the concept of curriculum at the Spring RAC resemble that in a school, the dynamics of the interpersonal relationships among center members are similar to those in classroom interactions. Because older persons spend most of the week at the center, it is inevitable that personality clashes and conflicts will sometimes occur. Conflicts happen most commonly during karaoke sessions—at which members, in their zeal to sing, fight over who will sing first or over the unfairness of someone getting to sing one more song than someone else. In order to resolve these conflicts and ensure fairness, rules have been established stating that members must take a queue number in order to sing.

To help older persons in their personal growth and to enhance group living, the center organized a series of four small-group discussions and sharing led by counsellors. Topics covered in the discussions included the handling of interpersonal relationships in the family and among friends and the ideal life in retirement. This sharing provided an avenue for members to better understand themselves and each other and offered an opportunity for self-reflection and personal development. The administrator of the Spring RAC also provides counselling to members in trouble (e.g., those being ostracized by others because of personality issues). For example, Mr. Lee, the pioneer member of the center mentioned previously, although a friendly person, sometimes offends others because of his loud personality, quick temper, and unruly behavior in public (such as his poor table manners). To help him change his bad habits so that people around him will stop complaining about him, the administrator counsels him privately and keeps a close watch on him, constantly reminding him to speak more softly, to try not to lose his temper, and to watch his behaviour; in a way, the administrator is mentoring him like a teacher would a student.

Except for one couple that joined as regular members together, all other regular members participated without their spouse, either because they were widowed, their spouses were still working, or their spouses had their own activities. Out of the five male Spring RAC members, two of them were not on good terms with their wives, which explained why they were particularly attached to the center and saw it like their second home. At one time, the administrator was troubled by rumors of an intimate relationship that had developed between two widows (in their early 60s) and two married male members. However, she refrained from commenting because they appeared to behave normally at the center despite reports about their being seen holding hands in the park after dark. The uneasiness of engaging in a relationship within an organized setting finally caused the said parties to leave the Spring RAC temporarily, except for occasional participation in dance and karaoke lessons.

The social dynamics at the Spring RAC reveal that interpersonal interactions and relationships remain complex among older persons. One member commented that the center was like a small community with different kinds of people and that everyone had to try to adapt themselves to each other. Such variety and complexity within a center of 30 older persons refutes the stereotypical image of older persons as unchallenging and uninteresting. However, although the dynamics seem similar to those found among groups of young people, older persons seem more willing to step back and forgive and forget the unhappiness, as members sometimes laugh at themselves for behaving like children at such a ripe old age. The desire to build a center where members can enjoy themselves and have fun in their later years often overrides the occasional unhappiness and conflicts resulting from personality, value, and even class differences. Members find meaning in attending the center. One member commented about his daily attendance, “Just like when we were working, when we get up in the morning, you don’t feel like going to work and yet you get up in the morning. We look forward to coming here and whatever activities they have, we become a part of it.”

The sense of closeness and belonging to the center and to one another echoes Traphagan’s (1998) study on older persons and gateball in Japan. Traphagan discovered that friendship bonding among older persons—which allowed them to refer to each other on a first-name basis and to use a pattern of speech reserved for close friends and family relations—was one important reason motivating their participation in a gateball group.

Discussion

How has frequenting the Spring RAC made a difference in the lives of these older people?
How can their experiences contribute towards the study of aging and activity?

De-Emphasizing Old Age

Studies on aging and older persons frequently argue that chronological age is an inaccurate determinant defining the onset of old age and is sometimes “less significant than other aspects of age” (Bytheway, 1997, p. 9). This is a fundamental message in Thompson and colleagues’ (1990) work about the resilience of 55 old men and women in Great Britain, whose personal accounts showed that “unless they [were] ill, or miserable, they [did] not feel, in their real selves, that they [were] old” (p. 1). Thompson and associates found it striking that only a few of their respondents belonged to clubs for old people. Their respondents referred to these clubs as having a patronizing atmosphere: “run by middle-class organizers who assume[d] the passivity of the working-class members” (p. 247). This led the authors to conclude that clubs for old people could not meet the needs of their clients, as the assumption “that people want to be associated just because they have reached a certain age is fundamentally mistaken” (p. 247).

However, the present study, conducted in Singapore, offers an alternative view. Although some older persons upon retirement do shy away from organizations catering specifically to seniors for fear of stigmatization, it is not uncommon for retirees to seek out the possibility of belonging to some retiree organizations. Moreover, instead of equating being old with having membership in an organization for old people, research on the Spring RAC found that such settings can play significant roles in de-emphasizing the negative connotation of old age and helping to foster positive feelings about the self. In fact, older persons may attend the centers and feel young among peers of the same age.

The activities and lessons offered by the Spring RAC play a major role in bringing about feelings of youthfulness in older persons. Instead of confining the programs within traditional domains (such as arts and crafts), the center organizes courses such as computer literacy, dancing, English language, and singing in a deliberate aim at familiarizing older persons with current trends.

The terms of address adopted at the Spring RAC also de-emphasize one's age. While outside the center, the members are usually addressed as *ah-mah* (granny) or *ah-pek* (old man) consistent with the cultural norm of addressing older persons in Singapore (Chinese) society, inside the center, women are encouraged to refer to each other by their first names or sometimes by more familial terms such as "sister Fang" whereas the men are usually called by their family name with the more honorable address of *xianshen* (Mr.). Such a way of referring to one's peers redirects the focus to one's self rather than to one's age.

In fact, among Spring RAC members, one's level of health and how fashionable or modern one behaves is a more common indicator of how old one is. The members are generally a healthy lot, although they do sometimes complain of minor ailments; it is rare to hear that they are absent from the center because of doctor appointments. The older women, in addition, benchmark youthfulness against one's fashion sense. Among the older women, some are called *ah-mah* (granny) by their peers because they behave "old" (e.g., speaking only dialects, wearing typical matronly fashions, or letting the hair turn gray without dyeing it). By defining old age as more multidimensional than chronological age, a person can in fact "grow younger" over the years depending on one's health status and willingness to venture into new looks and fashion beyond those that are confined by social norms as age appropriate. This suggests considerable fluidity in the concept of old age, whereby the individual's attitudes, behaviors, and values—not chronological age—are some of the significant determinants in defining one's own old age.

Creating New Selves

Along with gaining youth, the members at the Spring RAC can also be perceived as gaining a new role outside the family. I refer to this role gain as a creation of a new "leisure self," one that coexists with the "family self" that has heretofore been dominant (especially among the women). This new sense of self or new role gained represents conflicts and opportunities. To the older women, it can sometimes conflict with the family self (which consists of the woman's roles as wife, mother, and grandmother). In one of Spring RAC's sharing sessions, the counselor asked the members' opinions on a hypothetical situation in which an older woman complains that she is deprived of leisure because she has to take care of her grandchildren. One female member commented, "It is unfortunate to have to take care of grandchildren. Since it is inevitable, you do your duty well. Not everyone is as fortunate to come and enjoy life like we do. Everybody would like to have a leisure life, isn't it? It is just unfortunate that some cannot afford that."

Her response highlights the need to balance one's role as a grandparent and a leisure person in later years, which is not unlike the need that working women today face to balance their work and family roles. This member used to live in Malaysia; she emigrated to Singapore a year before the present study was conducted at the request of her son, who was getting married and settling down in Singapore. She came to the Spring RAC because her son registered her for fear that she would be lonely in Singapore. Participation at the center has since changed her lifestyle: not only has she become busy with daily activities at the center, she also sometimes goes on overseas travel with fellow members. She now tries to leave the weekend for her children as a way to balance her outside commitments with her family's expectations.

One of the theories often employed to understand self and identity in later life is that of the continuity perspective. In a study of the process of growing old, Kaufman (1986) argues that people integrate their past with the present to move ahead, hence the need for a continuous self in later life. This echoes closely with the continuity theory, often attributed to Atchley (1983), which posits that continuity is an important factor in the maintenance of identity. To the Spring RAC members, this continuity seems to lie in their perceptions of continuity in their obligations and responsibilities to family, including grandchildren. Because many lived in economic hardship in the past (which is typical of the older generation in Singapore), leisure is a new discovery; it represents new experiences different from the previous work self and family self.

Members at the Spring RAC consciously see the center as a place where they foster new identities—from being referred to by their first names to having opportunities to learn new things. As one member said during a sharing session, “We come here for activities to stay away from family matters, so we should concentrate more on learning new things (than on complaining).” The desire to see joining the center as an exploration of a new dimension of the self has powered the enthusiasm for activities organized at the center, and the focus on what new things one has learned rather than on one’s past experiences. The desire to interpret the Spring RAC as belonging to the current phase of life and the creation of a new self are more evident among the women. Perhaps this is a strategy that allows older women to stay on par with male counterparts, who, with a long history of work experience behind them, can rattle on about their past glories and work experiences when they have an opportunity to do so. This contrasts with the experiences of older Jews who recreated identities from their youth, as described in Myerhoff’s (1978) classic work on senior centers. However, the contrast also highlights differing sociocultural circumstances. Whereas the older Jews usually lived apart from their families and would “miss their family but cherish their independence” (p. 8), the older Chinese in Singapore, as noted earlier, usually live with their children or in relatively close proximity to their family. They cherish their continual emotional and often financial interdependence with their children, while at the same time venture beyond for opportunities to experience new leisure roles made possible with the presence of a senior center.

Conclusion

An examination of the Spring RAC in Singapore shows that far from being a ghetto for the old, the center enhances life satisfaction of older persons and gives meaning to their later lives. It expands the interpersonal network of older persons beyond the family and encourages members to stay youthful and in touch with the society not only through various classes offered, but also through frequent outings and participation in performances at community events. The center’s schedule of 9 A.M. to 6 P.M., 5 days a week helps structure the members’ days. This has been particularly useful for those who suffer from the crisis of retirement—a feeling of loss after relinquishing their active work role and the daily schedule structured around it.

Having focused on an RAC set in the context of an Asian society experiencing rapid social and demographic changes, this study bears the following theoretical and practical implications:

First, how should leisure in later life interact with the desire to continue working, either full time or part time? Despite the traditional idea of old age as a time to *xiang qin fu*, people have been shown to support a nonspecific retirement age. This parallels the paramount

value placed on work in traditional Chinese society, to the extent that one feels guilty about engaging in leisure, even in retirement. However, as one center member said:

If you say you want to work until the last day, you can still work, carry on working. But there must be a certain period in your life when you think back and look at how I've taken care of life, and have I been fair to myself? Leisure is something I want to be fair in the sense that I want to enjoy doing things.

The recent increase in various leisure activities and recreation programs for older persons in Singapore indicates the increasing desire to engage in non-work activity and fun. There is much room for further study on leisure and its possible juxtaposition with work in later life, especially in Asian societies where the work ethic is much treasured to the extent that leisure is sacrificed from a person's early years. A study of this juxtaposition as it relates to retirees would further refine and provide a more accurate perspective on the notions of retirement and what it entails cross-culturally (Luborsky & LeBlanc, 2003).

Second, how will Spring RAC change its role with the emergence of future cohorts of better educated retirees? As a service to the seniors, the center currently runs on the assumption that the members require care and help from the younger population. This has been typical among service providers for seniors, because many of the current cohort of elders have received little or no education.

However, the mindset of placing older persons as receivers of care was questioned during a group discussion where one Spring RAC member shared about feeling the need to help those among her cohort who were less fortunate. She suggested the possibility of initiating a volunteer group among members to reach out to those in need. Her suggestion shows the need for constant reflection and discussion to fine tune a center that is best suited to its members. Depending on the members' needs, the RAC could expand its role, perhaps playing multiple roles beyond a leisure center and also acting as a liaison office for seniors who prefer a later life package of part-time work, volunteer activities, and recreations. Ultimately, the seniors will be responsible for their own RACs, using them as vehicles to reach out and educate the wider population on the joys of active aging. In fact, when the funding for the Spring RAC was discontinued after 5 years of operation, they center was able to continue thanks to the presence of a dedicated pool of young-old in their 50s and 60s, many of whom turned from members into volunteers, taking a new step toward self-reliance. Empowering the older persons themselves with more autonomy at the center also serves to avoid a mismatch in activities and wants. Moody (1998) cautions that a "frenzy of activity" in old age can actually mask, rather than diminish, the emptiness of meaning. Katz (1996, p. 127), in discussing the activity theory, uses the example of Hazan's study on a London day center to show that activities in the senior center can be used as "sites to resist activity-driven social regulation," and that activities that are planned for seniors by professionals and gerontologists may not be what the seniors are interested in.

Organized activities and activity centers for older persons, as an emerging trend and an increasingly desirable choice for retirees looking for an active lifestyle in later life, also play a role in changing the goal of later life. The cultural ideal of *xiang qin fu* is no longer sufficient when one is faced with a possible 20 more years—largely with good health—of life after retirement.

Acknowledgments This project received funding from National University of Singapore Research Fund R112000012. An earlier draft of this article was presented at the XV International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (ICAES), July 5–12, 2003, in Florence, Italy. The author is especially grateful to Maria Cattell for comments on an earlier draft.

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