A global search for their roots

Youths make trips to embrace lifestyle of immigrant ancestors

BY Debbie Yong

WHILE the debate on a national identity — or the lack of it — rages, many young Singaporeans are heading abroad in search of their roots.

Miss Denise Tan, 20, made a five-day trip last June to a village in Hainan, China, where her father lived until he was 10.

“It was so different from any other trip because it was so personal,” said the medical student.

“Everywhere I walked, I tried to imagine my Dad doing the same, decades ago.”

During the visit, she helped neighbours plant seedlings in their rice fields and visited an old family home, where her father lived as a boy.

Miss Tam is one of a growing number of young Singaporeans who are not content with just tracing their cultural roots. They want to fully embrace them too, even if that means giving up their city lifestyles and creature comforts to live in the remote villages and native towns of their parents, grandparents and other ancestors.

Miss Tan, for instance, had to wash all her clothes in the old-fashioned way.

“There was not a single washing machine in the village. My aunt had to teach me how to do it manually, with a big basin and lots of stepping on and whacking the clothes,” she laughed.

There are no statistics for the number of young people who make these heritage trips, but other figures suggest that today’s youths are taking the initiative to find out more about their ethnic heritage.

At the Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan clan association, 11 out of 15 students in the Teochew language classes are in their teens or early 20s.

Museums are seeing more young visitors, too. A nine-month campaign from August 2004 to April last year to get more young people to visit museums saw a youth viewership count of 174,323, more than double the expected 70,000.

Mrs Lim Siew Peng, chief executive officer of the National Heritage Board, said the numbers are encouraging.

“It is best to reach them when they are young,” she said. “But not too young, think 13-year-old Samrat Desai. He and his twin brother were ‘apathetic Hindus’ in their teens. They only took part in Hindu customs to please their parents, and would rather stay in bed than follow their relatives when they went to the temple.”

“I never believed that these rituals would have any tangible impact on my life,” said the third-year finance and engineering student at the University of Pennsylvania. “But a four-week trip to stay with relatives in Mumbai and Baroda in India last July changed his mind.

Daily chats with his grandmother made him realise he had been too quick to dismiss his religion. “If they believe so strongly in something, there must be a reason behind it. Maybe I was just too used to looking for the logic or science behind everything,” he said.

For others like Mr Nabil Mustafiz, 22, learning about his culture is not enough. He wants to give back to it, too.

He is Singaporean but his parents are from Bangladesh, a country he said is often overshadowed by its larger neighbours India and Pakistan.

“Sure there are all the ‘Bangla’ jokes, but many people don’t know who we really are. During a trip back to the Bangladeshi capital Dhaka with his parents in December last year, the National University of Singapore law student and ex-debater spent his time improving the teachers’ standard of English at a school his relatives helped set up there.”

CULTURE SEEKERS: (From left) Miss Denise Tan, Miss Rebecca Ye, Mr Nabil Mustafiz, Mr Samrat Desai and his twin brother Shakti have gone or are planning to go to their “native countries” to learn more about their heritage.

“It’s my small part to help my people,” he said. “I want to do it at least once a year.”

Many young people here feel that growing up in a society as multicultural as Singapore’s means that ethnic identity gets watered down, because youths want to assimilate with their friends of other races.

Nanyang Technological University communications student Rebecca Ye, a 20-year-old of mixed Chinese and Indian parentage, agrees.

She said that cultural identity is often more watered down when Singaporean youths get too eager to emulate teens in the West.

Ironically, it was a trip to New Jersey in the United States to visit her mother’s relatives last month that made her realise how far removed from her Indian roots she was.

“I felt ashamed because they’ve lived in the West for the longest time but they still know more about our religious rites and customs than me, even though I live in Asia,” she said.

She does not speak a word of Malayalam, her mother’s dialect, because she took Chinese as a second language in school and speaks English at home.

Now, she tries to pick up a new word of Malayalam every time she sees her maternal grandmother — but still feels that the full cultural immersion of a trip to India would do her good.

“You learn more only when you genuinely want to know and go find out for yourself,” Miss Ye said.

She wants to make a trip back to Kerala, India, with her parents during the next school holidays.

Miss Denise Tan is heartened to know that there are people like Miss Ye. But she lamented that even though the desire to find one’s roots is there, finding time to do so is difficult.

She said: “When I came back from China, I said I’d sign up for Hainanese language classes, but eventually I got too caught up in my everyday life.”

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