Youth turning their backs on "Singapore Dream"

By Eveline Danubrata

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(Reuters) - Ong Hui Juan spent nearly four years working in a British bank in Singapore, but decided to leave last year to pursue her passion of working with youth - an unusual and surprising decision in the achievement-oriented city state.

But Ong, 25, is just one of a growing number of young Singaporeans who are turning their backs on the material joys of the long-cherished "Singapore Dream," summed up as the "Five C's" - cash, car, credit card, condominium and country club membership - to do what they enjoy, even at much lower pay.

"I wanted to get out of a nine-to-five job. It was waiting for bonus after bonus, promotion after promotion. That didn't really appeal to me," said Ong, who studied banking and finance at university, but had worked with young people on the side.

"I don't need to be very rich as long as I have enough to get by for myself and my family, and I continue to have the flexible time I have now."

Young people may want to slow down, but the government does not. Singapore has long counted on its people as its biggest resource, the one that helped drive its transformation from a sea port with few natural resources into a key financial center after independence in 1965.

The government has also placed a strong emphasis on practical skills such as science and mathematics in schools, with Singapore students usually excelling in international tests.

It is just one part of what has made Singapore one of the world's richest countries, with gross domestic product per capita of S$63,050 ($50,123) in 2011, 48 times the level in 1960, according to government statistics.

Not one to rest on its laurels, though, the Singapore government recently released a nearly 80-page "white paper" calling for higher productivity in its workforce and projecting population growth by as much as 30 percent by 2030.
But far from going along, some young Singaporeans feel a sense of disconnect from the traditional paths that are laid out ahead of them as part of this striving - get into a top school, land a high-paying job and hope that their children can build on their achievements.

"The institutional set up of Singapore makes it remain a more materialistic society, when the government always puts economic growth, and therefore materialistic achievement, as a first priority," said Chung Wai Keung, assistant professor of sociology at Singapore Management University.

"When the foundation of Singapore society is getting more secure, the younger generation can afford to make decisions different from the mainstream."

There are signs that more are already doing so, in part because financial firms have been shedding jobs the past few years, said Andrea Ross, Managing Director - Singapore, Vietnam and Malaysia, at recruiting consultancy Robert Walters.

"Redundancies across the board are still continuing within financial services globally, and Singapore youngsters are becoming more confident to take up jobs in industries they have a strong personal desire to be part of," she added.

The School of the Arts in Singapore, opened in 2008, has had around 1,000 applicants for only 200 spaces each of the last three years.

MORE FREEDOM

MaryAnn Loo, an artist in her late 20s, said younger people may have greater freedom to pursue their interests as they have been raised in relatively more comfortable conditions than their parents or grandparents.

Loo herself became a full-time artist at the end of last year and is staging her first solo exhibition. She previously studied psychology in university and had worked as a retail assistant and a freelancer on film and TV sets.

"Our parents grew up in a difficult time, and their primary purpose was survival. But I think a lot of people have already gone past the survival stage in Singapore, and therefore they can explore more things," Loo said.

This kind of maverick may still remain in the minority for a while at least, said Tan Ern Ser, an associate professor of sociology at the National University of Singapore.

"Some may well be able to afford 'dropping out' if they have the means, through inheritance, past savings, or having a rich spouse. But for most people, dropping out is not an option, at least not a long-term one," Tan said.

Yet Chung said these young people may ultimately prove to be pioneers.

"When there are more and more young adults making alternative decisions, and when more and more of them feel satisfaction because of their choice, it could reach a tipping point where the next generation will see those alternative options as legitimate," he added.

(Reporting by Eveline Danubrata, editing by Elaine Lies)