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HCI-J1-NOTES

ESSAY	CULTURE

Possible Essay Question

1. 'Cultural and heritage sites have lost their relevance.' How far is this true of your society?

Culture and its Physical Manifestations

Culture refers to a people's ideas, customs, and social behaviour. Through it, we see what people think, what they wear, what they eat, and what they do. And beyond just the *what*, there is also the *how*. A piece of bread can either be eaten by hand or with utensils. Yet, culture does not simply remain abstract and intangible. The way we live leaves an almost indelible mark on our physical surroundings. The tools, shelters, and art we leave behind are mediums through which we participate in culture and culture *itself*. Thus, our surroundings acquire cultural and historical significance beyond just existing as mere space. What do they serve to do? More importantly, are they still relevant amid relentless progress?

Cultural and Heritage Sites in Singapore

Singapore's National Museum

Established in 1887, the National Museum of Singapore is **Singapore's oldest museum** and a cornerstone of its cultural heritage. Located in a **19th-century colonial building**, the museum offers a variety of exhibits that **inform its visitors about the nation's past**. One example is the **Singapore History Gallery exhibit**, which **chronicles the development of Singapore**. Visitors are captivated by the museum's compelling storytelling, which vividly chronicles Singapore's transformation over the centuries. Through detailed exhibits and immersive displays, they gain a deeper understanding of the nation's evolution—from its early

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days as a **bustling trading port strategically positioned along maritime routes**, to its **establishment as a British Crown Colony in 1867**, which brought infrastructure development but also colonial subjugation. The harrowing period of **Japanese occupation during World War II** is brought to life through personal accounts, artefacts, and multimedia presentations, revealing the **immense suffering and resilience of the people**. Finally, the exhibits chart the **struggles for self-governance and eventual independence in 1965**, showcasing key moments such as the formation of a national identity and the building of a self-reliant economy. This demonstrates our willingness to preserve Singapore's heritage for posterity.

Watch this video to learn more about the museum's exhibits:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gAUs2pN06Vc.

Chinatown

Chinatown is a culturally rich district that is **popular among tourists**. The area is characterised by beautifully preserved shophouses, bustling markets, and historic landmarks. One of the **standout attractions** is the **Buddha Tooth Relic Temple**, a magnificent temple that houses what is believed to be a sacred tooth relic of the Buddha. The **Chinatown Heritage Centre** also provides an immersive journey into the lives of early Chinese immigrants. From the struggles of "Sinkheh" (new migrants) - risking life and limb to embark on an arduous journey from the various Chinese provinces to the promised land of Singapore - to the raw, seedy and underground practices of gambling dens and secret societies, the ethnographic museum educates visitors on Chinatown's history. The area is also populated by traditional Chinese medicine halls, quaint teahouses, and vibrant street art, **making it a popular tourist destination**. Moreover, the bustling street markets are a paradise for souvenir hunters. At the same time, the food scene—ranging from hawker stalls at Chinatown Complex Food Centre to Michelin-starred restaurants like Hawker Chan—offers an authentic taste of Singaporean cuisine. The district also comes alive during festivals like Chinese New Year and the Mid-Autumn Festival, with colourful decorations, cultural performances, and traditional crafts that provide an unforgettable cultural experience.

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Old National Library

The Old National Library, completed in 1960, was a beloved landmark that held a special place in the hearts of many Singaporeans. Known for its iconic red-brick design and serene atmosphere, the library was a hub for learning and knowledge. It attracted students, researchers, and book lovers from all walks of life. Yet, despite its historical and sentimental significance, the building was **demolished in 2004** to facilitate the construction of the **Fort Canning Tunnel**, which was part of a larger urban development plan to alleviate traffic congestion in the city centre. According to the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), 'over 3,000 vehicles pass through Stamford Road every hour during peak periods and with the old traffic scheme, motorists stopped at two traffic lights at slow speeds, which made the area prone to congestion.' The tunnel was expected to '**cut journey times from 5 minutes to as fast as 18 seconds**.' The decision sparked public outcry, with many lamenting the loss of such an important cultural and architectural icon.

Learn more about the Old National Library here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Feqd0DlcfY.

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ISSUES	CULTURE

Jiak Ba Buey? This is a question that not only conveys congeniality but also represents culture. The use of dialect, Hokkien in this case, signifies one's identity and the ties that one shares with one's community. Yet, the use of dialect in Singapore is dwindling with time. According to a population census conducted in 2020, only 8.7 per cent of residents aged five and above used dialects as the most common language at home. With the spread of westernisation, English, our lingua franca, has become the dominant language of a people. Time affects not just language but the beliefs and routines that were cherished by our forefathers and mothers. Can culture survive the tug and pull of modern progress? What are some other issues that revolve around culture?

2018 Chemnitz Riots – Control and Freedom

In 2018, **a German man**, Daniel Hillig, was killed in a fight. **Two immigrants**, one from Iraq and the other from Syria, were named as suspects. According to the prosecutors, the two men were suspected of stabbing Hillig multiple times with 'no justifiable reason.' As a response to the stabbing, **far-right** groups **protested against migrants and refugees coming to Germany**. Many of these protestors, troubled by the **European migrant crisis**, already held **xenophobic sentiments**; Germany, under Chancellor Merkel, allowed over a **million asylum seekers from the Middle East to cross the border into Germany**. One of the first few protests was organised by the political party - **Alternative for Germany (AfD)**. The party believed that **unrestrained migration diluted the German traditional way of living.** Petry, the former head of the party, once said that 'the **immigration of Muslims will change our culture**.' The protest in Chemnitz grew; other far-right groups, such as Pro Chemnitz and the anti-Islam Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident, also joined in. It later became a riot, which had to be quelled by the police. The event underscored the mayhem brought about by xenophobia (and Islamophobia) and the need for the government to manage the effects of immigration amid popular resistance. If you were the government, would you control your border to protect your culture?

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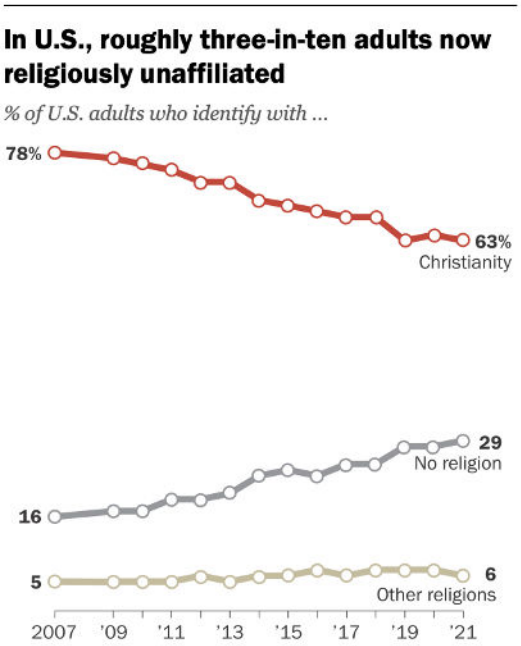
Secularisation of American Society – Preservation and Progress

With modernity, individuals are given **new alternatives to think and live**. These alternatives **diverge from traditional ways of living**, and they tend to prioritise the freedom and rights of the individual. Time-honoured beliefs and practices are **perceived as outdated and irrelevant**. This is true for rituals and festivities. This is also true for religion. In the United States, society has become increasingly **secularised**, as seen in the significant rise in the number of religiously unaffiliated adults. According to a 2021 Pew Research study, **about three in ten U.S. adults now identify as religiously unaffiliated**, a stark contrast to the dominance of religious affiliation in previous generations. This group, often referred to as **the "nones,"** includes atheists, agnostics, and those who describe their religion as "nothing in particular".



This trend reflects broader societal changes where traditional religious practices and beliefs are **losing their central role in American life**. The same study found that the proportion of adults who identify as Christian has dropped from 75% in 2011 to 63% in 2021. Simultaneously, fewer people attend religious services regularly, and a growing number of Americans say that religion is not important in their daily lives. This secularisation can be linked to **changing attitudes among younger generations**, who are **less likely to view religion as essential** to their identity. Additionally, the increasing emphasis on **scientific reasoning, personal autonomy, and diverse belief systems** has provided Americans with alternatives to traditional religious frameworks. If you were an American, would you abandon the faith practised by your community?

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Chinese New Year – Optimism and Pessimism

Chinese New Year, also known as **the Lunar New Year,** is one of Singapore's most significant cultural celebrations. The festival marks the beginning of the lunar calendar and is characterised by customs such **as family reunions, lion dances, the giving of red packets (*ang baos*), and the preparation of cultural foods**. Public spaces, particularly **Chinatown**, come alive with **dazzling red lanterns, elaborate decorations, and bustling night markets**, creating a festive atmosphere. While the Chinese community traditionally celebrates it, Singapore's multicultural society ensures that **people of all ethnicities and religions are welcome to join in**.

A key example of minority participation is seen in schools. **Inter-ethnic participation is promoted** by encouraging students of all backgrounds to join in activities like the making of red paper lanterns or performing the *lo hei* (prosperity tossed salad). Furthermore, grassroots organisations such as the **People's Association host community events** where minority residents partake in learning mahjong, lion dance workshops or Chinese calligraphy sessions alongside their Chinese neighbours. As an observer, do you think that these festivities help in unifying the people?

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