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27 Nov 2017 06:38AM  
(Updated: 27 Nov 2017 11:37AM)



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## Commentary: Wouldn't it be nice to have more public holidays?

The recent Golden Week in China and extra public holiday in South Korea has left National University of Singapore's Sin Harnɡ Luh wondering why are authorities in those countries so generous? Do we have a right to leisure?



Are you looking forward to your next holiday?(Photo: REUTERS/Bernadett Szabo)

SINGAPORE: Wouldn't it be nice to have a whole week of public holidays? When offices shut and one had no choice but to take a break?

Recently, the South Korean government made an unprecedented move to declare a one-off public holiday on Oct 2 to bridge the gap between the weekend and a series of national holidays.

By doing so, the extra day added one more day of rest before National Foundation Day on Oct 3, which was followed by Chuseok on from Oct 4, to 6, and then Hangeul Day on Oct 9. Together with the weekends, this move effectively created a 10-day public holiday in South Korea – a Golden Holiday.

President Moon Jae-in was said to have done so to offer South Koreans the chance to take a well-deserved break after a difficult year in a country famous for stressful, long working hours and a working culture where employees typically underuse the paid leave system.

He had also previously spoken about the importance of vacation and time away from work.

### REST OR GO ON VACATION

Indeed, the idea that everyone, regardless of economic or social situation, should have the opportunity to rest or go on vacation, is not a new one.

Rooted especially in ideas like accessible tourism, public holidays have long been seen as a means to ensure mandatory time off work. The assumption is that leisure time and vacations especially are considered to be important aspects of life, and are positively associated with well-being and good health.

Travel and time away from work is considered to be relaxing, enriching and in general tied in with the ability for one to refresh and recharge. Ensuring sufficient leisure time has also been thought to produce better citizens – ones that were more productive at work after a vacation.

The cyclical process of going somewhere and then coming back refreshed and ready for more work often forms the basis of modern life and employment – inclusive of our prior lamenting that we need a holiday.

However, since different types of jobs give varying levels of time off work and paid leave, public holidays have the additional benefit of ensuring time off is made available by law.



Time away from work is considered to be tied in with the ability for one to refresh and recharge.

This is particularly critical in all sorts of situations from contract work where people are usually paid by the hour and do not have time off, to white collared work where workers may have access to a paid leave system but feel socially pressured not to go on leave by their colleagues and employers.

Indeed, article 24 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights states that “everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitations of working hours”.

Some countries such as Australia and the United States provide a two- to three-day public holiday on Christmas which occasionally leads to a combined four- to five-day break when it falls just before or after a weekend.

The UK government also sets what they term bank holidays on a few Mondays in the year to allow for long weekend breaks.

China's Golden Weeks on Lunar New Year and the Chinese National Day are perhaps the most well-known examples. In 2017, the China National Tourism Administration reported more than 700 million vacations taken by Chinese nationals in its National Day Golden Week (Oct 1 to 8).

Retail and food services spending in China during the Golden Week recorded a historic high of 1.5 trillion yuan (\$\$307 billion), while domestic tourism revenues amounted to some 584 billion yuan (\$\$119 billion).



People wait in a hall of a railway station in Hangzhou, Zhejiang, as China's National Day Golden Week comes to an end. (Photo: REUTERS/Stringer)

#### **SPEND OR REST?**

It seems beyond lofty ideals of work-life balance and the importance of leisure are impressive statistics.

President Moon Jae-in was said to have hoped that the lengthened holiday in South Korea would turbocharge consumption and provide a boost to the economy akin to China's Golden Week or Premium Friday in Japan.

In fact, one of the early proponents and adopters of shorter working hours and the five-day work week was Henry Ford.

Well-known industrialist and business magnate, Henry Ford, the founder of the Ford Motor Company, was said to have implemented such policies not so much because of labour rights or because of a belief that productivity declines after long working hours.

Instead, Ford believed that workers needed adequate leisure time to shop – and consume the products he was trying to sell.

Both the Golden Holiday in South Korea or the Golden Weeks in China are probably driven with the aspiration to make people spend, rather than rest.

Would such long stretches of public holidays be something one should wish for then?

#### **BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR**

It's not like I would mind them, but looking at China's example, one should perhaps be careful what they wish for.

The overwhelming numbers of people who travel back home or elsewhere during the Golden Weeks in China, have long been regarded to be a problem of instituting such long breaks.

In 2017, the China Railway Corporation estimated more than 110 million passenger rail trips made during the National Day Golden Week period. 12.95 million passenger trips were made by plane during this same period.

Such peak travel numbers have inevitably drove up prices to travel during such periods, not unlike how airfares and tour packages are typically more expensive during the school holiday periods in Singapore.



A crowd of commuters at Beijing Railway Station, as migrants head home for the Lunar New Year. (Photo: Jeremy Koh)

China itself is beginning to consider whether Golden Weeks should be continued considering its disruptions to the country's regular economy.



Also, while the popular perception is that public holidays is for everyone, we should not neglect the fact that huge numbers of retail and service staff continue to work during public holidays – otherwise how can one consume and spend the money he or she is expected to be spending?

Similarly, those working in the military, police, civil defence and other essential services like public transport and emergency healthcare are unlikely to be able to take long public holidays off work in the same way.

Finally, in case you are still hoping for a long public holiday in Singapore – it has in fact happened before. Two years ago, when Singapore marked 50 years of independence, then President Tony Tan declared Aug 7, 2015 a public holiday.

This made Aug 7 to 10, 2015 an extended four-day Jubilee Weekend.

It was of course nice to have an extra-long weekend to join in the nation's festivities and celebrate its achievements.

But my lasting memory of the Jubilee Weekend was driving up to the Science Centre thinking that I would visit Snow City with my kids since it was free but finding the entire centre surrounded by a queue snaking all the way round its back.

There were hundreds, if not thousands of people trying to get in. Social media posts by the end of the day showed similar situations at most major tourist attractions in Singapore.

So perhaps the paid-leave system that spreads out vacations and time off work is not so bad after all when one compares this to the Golden Week – as long as employers allow us to go on leave, and not have to take our work along on holiday.

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Source: CNA/sl