NANYANG JUNIOR COLLEGE

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GENERAL PAPER

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INSERT **1 hour 30 minutes**

READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS FIRST

This insert contains the passage for Paper 2.

This insert consists of 3 printed pages.

Richard Godwin writes about the competitive nature of modern leisure

1 If you spend much time mooching around the internet, you will probably have come across articles on sites such as Quartz and Forbes called things like “17 habits of highly successful people”. Lest we begin to suspect that these executive Stakhanovites are monomaniacal, tedious and exhausting, we are encouraged to admire how well-rounded they are. At weekends, the Facebook founder, Mark Zuckerberg, and his family embrace “Jomo” – the joy of missing out. Warren Buffett kicks back with his ukulele. Oprah Winfrey makes time for twice-daily meditation. As lifehack.org puts it: “The weekends can often be busier than weekdays, with people attempting to cram chores, exercise, family commitments, social engagements and more into a 48-hour period.”

2 Even those of us occupying less happy positions as manual workers might emit a weary bleat of recognition at that. Weekdays are tough. But weekends? Exhausting! Increasingly, our leisure time is not leisure as our parents or grandparents might have enjoyed it: time away from the productive demands of work for pottering, ambling, collecting, socialising. It is leisure with an imperative, self-imposed or otherwise, to maximise relaxation yield, compete over hobby production and co-opt every activity – exercising, meditating, making Halloween costumes for the children – into a dynamic of human perfectibility.

3 It is hard to say precisely when this shift took place. One reason leisure has become more competitive is that it is increasingly quantifiable. Smartwatches keep track of your movements, from steps walked to kilometres skied; platforms such as Strava allow you to compare times with peers. The principle works beyond exercise, too. Apps such as SleepScore help you measure how productive your sleep is; Calm and Headspace gamify mindfulness and meditation, so it is no longer an antidote to work but a way of preparing yourself for more work.

4 Aspects of all this measuring are perfectly innocent. A little competition makes things fun and there is nothing wrong with wanting to improve your triathlon time. However, Dr Thomas Curran, a clinical psychologist at the University of Bath, sees a correlation between the increased use of metrics and the rise in perfectionism in young people. In a recent study, he defined this as “an irrational desire to achieve, along with being overly critical of oneself and others”.

5 “Perfectionism is a very problematic trait, especially for those who suffer with it at the clinical end,” he says. “It is positively associated with depression, anxiety and even suicide. We are not suggesting that every young person is a clinical perfectionist, but we are suggesting that they are moving further up the spectrum as time unfolds – and that is concerning.”

6 The culture of metrics has migrated from the business world into our leisure time via education and public services. Schools have become more results-oriented. In an attempt to make the important measurable, we have instead made the measurable important. This has helped to create a generation who see learning as a numbers game.

7 This has changed the way we view our time off. We are intimidated by the expectation that we must actually be skilled at what we do in our free time. Our ‘hobbies’, if that is even the word for them anymore, have become too serious, too demanding, too much an occasion to become anxious about whether you are really the person you claim to be. To be fair, this is partly a function of growing up. Small children sing, swim, climb, draw, play various sports, make various crafts and do not much worry if they are any

good at them. When you are 37, for example, it is embarrassing to be rubbish at drawing, so we tend to narrow our range of activities. But there is a generational shift here, too. My grandad was a keen photographer, coin collector, cyclist, watercolourist and tropical-fish keeper – and, bless him, he was not much good at any of them. I do not think that was the point. His hobbies were ways of absorbing himself and meeting people. There was not the same urge to share and compare and discover how rubbish your efforts were next to some tropical-fish fancier in Colorado with 373,000 followers; likewise, my mother has never given much thought to how she might turn her sewing skills into a side hustle. She just likes doing it.

8 We could turn to art and literature for some perspective – but these are subject to the same imperatives. Apps such as Joosr and Blinkist condense books into 20-minute versions. On Reddit's podcast forum, a number of users report listening at 1.5x speed, so as to maximise consumption, and express regret that they cannot do the same for Netflix shows. "I do audiobooks at 1.6," one user explains to me. "It feels like an appeal to intelligence – the natural pauses and implied rimshots are gone. It is a fast stream of one-two punches that challenges my reaction time and makes me listen harder – and it is less casual." Less casual?

9 In the past, it was the poor who worked all hours, while the upper classes flaunted their leisure as a status symbol – take those Parisian flâneurs* who used to take their tortoises for walks. The members of the early labour movement battled hard to claw back their time and they were successful at it: we have them to thank for our largely work-free weekends. The post-war period was arguably a golden age for the hobbyists. Now, if anything, the 19th-century paradigm has been reversed: automation and associated forces mean those at the lower end of the labour market often do not have enough work to do, while the rich are time-poor. Busyness is worn as a badge of honour; idleness is condemned as a vice.

10 From an economic point of view, the decline of leisure is not as illogical as it first appears. Time is money. The more money you earn, the more valuable your time is. The more valuable something is, the less inclined you are to waste it. That is why people in London walk faster than people in rural Cornwall. It is why a banker is more likely to ask you to sponsor their ultramarathon effort than, say, a fisherman.

11 But I sense a backlash against the cult of competitive accomplishment. When I surveyed my friends, I discovered that quite a few had hobbies that they keep quiet about – usually something cultivated as an antidote to screens, "likes", metrics and doing. I have found time to go swimming, too. I have no desire to compete with anyone. I do it mostly because I enjoy the feeling of being suspended in another element, the coolness, weightlessness and motion. I also like the discernible progress I have made over six months with the aid of the occasional YouTube instructional video and notes from other swimmers: I have gone from thrashing around and panting whenever I attempted front crawl to serenely gliding up and down. One reason I like it is that getting into the right rhythm leaves room for almost no other thoughts. Another is that there is a straightforward relationship between effort and reward. If you keep at it, you get better. In very few areas of 21st-century life is that true. But, naturally, when I managed to swim a mile, I shared it on Instagram.

**flaneur - someone who walks around not doing anything in particular but watching people and society.*