

DECODING AND MANUFACTURING CULTURES: INTERPRETING SINGAPORE FOR TOURISTS

CAN-SENG OOI*

Copenhagen Business School, Denmark

ABSTRACT

Tourists visit a destination for only relatively short periods of time and they lack the local knowledge to truly appreciate the destination's local cultures. Under such conditions, tourists can easily misinterpret, ignore or not even notice many cultural aspects of the host society. However, tourists rely on cultural mediators and interpreters to help them understand and appreciate the destination's local cultures. This paper examines how the Singapore Tourism Board mediates the tourist cultural experience in Singapore. The process of helping tourists interpret and decode local cultures is not simple or straightforward. This process not only describes local cultures to tourists, it also involves enticing tourists and drawing economic benefits from the enterprise. These goals may lead to the manufacturing of cultures for tourist consumption. This paper argues that the decoding of cultures for tourists extends beyond describing local cultures to tourists, it can initiate change in local society too. In sum, this paper asks these questions: What types of interpretations are offered to tourists? How would new tourist cultural products, which are invented to enhance the promoted image of the destination, fit into and influence the host society?

KEY WORDS

Cultural change, cultural interpretations, mediation, city identity, tourism, Singapore.

RESUMEN

Los turistas suelen visitar sus destinos sólo por un corto período así que les falta la sabiduría para apreciar las culturas locales. Esto significa que los turistas fácilmente pueden malinterpretar, ignorar o incluso no observar muchos aspectos culturales de la sociedad anfitriona. Por el contrario los turis-

* Can-Seng Ooi, Ph.D., researches and teaches in the Copenhagen Business School. He has done research and written on the mediation of tourist experiences, the strategic use of history and social engineering and politics. Empirically, his fieldwork concentrates on different aspects of Singaporean and Danish societies.

tas dependen de los mediadores e intérpretes de la propia cultura para apreciar las culturas del lugar visitado. El presente artículo examina cómo el Singapore Tourism Board está actuando en su papel de mediador frente a los turistas que visitan Singapur. La interpretación y desciframiento de las culturas locales no es un proceso simple ni fácil. Este proceso no sólo requiere una presentación de las culturas locales sino también atraer a los turistas y lograr beneficios económicos de este establecimiento. Estos objetivos pueden dar resultados ambiguos ya que el desciframiento cultural muchas veces es acompañado por una producción cultural dirigida al consumo turístico. Este artículo propone que el proceso del desciframiento cultural es dinámico y puede afectar la sociedad local. En breve, el artículo pone estas preguntas en el contexto de Singapur: ¿Cuáles son las interpretaciones que se ofrecen a los turistas? ¿Por qué estas interpretaciones? ¿Cómo pueden estos empaquetados y nuevos productos turísticos materializar la imagen de la sociedad anfitriona?

PALABRAS CLAVE

Cambios culturales, interpretaciones culturales, mediación, turistas, turismo, Singapur.

RÉSUMÉ

Les touristes ne passent qu'une période relativement courte dans leur pays de destination et ils n'ont pas assez de connaissance de la région pour leur permettre une appréciation profonde des cultures locales. Sous de telles conditions, les touristes peuvent facilement risquer de mal interpréter ou de ne pas reconnaître de nombreux aspects culturels du pays d'accueil. Les touristes comptent donc sur l'aide des médiateurs et des interprètes pour comprendre et apprécier les cultures locales du pays de destination. Le but de cet article est d'étudier comment le Syndicat d'Initiative de Singapour sert d'intermédiaire dans l'expérience culturelle des touristes à Singapour. Le processus d'aider les touristes à interpréter et à déchiffrer les cultures locales n'est ni simple ni droit. Il s'agit non seulement de faire une description des cultures locales auprès des touristes, mais aussi de les séduire, et finalement de tirer profit de l'entreprise. Ces buts peuvent mener à une industrie de fabrication de cultures pour la consommation touristique. La thèse de cet article est que le décodage des cultures pour les touristes s'étend au-delà de la description des cultures locales et risque de déclencher un changement dans la culture elle-même. Bref, cet article pose les questions suivantes: Quelles sont les interprétations culturelles proposées aux touristes? Comment peuvent de nouveaux produits culturels destinés aux touristes et créés afin de renforcer l'image de marque du pays, en devenir partie intégrante et exercer de l'influence sur la société du pays d'accueil?

MOTS-CLÉ

Changement culturel, interprétations culturelles, médiation, identité urbaine, tourisme, Singapour.

We have often taken for granted the social and cultural embeddings in common objects. Many objects in our daily life are culturally meaningful. However, there are objects that we could not make sense of immediately. Dant observed that “we do come across objects that we do not recognise. These are the things that we cannot name, could not use and cannot make sense of; very new things, very old things or things that come from other cultures. These strange things are usually put on display in demonstrations, museums or exhibitions where they are treated as mediators of past, future or distant cultures and their meanings are ‘translated’, their messages decoded, by historians, archaeologists, anthropologists and technologists, often through the medium of accompanying texts” (1999, pp. 153-154).

In other words, we need the help of interpreters to decode the cultural meanings of apparently obscure and esoteric objects. Cultural meanings and their decoding and unlocking have become important aspects of cultural tourism. Firstly, cultural meanings animate and enliven ordinary objects and sights into interesting tourist products. For instance, in a tour I participated around Singapore’s Little India, the commonly found brown shaved coconut was framed as a tourist cultural product. My tour guide took a coconut from a basket in a shop. She pointed to the three spots on the coconut, which form an equilateral triangle. She told us that the spots are the “eyes of evil” in Hinduism. Her comment has effectively decoded the religious significance behind the otherwise ordinary fruit to many unknowing non-Hindu tourists. And her explanation has transformed the fruit into an object of tourist curiosity.

Secondly, a destination is culturally diverse and complex, and a cultural tourist can easily misunderstand, ignore or not even notice many cultural aspects of the destination. Tourists rely on travel information guides, tourist information offices, tour guides and friendly locals to help them move around, notice interesting cultural manifestations and make sense of the place. Tourism authorities, tourist guides, sight operators, travel writers and travel destination reviewers are some other cultural mediators in the tourism industry. Some of these mediators promote, offer advice and views to enable tourists to decide on the places they want to visit and the activities they want to do, while others help tourists experience a destination in a culturally more meaningful manner.

The process of helping tourists interpret and decode local culture is not a simple and straightforward exercise. It is not just geared towards

communicating clearly to tourists, it also involves enticing tourists and benefiting economically from the enterprise. This means that the decoding of cultural messages is more than just informing tourists “factual cultural meanings”, other interests embedded in the decoding exercise may give rise to conflicting aims (Cohen, 1985; MacCannell, 1976, pp. 91-107; Watson and Kopachevsky, 1995). With the goal of attracting and seducing tourists, cultural myths may be sensationally modified or even fabricated, for instance (Cohen, 1985; Ooi, 2001b, pp. 112-144). Or unattractive aspects of the destination are not mentioned and blocked from the gazes of tourists.

This paper investigates the construction of Singapore as “New Asia – Singapore”. “New Asia – Singapore” is the branding of the destination, it aims to package and present Singapore as a culturally dynamic place. As a branding, it intends to help tourists make sense of the myriad of experiences they encounter in the city. “New Asia - Singapore” focuses the attention of tourists on sights and experiences that are consistent with what the Singapore Tourist Board (STB) wants tourists to perceive Singapore. In other words, it interprets and organises the complexity and heterogeneity of the city for tourists. However, as “New Asia – Singapore” decodes Singaporean cultures with the aim to entice and please tourists, it reframes and offers new interpretations of what Singaporean society is.

This paper will show that “New Asia – Singapore” has become a vision for the Singaporean authorities to mould the society. The desire to appeal to tourists have led to the re-presentation and re-interpretation of the destination, and from these re-interpretations, new cultural elements and products are invented or rediscovered to enhance the reality of a “New Asia – Singapore”. The “New Asia – Singapore” message has become more tangible through these new cultural activities and events. In other words, the process of interpretation is thus not just one of decoding “reality” but also creating “reality”. And the differentiation between established and newly invented “realities” is not clear, at least not to unknowing and uninformed tourists.

In the first part of this paper, I would briefly discuss the tourist situation, and accentuate the enormous help tourists need to decode cultural products. Subsequently, I will present the case of Singapore being promoted as “New Asia”. I will analyse the case with regards to how the Singapore Tourism Board strategically decode Singaporean society for tourists and enhance the message they are presenting.

INTERPRETING FOR THE UNKNOWING TOURIST

The starting point of this paper is based on three fundamental conditions of tourists: tourist visits are short, tourists have little local knowledge to appreciate destination cultures and they are doing leisure. The World Tourism Organisation (WTO) described tourism as “the activities of persons travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes. The usual environment of a person consists of a certain area around his/her place of residence plus all other places s/he frequently visits” (WTO, 1995, p. 12). The period of travel is always incorporated into the definitions of the tourist. For example, tourism researcher Erik Cohen suggested that “a tourist is a voluntary, temporary traveller, travelling in the expectation of pleasure from the novelty and change experienced on a relatively long and non-recurrent round-trip” (1974, p. 533). In fact, the average length of stay in Singapore was 3.5 days in 1995 (National Tourism Planning Committees (NTPC) 1996).

Further to the above characterisation, another basic trait of tourists is the relative unfamiliarity with the place tourists visit. As a result, tourists do not have the deep local knowledge of residents in the destination. This varies accordingly, as domestic tourists are more likely to be more familiar with the destination than tourists from far away countries. Nonetheless, being in an unfamiliar destination would inevitably imply that visitors are not armed with the knowledge that local residents have about their own local cultures.

Beside the short trip and the lack of local knowledge, another important characteristic of most cultural tourists is that their activities are situated in the leisure social sphere. A tourist trip is expected to be approached with curiosity and it has a playful quality (Belk, 1997, p. 27). Tourism is promoted and promises to be fun (Urry, 1990). While engaging in a sphere of social activities, tourists are in pursuit of pleasure, they depart from the world of work and seek refuge in the realm of leisure (MacCannell, 1976, p. 6). And the pleasure is framed as freedom from daily routines, inhibitions and constraints, and embraces a luxurious novelty (Belk, 1997, p. 27). As a result, tourists are unlikely and are not expected to invest in much resource to delve into a deep understanding of the destination cultures.

Under the circumstances that tourist visits are short, tourists have little local knowledge and their frame of mind is in the pursuit of

leisure, tourists might not even notice local cultures (MacCannell, 1976, pp. 39-56). They may be oblivious to local cultures that are relevant and deep-seated in the host society. However in the tourism business, cultural mediators are at hand to help tourists notice and interpret local cultures. These mediators select and accentuate aspects of local cultures for tourists to gaze at (Ooi, 2001b, pp. 17-44).

With strong economic motivations, cultural products are packaged in ways to excite, attract and appeal to tourists, and that seduction process may result in the invention of products that are staged as authentic local cultures. Or local cultures are modified, misrepresented and subjected to creative interpretations to please tourists. The unknowing tourists would find it difficult to ascertain whether the cultures presented to them are authentic or fabrications. Some tourists may not even be interested.

So, under the conditions of tourism, what types of interpretations are offered to tourists? Subsequently, with the creative reinterpretation of local cultures, new tourist cultural products are packaged, how would the new cultural products fit into and influence the host society? I would consider these questions with regards to Singapore and its "New Asia – Singapore" branding.

THE SINGAPORE TOURISM INDUSTRY

Singapore places great importance on its tourism industry. The industry underwent tremendous changes in the late 1990s. In 1995, four National Tourism Plan Committees (NTPC) were formed, they released their *Tourism 21: vision of a tourism capital* report in 1996. That report was subsequently accepted as the tourism master plan for Singapore by the government. In the plan, the national tourism authority was given more responsibilities, the tourism business was re-defined and Singapore as a tourist destination was re-positioned. Also in accordance to the plan, the tourism authority, Singapore Tourist Promotion Board (STPB), was renamed Singapore Tourism Board (STB) in November 1997. The plan is constantly being reviewed and fine-tuned although the long term vision remains the same (*STB press release*, 26 May 2000).

For a tiny island city-state of about 650 square kilometres and a population of four million people, it is remarkable that more than six million foreigners visited Singapore annually since 1995 (STB, 1998a,

p. 17). And more than eight million visitors are expected in 2001. Tourism receipts have increased steadily and amounted to US\$7 billion in 1996 (STPB 1997), and is the city-state's third largest foreign exchange earner (Var, Toh and Khan, 1999, p. 196). Singapore has also one of the richest tourist promotion authorities in the world (WTO, 1996, p. 64).

Qu and Zhang (1997) explained Singapore's success as a tourist destination through a number of factors. These factors include promotion, diversification of the tourism product, upgrading of infrastructure, improving living standards, desirable shops and facilities, and the reputation Singapore has for personal safety (p. 43). Unlike many other city tourist destinations, problems such as litter, traffic congestion and overcrowding are not obvious there. The pressures on infrastructure and the environment from the tourist industry are well managed.

Singapore has a good reputation and seems able to deliver positive pre-visit images to visitors. In the *Survey of Overseas Visitors to Singapore 1997*, more than 99 percent of first-time visitors who have preconceived images of Singapore as clean and green, modern and advanced, orderly and disciplined, agreed that Singapore is indeed as they have expected. More than ninety percent who expected, found true that Singapore has interesting tourist attractions and good tourist facilities and services (STB, 1998b, pp. 34-35).

However the growth in the Singapore tourism industry has been threatened. The tourism industry is fiercely competitive in Southeast Asia. Bali in Indonesia, Langkawi in Malaysia, Cebu in the Philippines, lively Southeast Asian cities, including Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta and Manila, are all vying for tourists. In the mid 1990s, with increased competition from the region, Singapore saw its growth of visitors slowing down and the average length of stay and per capita visitor spending falling. In the blueprint, ways of handling competition from the region are offered. The report suggested ways to create new products, enhance the local tourism industry and restructure tourism businesses.

A new destination identity or positioning, "New Asia – Singapore", was launched in January 1996 by the STPB, and the *Tourism 21* master plan recommended that it should be continued. The STPB proclaimed that the positioning "better captures the essence of today's Singapore" (STPB press release, 4 January 1996). The former 11 year-old "Surprising Singapore" position was stated to be no longer adequate in communicating "the breadth of the mature Singapore tourism product,

or the vision of Singapore tourism" (*STPB press release*, 4 January 1996). Asad Shiraz, STPB Director of Destination Marketing, explained to me:

We needed to find a branding that better reflects what Singapore, the new Singapore, is all about. We also need the new branding to reflect the new role of the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board, and the fact that we are now not just a destination but we are also a jumping off point to a culturally very exciting, very rich area of the world, plus an important tourism business hub. We also want something that would reflect that Asia is coming of age, we are listening to people talk about the [21st] century being that of the Asia Pacific. So, we want to include elements of these sentiments in the market place into our branding. And it also gives us an opportunity to refresh the way we presented ourselves in our brochures, in our posters, and other collateral, in our advertising and so on. So as a result of these, we said we need a new branding.

The new positioning should re-package and re-invent the destination. It is to generate new interests, new products and new possibilities for the Singapore tourism industry. It is also supposed to reflect Singapore in a new competitive situation (NTPC, 1996, 24-25). Instead of competing with regional destinations, the *Tourism 21* master plan proposes regional cooperation by expanding Singapore's tourism activities beyond the city-state. Besides investing in the region's tourism facilities and infrastructure, the joint packaging of Singapore with other regional destinations would complement each other, and develop Singapore into a tourism hub. Singapore intends to become a central component in regional travel packages (NTPC, 1996, p. 49). With the aim of making Singapore the starting and ending point of visitors' sojourn into the region, Singapore embarked on a strategy of "gateway tourism" (Low and Toh, 1997). The new identity should reflect this "*Unlimited approach to tourism development*" (NTPC, 1996, p. 25, *italics* in original). "New Asia – Singapore" is perceived to convey this message by presenting Singapore as the "innovative, enterprising and confident city-state" (NTPC, 1996, p. 25).

In sum, the need for a new positioning arises from regional competition, changes in Singapore itself and a desire to enhance a troubled tourism industry. The new positioning intends to communicate the idea that Singapore is a "must-see" destination, a tourism business centre and a hub for the Asia Pacific region. As already mentioned, "New Asia – Singapore" was eventually chosen as Singapore's latest destination positioning.

It was also chosen because of its popularity: “New Asia – Singapore” as a branding was tested through a survey of 1300 departing tourists. Respondents were asked what impressions of Singapore they found endearing, and their preference for alternative brands of Singapore. The respondents took to “New Asia – Singapore” (*STPB press release*, 4 January 1996).

“NEW ASIA – SINGAPORE” IMAGES AND PRODUCTS

“New Asia – Singapore” intends to communicate a modern, dynamic and multi-cultural destination. Specifically, “New Asia – Singapore” hopes to capture a destination in which tourists find the old blend with the new, the East fuse with the West, and Asian heritage entwined in high technology (Fig. 1).

Singapore tourist destination position has changed three times since 1964 (Chang, 1997a). In the 1960s and 1970s, Singapore was “Instant Asia”, where one could find an array of Asian cultures, peoples, festivals, and cuisine conveniently exhibited in a single destination (Chang, 1997a, pp. 548-553). In the 1980s, “Surprising Singapore” positioned Singapore by placing contrasting images of modernity and Asian exoticism together. The co-existence of East and West, old and new were already highlighted then (Chang, 1997a, pp. 553-555; Leong, 1997). In the 1990s, Singapore continued to promote itself as a “multi-faceted jewel” and also emphasised its desire to be the regional hub for travelers (Chang, 1997a, pp. 555-558). “New Asia – Singapore” is the eventual destination identity. There is a subtle shift in focus between “Surprising Singapore” and “New Asia – Singapore”. “Surprising Singapore” promised pockets of unexpected diverse and distinct ethnic cultures in a modern city, “New Asia – Singapore” offers ethnic cultures fused into modern development. Metaphorically, “Surprising Singapore” describes a “salad mix” of various ethnic cultures in a modern environment, “New Asia – Singapore” presents Singapore as a “melting pot” of eastern and western cultures.

“New Asia – Singapore” is a response to the overwhelming presence of modernity and development in the city-state. The rapid modernisation and economic development of Singapore have led tourists lamenting that Singapore is too modern, or as John Naisbitt has said, “Singapore is as Western as Kansas” (1995, p. 78). In the 1997 survey of visitors to Singapore, the most cited impression by first-time visitors



Figure 1. A New Asia sight - pre-World War Two shop houses alongside modern skyscrapers in the Singapore city centre.

about Singapore is its good transport system (22.8%) (STB, 1998b, p. 75). 15.6% of the surveyed tourists thought that Singapore is a modern and advanced city, and 10% found Singapore to be expensive (10%) (STB, 1998b, p. 75). Tourists inevitably encounter the modern and developed aspects of Singapore. Dayne Lim, STPB Assistant Marketing Manager observed that (personal interview):

We don't seem to be very Asian, by the mere fact that English is the language of administration, [...] we are bombarded with American pop culture, [...] so where is the Asian soul? However I think, when we look at the reformulation, the reinvention of the "New Asia" global image of ourselves, we look further into ourselves, that Singapore could never be where it is without the Asian soul in it.

Effectively, the re-positioning from “Surprising Singapore” to “New Asia – Singapore” is not one of introducing modern development into Singapore cultural mix. Instead, it is to maintain a sense of oriental exoticism in its brand imagery. Many Asian aspects of Singapore society are increasingly difficult to observe and experience by tourists. “New Asia – Singapore” accentuates oriental aspects of the city to tourists. It decodes the “Asian soul” behind the modern façade. Dayne Lim continued (personal interview):

The way that people work, in the way that we see ourselves, in the way that we re-engineer things, in a lot of the traditions that we currently practice [...] we are still Asian in our soul.

By melting modernity and exotic Asia together, STB tries to claim an indigenous Singapore. It asserts that Singapore has progressed and modernised in an Asian manner, and its oriental traditions have also changed and modernised through external global influences. These metamorphosed aspects of culture are considered truly Singaporean. Subsequently, “New Asia – Singapore” hopes to offer products that are different from competitors in the region. “New Asia – Singapore” interpreted Singapore as an indigenous brewing of multiple cultures, and of the old and the new, would distinguish Singapore from the region’s more “pristine” destinations.

In making clear the official concept of “New Asia – Singapore”, the STPB Destination Marketing Division offered a brief (11 September 1997), stating that “New Asia” can be found in Singaporean lifestyle, food, music and various attractions. The brief reiterated that though Singaporeans live in a modern environment, their lifestyles reflect some traditional ways of life. Practices such as hanging clothes to dry on bamboo poles (Fig. 2), dishes such as passionfruit ginger seabass and banana “pizza” with honey lavender ice cream offered in Doc Cheng’s Restaurant in the Raffles Hotel, places like Suntec City, Asia’s largest convention/exhibition centre, with its modern buildings organised according to the ancient Chinese belief of geomancy, are “New Asia” examples. Basically, as already mentioned, “New Asia” decodes Singaporean society as an entangled mix of East and West, old and new.

Images of “New Asia – Singapore” are aggressively promoted throughout the world. Since the launch of “New Asia – Singapore”, advertisements can be found on the Internet, international newsmagazines and global television networks. The tourism authorities in Singapore



Figure 2. A traditional Asian way of drying clothes in modern high rise flats: a sign of “New Asia – Singapore”.

have always emphasised on market promotion. Between 1991 and 1995, the authorities spent between 88 and 92 percent of its budget on promotion (WTO, 1996, p. 67).

STB has also developed a number of “New Asia – Singapore” tour products since 1996. Asad Shiraz, explained:

What we are doing is we are changing the tourist products in Singapore. We want them to experience the “New Asia – Singapore”. Yes, today as the [old] tours are conducted, they will not go away thinking that Singapore is New Asia. And that’s why the tourist board is involved in not just brand positioning, but influencing the type of products so that there is a match between our positioning and what we are selling to the consumer.

STB also launched the Tourism Development Assistance Scheme (TDAS) in 1998 to further strengthen the tourism industry. The authorities have allocated US\$50 million to be used over ten years for this scheme. More money will be offered if necessary (*The Straits Times*, 4 May 1998). Among other things, products consistent with the “New Asia – Singapore” theme would be developed. Through TDAS, for instance, the STB and Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority of Singapore assisted five urban farms within the Singapore’s Agrotechnology Parks to enhance and develop visitor-friendly programmes. In the name of agri-tourism, the parks would showcase a brand of intensive modern city farming technologies, in rare and rustic Singapore settings. These farms would offer exotic and endangered plants, environmentally friendly and pesticide-free vegetables, ornamental fish and tropical orchids (*STB press release*, 19 May 2000).

With the many connotations tied to “New Asia – Singapore”, Singapore is offering its style of Asian development and asserting an indigenous modern Singapore. Its new identity is supposed to capture the essence of modern Singapore, and at the same time, create an even more exciting destination for visitors.

As can be seen from the discussions so far, “New Asia – Singapore” is descriptive, in the sense that it attempts to capture the “essence” of Singapore. This point is reflected in the *STPB Destination Marketing Division brief*, “‘New Asia – Singapore’: the concept” (11 September 1997, **highlights** in original):

“New Asia – Singapore” is not a product one consciously creates. It is the sum total of the way we live, work and think. The products are an expression of all that.

The STPB Destination Marketing Division brief also stated:

In short, “New Asia – Singapore” expresses the essence of today’s Singapore: a vibrant, multi-cultural, sophisticated city-state where tradition and modernity, East and West meet in harmony; a place where one can see and feel the energy that makes New Asia – Singapore the exemplar of the dynamism of the South-East Asia region.

However, “New Asia – Singapore” also offers a vision. It generates new tourist products (e.g. through TDAS) and forms perceptions and images for visitors by focusing the attention of tourists on selected delightful things in Singapore (Ooi, 2001b, pp. 145-179). As I shall elaborate later, the “New Asia – Singapore” vision is also changing local society.

MEDIATED INTERPRETATIONS: DECODING REALITY OR VISIONS?

In the beginning of this paper, I pointed out that tourists are on a relatively short period of visit, they lack local knowledge and they are engaged in leisure activities. This led to the situation in which tourists need the help of cultural mediators to decode the local meanings of cultural products for them. However, because of the situation in which tourists lack the resources and knowledge to verify what they have been told, it is possible for cultural mediators to modify or even fabricate local cultures, so as to better entice tourists with their products. I also pointed out that the interpretation of cultures is not a straightforward process. I posed these questions: What types of interpretations are offered to tourists? And how would these interpretations lead to changes in local society?

In the case of “New Asia – Singapore”, it selectively accentuates aspects of local cultures for tourist consumption. This identity product has to reflect local society and at the same time please and excite tourists. Through “New Asia – Singapore”, the STB has modified, enhance and even created cultures to realise the identity. Therefore the types of interpretations offered by the STB are both descriptive of the society, as well as visionary. It is visionary because aspects of the identity are appealing images imagined and constructed for the tourist market. However, the new products stemming from the “New Asia” vision are also being appropriated into local society.

The STB works with other state agencies to “enhance” Singaporean cultures through nation-building programmes. For example, every year since the early 1980s, the tourism authorities organise street light-ups and activities in Chinatown during Chinese New Year, Serangoon Road during Deepavali (the Hindu festival of lights), Orchard Road during Christmas and Geylang Road during Hari Raya Puasa and Hari Raya Haji (Muslim festivals). These light-ups generate atmospheres of excitement, and at the same time, celebrate ethnic pride according to the official Singaporean Chinese, Indian, Malay and Others ethnic mix model (Benjamin, 1976; Chang, 1997b; Leong, 1997; Siddique, 1990)¹. These lively and colorful events make Singapore an eventful city, and they are aggressively promoted to tourists. Although these events are state-

¹ The Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others (CMIO) model is a social engineering programme to fit all Singaporeans into broadly pre-defined ethnic communities. The CMIO model is also used as a framework in organising another tourist product, the Asian Civilisations Museum (Ooi, 2001a).

organised and staged through the STB, they have become popular with locals over the years. The popularity of these festivals with locals have made these events part of Singaporean society.

Similarly, the STB co-organised the first Singapore River Buskers Festival in December 1997. In line with “New Asia – Singapore”, this is another activity to make Singapore into an eventful and spontaneous city. Busking had been forbidden in Singapore but laws were relaxed weeks before the festival (*The Straits Times*, 1 October 1997). In September 1998, before the second festival, busking regulations in Singapore are further relaxed to allow for longer performance hours and audience participation. More places are made available for buskers to perform. Monthly charity busking sessions are being organised. Apparently, the Singapore River Buskers Festival would be the annual culmination of this new form of street life in Singapore. STB is initiating programmes to make Singapore a livelier city.

There are also indications that “New Asia – Singapore” has since taken a reality of a cultural and discursive category in Singaporean society. For example, *The Straits Times* (3 August 1997) compared “New Asia cuisine” to fusion cuisine invented in California in the mid 1980s. In another issue, *The Straits Times* searched for “Singapore’s original ‘food people’, who may have been the first to invent fusion fare” (1 May 1998). “New Asia – Singapore” as a cultural category, labels numerous local practices “New Asia”. This new “New Asia – Singapore” category, *The Straits Times* admitted as a term “coined here about 18 months ago” (3 August 1997).

The acceptance and appropriation of tourist-driven cultures into Singaporean society reflect the general social cultural attitude of the people. Singapore has evolved into a pragmatic society (Chua, 1995, pp. 68-70). Singaporeans do not necessarily reject profit-driven culture, art, environmentalism and public programmes (Chua, 1995). The compartmentalisation of economics from other aspects of social and cultural life is blurred in Singapore. This is supposedly part of the Singaporean “New Asia” approach. Singapore embraces foreign influences, adopts new technologies, seizes international business opportunities and appropriates foreign cultures. While the state attempts to control “undesirable” foreign influences, this city-state constantly embraces the world economically. Its open trade policies often entail accepting many influences from the world. Tourism is one of them.

Besides that, the social engineering of Singapore through tourism programmes must also be understood in the soft authoritarian regime

of the nation-state (Chua, 1995; Ooi, 1998). The ruling party –People’s Action Party– is in power since 1959. For decades now, the party has an overwhelming majority in parliament, sometimes having all the seats. The state social engineering machinery is well lubricated, as the government has successfully made Singaporeans more polite, not to have more than two children (before 1986) and then to have more children if they are better educated (after 1986) and speak their official mother tongues (namely, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil) (Ooi, 1998). The mass media and various governmental agencies work together (Leong, 1997; Schein, 1996). In these contexts, the Singapore tourism industry has provided resources, from which the government has used for local social engineering too. Tourism is then not just a source of economic income but also a resource for imagining and shaping the society.

On the other hand, “New Asia – Singapore” is not totally fabricated. It reflects Singapore society to a large extent, although its interpretation is debatable. Nonetheless, the elements that reflect “real” Singapore and those that are “modified” are not clearly distinguishable to tourists. Therefore, the types of interpretations offered to tourists are those that both reflect local society, as well as, those that are imagined. And all these interpretations of “New Asia – Singapore” are believed, and found, to be attractive to tourists.

Local co-operation is also roped in to simulate a “New Asia – Singapore”. The constant dynamic changes observed in society show that through time, cultural inventions can become local cultural traditions (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). And in this paper, cultural inventions are initiated through imagining the society for tourists.

The touristisation of local society is not unique to Singapore. For instance, Picard demonstrated how tourism contributes to the preservation and revival of Balinese culture to the extent that it is turning it into a source of pride and profit for the locals in Bali (1995). Similarly, Erb, in her study of the Manggaraian people on the island of Flores in Eastern Indonesia, demonstrated how the people actively incorporate tourists into their life-worlds (2000). However, in Singapore, the STB plays an active role in imagining and realising a “New Asia” society for Singapore. The touristisation of Singaporean cultures is state-managed.

CONCLUSIONS

Cultural mediators are actively engaged in the process of interpreting cultural objects for tourists. However, the process of re-pre-

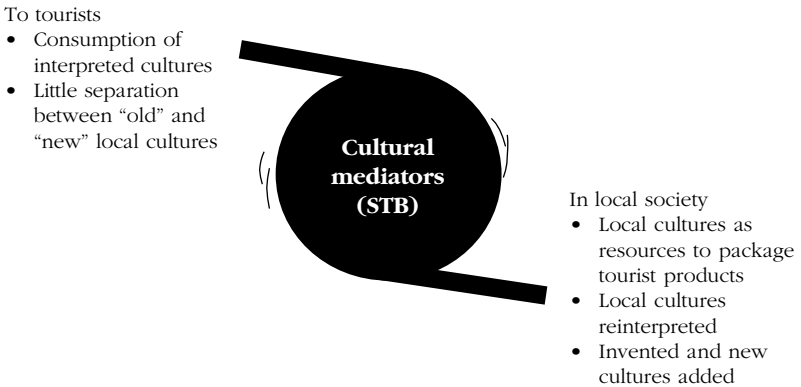


Figure 3. Cultural mediators mediating between local society and tourists.

sending cultures to tourists does not only enlighten tourists but may also transform the very society tourists want to gaze up. This article shows that the STB packages and interprets Singapore for tourists but the process of packaging and interpreting cultures for tourists also extends to transforming the destination.

Nevertheless, “New Asia – Singapore” is not an invention out of nothing. It still makes use of many aspects of Singaporean cultures in formulating the identity. But the identity is enhanced through new cultural products. Furthermore, the STB, by collaborating with other state agencies and combining commercial and local interests, local cultures are “enhanced” and changes are being assimilated into local society.

Figure 3 summarises this paper. It points to the dialogic relations between local society and tourism. The relations are mediated by STB in a dynamic manner.

In conclusion, the commercial gains of tourism and tourists needing the help in interpreting cultural products have given rise to the danger of packaging attractive but fabricated cultures. As in the case of Singapore, the work of cultural mediators has been extended beyond interpretation and into social engineering. One may of course also argue that culture is always changing and evolving, and tourism is just one of many agents in bringing about cultural change.

REFERENCES

BELK, R. W. (1997), “Been there, done that, bought the souvenirs: of journeys and boundary crossing”, in Brown, Stephen and Turley, Darach (eds.),

- Consumer research: postcards from the edge*, London, Routledge, pp. 22-45.
- BENJAMIN, G. (1976), "The cultural logic of Singapore's 'multiculturalism'", in Ong, Jin Hui, Tong, Chee Kiong and Tan, Ern Ser (eds.), *Understanding Singapore society*, Singapore, Times Academic Press, pp. 67-85 (1997).
- CHANG, T. C. (1997a), "From 'Instant Asia' to 'multi-faceted jewel': urban imaging strategies and tourism development in Singapore", *Urban Geography*, vol. 18, n° 6, pp. 542-562.
- , (1997b), "Heritage as a tourism commodity: traversing the tourist-local divide", *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, vol. 18, n° 1, pp. 46-68.
- CHUA, B. H. (1995), *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*, London, Routledge.
- COHEN, E. (1974), "Who is a tourist? A conceptual clarification", *Sociological Review*, vol. 22, n° 4, pp. 527-555.
- , (1985), "The tourist guide: the origins, structure and dynamics of a role", *Annals of tourism research*, vol. 12, n° 1, pp. 5-29.
- DANT, T. (1999), *Material culture in the social world*, Buckingham, Open University Press.
- Erb, M. (2000), "Understanding tourists – Interpretations from Indonesia", *Annals of tourism research*, vol. 27, n° 3, pp. 709-736.
- HOBBSAWM, E.; RANGER, T. (1983), *The invention of tradition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- LEONG, W. T. (1997), "Commodifying ethnicity: state and ethnic tourism in Singapore", in Picard, Michel and Wood, Robert E. (eds.), *Tourism, ethnicity, and the state in Asian and Pacific societies*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, pp. 71-98.
- LOW, L.; HENG T. M. (1997), "Singapore: development of gateway tourism", in Go, Frank M. and Jenkins, Carson L. (eds.), *Tourism and economic development in Asia and Australasia*, London, Cassell, pp. 237-254.
- MACCANNELL, D. (1976), *The tourist: a new theory of the leisure class*, London, Macmillan.
- NAISBITT, J. (1995), *Megatrends Asia*, London, Nicholas Brealey Publishing.
- NATIONAL TOURISM PLAN COMMITTEES (NTPC) (1996), *Tourism 21: vision of a tourism capital*, Singapore, Singapore Tourism Promotion Board.
- OOI, C-S. (1998), "Singapore", in Sachsenröder, Wolfgang and Frings, Ulrike E. (eds.), *Political Party Systems and Democratic Development in East and Southeast Asia, Volume 1: Southeast Asia*, Aldershot, Ashgate, pp. 343-402.
- , (2001a), "Dialogic heritage: time, space and visions of the National Museum of Singapore", in Teo, Peggy, Chang, T. C. and Ho, K. C. (eds.), *Inter-connected worlds: tourism in Southeast Asia*, Amsterdam, Elsevier, pp. 171-187.
- , (2001b), *Mediated cultures: the production and consumption of Copenhagen and Singapore*, Published Ph.D. dissertation, Copenhagen, Department

ment of Intercultural Communication and Management, Copenhagen Business School.

- PICARD, M. (1995), "Cultural heritage and tourist capital: cultural tourism in Bali", in Lanfant, Marie-Françoise, Allcock, John B. and Brunner, Edward M. (eds.), *International tourism: identity and change*, London, SAGE, pp. 44-66.
- QU, H.; ZHANG, H. Q. (1997), "The projection of international tourist arrivals in East Asia and the Pacific", in Go, Frank M. and Jenkins, Carson L. (eds.), *Tourism and economic development in Asia and Australasia*, London, Cassell, pp. 35-47.
- SCHEIN, E. (1996), *Strategic pragmatism: the culture of Singapore's Economic Development Board*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press.
- SIDDIQUE, S. (1990), "The phenomenology of ethnicity: a Singapore case study", in Ong, Jin Hui, Tong, Chee Kiong and Tan, Ern Ser (eds.), *Understanding Singapore society*, Singapore, Times Academic Press, pp. 107-124 (1997).
- SINGAPORE TOURISM BOARD (STB) (1998a), *Singapore annual report on tourism statistics 1997*, Singapore, Singapore Tourism Board.
- , (1998b), *Survey of leisure attractions 1997*, Singapore, Singapore Tourism Board.
- , (1997), *Yearbook 96/97*, Singapore, Singapore Tourist Promotion Board.
- STB press release (19 May 2000), "Agri-tourism: nature trails in New Asia – Singapore".
- STB press release (26 May 2000), "The Singapore Tourism Board updates Tourism 21, taking the industry to new heights".
- STPB press release (4 January 1996), "STPB launches new branding and destination marketing tagline for Singapore".
- STPB Destination Marketing Division brief (11 September 1997), "New Asia – Singapore: the concept".
- The Straits Times* (3 August 1997), "Fusion cuisine, or confusion?".
- The Straits Times* (1 October 1997), "'Strict' busking allowed from today".
- The Straits Times* (1 May 1998), "Ah Ko always gets it right".
- The Straits Times* (4 May 1998), "New \$80m [US\$50m] assistance scheme for tourist firms".
- URRY, J. (1990), *The tourist gaze: leisure and travel in contemporary societies*, London, SAGE Publications.
- VAR, T.; TOH, R.; KHAN, H. (1999), "Tourism and ASEAN economic development", *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 26, n° 1, pp. 195-196.
- WATSON, G. L.; KOPACHEVSKY, J. P. (1994), "Interpretations of tourism as commodity", *Annals of tourism research*, vol. 21, n° 3, pp. 643-660.
- WORLD TOURISM ORGANISATION (WTO) (1995), *Concepts, definitions and classifications for tourism statistics*, Madrid, World Tourism Organisation.
- , (1996), *Budgets of National tourism administrations*, Madrid, World Tourism Organisation.