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Commentary
Creating and Recreating Heritage in Singapore

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The aim of this paper is to examine the extent to which public planning and policy have created a 'national' identity for Singapore since its independence in 1965, the importance of heritage to contemporary Singapore, and how heritage is marketed to Singaporeans and visitors. Over the last 30 years Singapore has striven to create itself as one of the most modern and successful of the ASEAN nations, but this may have been at the cost of its indigenous cultures and authentic heritage. Many of the craft industries common in the late 1970s and 1980s have been lost, and while the Singapore Tourism Board promotes Chinatown, Little India and Kampong Glam as 'pockets of individuality' in Singapore's multicultural society, souvenirs currently on sale were made in China, India, Malaysia and Indonesia. By contrast, the enduring image of 'Singapore Girl' for Singapore Airlines led to an entire souvenir culture and a batik clad 'Singapore Girl' Barbie Doll.

Keywords: heritage, Singapore, culture, identity

Introduction

In 1965 Singapore had to create an identity for itself as an independent nation and its policy makers looked to the heritage and culture of the time to plan the future. Today, Singapore continues to re-create and re-invent its communal, national and global identity through policies of social engineering (Ooi, 2002: 202–3) and by packaging and marketing heritage to its citizens and visitors. While the creation of the nation's identity and the re-invention of its heritage draws some criticism from Singaporeans and non-Singaporeans alike, there are lessons to be learned from what the country has achieved and how it has achieved it.

What is Singapore's role in world and regional heritage? Geographically and historically,[1] Singapore is the gateway to Southeast Asia and is well placed as an air and sea hub in the region. Economically, it is one of ASEAN's biggest Tigers. Politically, it is one of the most stable countries in the region, and culturally it is as diverse as many of its neighbours.[2] However, like many new and rapidly industrialised countries, it has suffered the disadvantage of having sacrificed some indigenous culture and history in the name of modernisation.

Singapore has no World Heritage sites and yet heritage is the key to its contemporary political and social identity and it is well placed to provide access to World Heritage sites within the region. In an age of mass transport, with bigger planes (500 passengers), and ships with 1500–2500 passengers, it may well be necessary to limit the number of tourists to a destination. Should the idea of a quota system for visiting World Heritage sites become reality,[3] visitors would

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require a convenient inter-regional stopover. In this scenario, Singapore might function as an educational and arts appreciation hub, offering cultural or educational tourism opportunities to enhance the visitors' experience.

What is Singapore's National Heritage and Why is it Important?

Historically, Singapore's heritage and pre-independence history has been shaped by an early indigenous history which was essentially Malay. Its trading history involved Chinese, Indians and Arabs, followed by British colonialism (1819–1942), the Japanese Occupation (1942–45), the postcolonial period (1946–63) and union with Malaya (1963–65). Its heritage is therefore drawn from Chinese traders, sojourners and migrants, and from indigenous Malays (Daud, 1999: 35), Indians, Peranakans,[4] Eurasians and others. However, following the split with Malaysia and independence in 1965, Singapore had to create a new nation overnight. Diversities had to be put aside in favour of shared traditions and commonalties. In 1965, the creation of 'Malaysian Malaysia' required the creation of 'Singaporean Singapore' (Wee, 2002: 135), but what did Singaporean Singapore mean?

Singapore's identity has been shaped and moulded by its government's policies. Culturally (and collectively) Singaporeans espouse Confucian Asian values (Ooi, 2002: 14) and, within a multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-religious democratic society, citizens must abide by the nation's shared values.[5] In Singapore, for example, 'heritage has important social, economic and political purposes for the State. It binds Singapore and it sells it' (Yeoh & Kong, 1999: 144). As in many Asian cities, this heritage is 'characterised as . . . living rather than . . . monumental,' but while 'change is accepted as a way of life associated with advancement . . . living heritage is not easily appreciated' (Lee Lai Choo, 1999: 182). It is in this context that Singapore has largely concentrated on creating and recreating 'tangible heritage' through its historical and cultural legacies and a sense of values carried by the people. Its 'intangible heritage' is drawn from the recognition of a cultural identity being moulded from the past through the Malay, Chinese and Indian cultures, and the encouragement of an art/cultural and lifestyle experience in a modern context, which encompasses local, regional and international elements. These include cultural cuisine, the traditional Sam Sui soup restaurant, the Imperial Herbal Restaurant, Analakshmi, Indian vegetarian restaurant and Nonya cuisine.

Singapore's Changing Image: Creating Singapore – Cultural Planning and Policy Making

Singapore's image has changed over the last four decades for citizens and visitors. The development of Singapore into Asia's premier 'Garden City' was initiated in 1963 and directed by Mr Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's first Prime Minister from 1959, and founding Father of contemporary Singapore. He instigated a policy of 'greening' the city, which was followed in 1979 by the 'colouring' of Singapore. The 1970s and 1980s were also dominated by comprehensive building schemes of the Housing Development Board, which provided affordable high-rise housing to replace shophouses and *kampongs* (traditional settlements) and accommodate the majority of the population.

During the processes of nation building, industrialisation and economic development, Singapore was also promoting itself as a tourism destination, offering instant access to Asian cultures, peoples, festivals and cuisine, and much of Singapore's planning continues to be themed in this way. The Merlion (a mythical lion's head with a fish tail) was created in 1972 as the tourism symbol for Singapore. Singapore was marketed as 'Instant Asia', 'Surprising Singapore' and 'New Asia – Singapore' in time for the millennium. As Ooi contends (2002: 148), the creation of these new identities is directly related to the government's overall vision for the nation.

In 1985, the Singapore Tourism Promotion Board (STPB), which in 1997 was renamed the Singapore Tourist Board (STB), decided to focus on 'Surprising Singapore', contrasting modern and traditional, western and eastern exotic in marketing Singapore as a destination with a unique cultural heritage. During the 1980s, the spotlight was on cultural consciousness (Chang & Yeoh, 2001) and Chinatown, the Singapore River, Fort Canning, Haw Par Villa (The Tiger Balm Gardens) and the Colonial district (Civic District) were all deemed worthy of conservation and re-development.

In 1996, there was a move away from 'Surprising Singapore' to 'New Asia – Singapore, which was promoted as a tourism capital, destination, hub and business centre (Chang & Yeo, 2001: 281). Ooi argues that, by instigating this change, the tourism authorities were providing Singapore with a new identity:

> The Singaporean authorities have literally re-invented their product identity with new messages and new images. The STB and other state agencies have also introduced New Asia – Singapore as a way of life for Singaporeans themselves. (Ooi, 2002: 148)

The change is reflected in souvenir T-shirts available for sale. During the 1980s, 'Fine City' T-shirts, referring to Singapore's very strict rules and regulations (Ooi, 2002: 151) gave way to neon-coloured beach style souvenirs that suggest a fun-loving Tropical Island city, thus echoing STB's conception of Singapore as 'the most surprising tropical island on earth'.

Having established political, economic and social stability in Singapore and laid down foundations for national education and values during the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s, political attention has recently turned to pursuit of the aesthetic. The focus is the creation of a regional arts hub and encouragement of creativity and entrepreneurship. In 2000, for instance, the government announced that in the 21st century it wished to turn Singapore into a global arts city (MITA, 2000), which would spearhead an Asian renaissance and strengthen national identity through the appreciation of heritage.

Strategically, Singapore is well placed as a gateway to Asia (MITA, 2000: 35) and, in effect, it has re-created itself as a focal regional point for technology, science, tourism, the arts and transport. For instance, tourism is now a major source of foreign exchange. In 2000, it brought in S$6 billion, and in 2002 it attracted 7 million visitors, double the arrivals figures of the 1970s. Most Asian visitors came from Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, China and South Korea, while non-Asians were primarily from Australia, the UK and the USA. Cruise ship arrivals, in particular, have increased, and in 2000 the Singapore Cruise Centre handled 47 Cruise ships and 898,000 passengers (MITA, 2001).

The Role of Government in Creating Identity and Marketing Heritage

The Singapore Tourism Board (STB), which in 1997 replaced the Singapore Tourism Promotion Board (STPB) of 1964, is responsible for the development and promotion of tourism in Singapore, and its mission is to establish Singapore as a tourism hub. The STB controls the tourism industry in Singapore and its functions include training tour guides and licensing travel agencies (Ooi, 2002: 156).

The STB works closely with the Ministry of Information for the Arts (MITA) and other government bodies. In the early 1990s, the STPB realised that some of the vanishing trades of Singapore were of interest to visitors. Since then, there have been numerous major preservation projects, including the designation of traditional tea merchants and herbalists in Chinatown as authentic trades. As a consequence, some traditional craft people have been able to remain in business, even though the STB has been criticised for not doing enough to preserve other activities or communities (Lee Lai Choo, 1999: 183; Sullivan, 1993: 284)

One of the STPB's most significant contributions to Singapore's heritage was its support in 1994 for the preservation and renovation of Raffles Hotel. Confronted with a proposal from the Urban Redevelopment Board to pull it down, the STPB argued strongly for its restoration, suggesting that:

> Singaporeans were becoming bonded with historical Singapore. A beautifully restored Raffles would (once again) become a treasured tourist icon, the restored building would be seen as a positive signal about the sensitive artistic side of a maturing global city. (Batey, 2002: 163)

Such projects have their critics. It has been argued that tourism has led to Disneyfication. Chinatown, for example, has been pedestrianised, and Smith Street has become a 'Food Alley'. Visitors go to Chinatown in search of Chinese-ness, much as people go to Little India in search of Indian authenticity (Ooi, 2002: 35). However, visitors to Chinatown include Chinese Singaporeans, who flock to queue for *Bac Hwa* (a specialty BBQ meat) at Chinese New Year. They eat in the hawker centres, and shop daily at the local open markets (wet markets), held under apartments built by the Housing Development Board, where fresh produce is cheaper than the supermarkets.

Now that Singapore's scientific and technological aspirations have been met, government attention and finance has turned to the arts, and the Ministry for Information and the Arts (MITA) plays an important role in promoting 'heritage'. It comprises five statutory boards: the National Heritage Board (NHB), the National Arts Council (NAC), the Singapore Broadcasting Authority (SBA), the National Libraries Board (NLB) and the Public Monuments Board (PMB). MITA's mission is 'to inform, educate and entertain, to make Singapore into a hub city of the world and build a society that is economically dynamic, socially cohesive and culturally vibrant' (MITA, 2001: 31). A recent and much-praised example of MITA's initiative is 'The Esplanade, Theatres on the Bay', which opened in October 2002.

Museums, too, have an important role to play. With conservation areas, they are considered 'vital to national identity and to making Singaporean citizens aware of their multi-faced history' (Alvin Tan Peng Hong, 1999: 111). Elsewhere,

it has been argued that they are 'cultural memory banks' (Wibisono, 2000: 189). This is certainly true of museums in Singapore. In 1993 MITA and the STB formed the National Heritage Board (NHB), bringing together the National Museum, the National Archives and the Oral History Department. Now a statutory board under MITA, the NHB's role is to preserve, present and promote the cultural heritage of Singapore. It works closely with the Ministry of Education, and also manages the Singapore History Museum (SHM) (formally the National Museum), the Singapore Arts Museum (SAM), which was formed with the collections of the former National Gallery (part of the old National Museum), and the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM). As a recent example of its initiative, Singapore's Asian collections were housed in the ACM's Empress Place Building (EPB) and re-opened to the public in March 2003 after renovation. The NHB also encompasses the Children's Discovery Gallery, the National Archives (NAS), the Heritage Conservation Centre (HCC) and the National Museum Shop.

Other government organisations are also involved in promoting the arts and Singapore's 'heritage'. The National Arts Council (NAC), the national funding agency, was formed in 1991 'to develop Singapore as a distinctive global city for the arts' and to become 'an integral part of the lives of the people of Singapore'. Similarly, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), the national planning authority for Singapore and the national conservation authority, seeks to conserve the past and, through its activities, to reunite citizens with their roots (Yeoh & Kong, 1999: 141). As an example of such a remit, the URA has tried to re-create the atmosphere of historical Singapore and simultaneously achieve long-term commercial viability by re-inventing and recreating past heritage, as in its promotion of the Chinese Heritage Centre in Chinatown in July 2002.

How is Heritage Marketed in Singapore and Globally?

As part of creating an identity for independent Singapore, identity also had to be created for the national airline. Originally part of MSA (Malaysia, Singapore Airlines), the national flag carrier had to fly the flag for the new nation. Ian Batey's advertising campaign for Singapore Airlines (SIA) led to the enduring 'Singapore Girl: A Great Way to Fly' and, as a result, Singapore Girl was incorporated into local culture and has come to represent Singapore and Singaporeans abroad. Clad in Pierre Balmain designer blue batik-patterned, Malay-style *sarong kebaya*, 'Singapore Girl' was introduced in 1972 and the style of the uniform has remained unchanged. Indeed, it spawned a complete range of imitations. Not only are copies of the *sarong kebaya* for sale, but also there is a wide range of batik accessories.

The image of 'Singapore Girl' is a still a significant contribution to Singapore's global image. As Batey contends, 'traditionally an image of an airline is only as strong as the image of its country . . . which in 1972 was seen by the west as a third world city state with creaky rickshaws and flooded streets' (Batey, 2002: 118–19). Graceful in her traditional Malay style batik (*sarong kebaya*), with a warm and welcoming smile, 'Singapore Girl' was the international face of Singapore. She personified the hospitable traditions of the east and represented a modern cosmopolitan nation with a brand new national airline. Her claim to fame was further advanced in 1991, when her wax effigy was unveiled at Madame

Tussaud's Museum, in London, thus becoming the first commercial image to be an exhibit. She also inspired her very own Barbie Doll, as Mattel manufactures a genuine batik-clad Singapore Airlines Barbie for Singapore Airlines. In short, she became and remains a global icon for a modern Singapore which is yet rooted in a multi-cultural Asian past.

Souvenirs from Singapore: Heritage and Material Culture

In Singapore, there is little opportunity to promote the development of local ethnic handicrafts because hardly anything is produced locally. However, Blue Ginger City Batik, Royal Ming Porcelain, and Tiger Balm are a few examples of authentic Singapore-made items. Three decades ago, the situation was different, and Sullivan (1993) documented many of the traditional arts and crafts peculiar to Singapore in the 1970s. By the 1990s, many had sadly disappeared or were disappearing. The Singapore handicraft centre at Chinatown point, constructed in the early 1980s, was intended to provide a retail outlet for some of Singapore's endangered crafts that were being displaced by urban redevelopment, but many of the items now sold there originate in China, Indonesia or Malaysia. Nearby, Yue Hwa Chinese Products Emporium has a much wider range of Chinese products.

In their Official Monthly Guide, the STB (November 2001) suggests that visitors shop for 'art and heritage gifts' and 'Singaporean memorabilia' but the choice of items produced in Singapore remains limited. However, authentic batik from Indonesia and Malaysia is available, as are hand-woven silk shawls from Thailand. There are also some products 'inspired by Singapore's heritage' (STB, 2001: 80), including Straits Chinese-style porcelain and jewellery made by RISIS. At Singapore's airport, Duty Free Shops (DFS Galleria), have created a multi-ethnic shopping experience, where Chinese and Indian handicrafts are available, along with the ubiquitous range of Singapore Airlines-style batik goods. These have become synonymous with Singapore's identity and are reflected in its souvenir market, even though some critics consider the Chinese souvenirs to be caricatures of Chinese culture (Ooi, 2002: 35).

The Marketing of Heritage to 'Hosts' and 'Guests'

As indicated in the comprehensive guides produced and regularly updated by the STB, the STB and the NHB market Singapore's heritage very thoroughly to locals and visitors. By fusing modernity and the exotic Asia, Singapore tries to fuse an indigenous existence with a new identity (Ooi, 2002: 144). It is an experience that seems to divide tourists into those who enjoy the sanitised instant Asia experience, which does not involve getting the camera wet, and those who seek authentic Asia. However, despite the re-development, re-creation and destination branding and packaging, Singapore does indeed have authentic experiences to offer, for many of the festivals in multi-cultural Singapore offer an opportunity to join locals in celebration. These include the Taoist Festival of the Hungry Ghosts, *Thimiti* (Tamil Fire walking), Chinese New Year, the Hindu festivals of *Thaipusam* and *Deepvali*, and the Malay *Hari Raya* (STB, 2001: 107–9).

For Singaporeans, national and cultural heritage have always been, and still are, very important to their sense of identity and to their sense of belonging.

Through heritage, they are anchored in time and space, nationally and regionally. Mindful of the potential threat to national unity and nation building that could emerge from a nation of migrants with diverse ethnic and cultural roots, government policy has focused on the development of the common good. However, having moved from Third World to First World status, economically and politically, Singapore can now celebrate its cosmopolitan status through its multi-cultural heritage. All Chinese, Malay, and Indian holidays and festivals are observed and celebrated, the nation's museums represent the main cultures within Singapore, and dedicated heritage centres for every group highlight the important contributions they have made to the Republic of Singapore. In short, cultural diversity is integral to the shared heritage of the nation.

However, as Singapore matures as a nation and its citizens gain confidence in their cultural identity, there are likely to be more questions and challenges to national policies. Recognising this, the Remaking of Singapore committee has launched a dot.gov website to encourage public debate on public policies (*Straits Times*, 6 June 2002).

Conclusion

> Singapore's National Monuments:
> No Ancient ruins, no vast temple complexes,
> No world wonders.
> But, without them, Singapore would be bereft.
> (www.heritagehub.com.sg national treasures 2002)

Unlike Malacca, another of the Straits Settlements, along with Penang, Singapore does not have a World Heritage site. However, as the opening quote from the heritagehub website shows, heritage is important to Singapore and is valued despite initial sacrifices. Singapore is surprising and it continues to surprise, and it has succeeded in creating a national and a communal identity for an ethnically diverse and multi-racial society, largely descended from immigrants. It has united its diversity through shared values, and rules and the common good prevail over that of the individual. Such is the price of success. However, Singapore has never lost sight of its ethnic and cultural roots and heritage. It has been contended that to continue to succeed, Singapore must maintain a high standard of living, political stability and harmonious relations among ethnic groups (Quah, 1990: 19). As many in Singapore recognise, this requires that it preserve and nurture what it can, while continuing to re-create and re-invent where necessary.

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Notes

1. The Republic of Singapore is an island city state of 606.7 square kilometres, with 63 offshore islands. It has commanded a strategic location for maritime trade for centu-

ries. Sir Thomas Raffles secured a trading base for the British East India Company in 1819. When planning the town of Singapore in 1822, he grouped migrants according to their ethnic origins and the names of these areas remain part of contemporary Singapore. Bugis Street, Arab Street, China Town, Little India, Kampong Java and Kampong Glam all indicate the origins of these early immigrants.

2. The population is approximately 4 million, including 800,000 foreigners (MITA, 2001). There are three main ethnic groups: the Chinese account for 76.8% of the population, the Malays 13.9% and the Indians 7.9%. Others are 2.4% (MITA, 2001). Singapore is also home to foreign workers from neighbouring Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. The national language is Malay and the official languages are Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and English. A 'Speak mandarin' campaign has been in place since 1979 in an effort to unify the Chinese community linguistically. The main religions of the country are Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Taoism and Hinduism.
3. The Kingdom of Bhutan, for instance, controls the number of visitors to the country to protect its culture and heritage.
4. The Peranakan culture is a unique blend of Chinese and Malay cultures. In the Straits Settlements, the cross-culture of Chinese traders who married locally became known as the *Nonya Baba* culture.
5. Every Singapore citizen must abide by the Nation's Shared Values which are: Nation before Community, Society above the Self; Family as the basic unit of society; Community support, and respect for the individual and Racial and Religious Harmony (MITA, 2001: 12).

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