

# The Orient responds: Tourism, Orientalism and the national museums of Singapore

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## SUMMARY

*As part of the critical tourism studies stream of research, this paper draws inspiration from Edward Said's criticisms of Orientalism. It examines how the three national museums of Singapore - the Singapore History Museum, the Singapore Art Museum and the Asian Civilizations Museums - reify various Singaporean Asian identities. Singapore has become too modern and western for many western tourists and the authorities have embarked on an on-going campaign to make the country more Asian. While most Said-inspired studies examine how the Occident has come to dominate the Orient, this paper argues that the Orient can creatively respond to the superficial Occidental-centric views of them. In this case, the three national museums have adopted, appropriated and even invented new Orientalist discourses to assert the uniqueness and superiority of Singapore as a tourism destination and as an Asian society. The manner in which the various Asian identities are reified in Singapore also fulfils the aims of nation building.*

### **Keywords:**

*critical tourism studies; heritage; nation building; Orientalization; social engineering*

## INTRODUCTION

Many researchers are interested in the social impact of tourism. There are at least three broad and interrelated streams of research in this area. The first is the most common. It addresses issues related to problems such as crowding of heritage sites, trinketization of local crafts, commodification of native social practices, sensationalization of indigenous folklores and even price inflation and traffic problems (Cohen 1988; Philo and Kearns 1993; van der Borg, Costa and Gotti 1996; Watson and Kropachevsky 1994). Some people even see tourism as a form of colonization and treat tourism as 'whorism' (Mathews 1975: 201).

But not all social impacts of tourism are negative; studies have shown that over time, seemingly alien cultural effects of tourism are welcomed and eventually appropriated into the destination (Boissevain 1996; Erb 2000; Martinez 1996; Picard 1995). Many researchers are thus advocating a balanced and sensitive approach to the management of tourism development (Chang 1997; Jenkins 1997; Newby 1994; Teo and Yeoh 1997).

A second related stream of research addresses the political dimensions in defining and managing the so-called sensitive and balanced approach to tourism

development. While few researchers and practitioners disagree on the need for a balanced and sensitive approach to tourism development, how is this need translated into practice? For instance, in using Gidden's 'Third Way', Burns (2004) paints a bipolar view of tourism planning. The first – 'leftist development first' – view focuses 'on sustainable human development goals as defined by local people and local knowledge. The key question driving development is "What can tourism give us without harming us?"' (Burns 2004: 26). The second – 'rightist tourism first' – view aims to 'maximize market spread through familiarity of the product.

Undifferentiated, homogenized product depends on core with a focus on tourism goals set by outside planners and the international tourism industry' (Burns 2004: 26). The Third Way brings different interests together and aims to generate consensus. Burn's Third Way remains conceptual. Different host societies have found their own ways to bring about sustainable tourism. Comparing Denmark and Singapore for instance, the Danish tourism development strategies aim to protect Danish society from tourism social impacts, while in Singapore, the impacts are actively absorbed and appropriated into the social engineering programmes of the destination (Ooi 2002a). Both the Danish and Singaporean authorities claim that their own tourism programmes are well balanced and sensitive to both tourism and local needs (Ooi 2002a). The definition of a balanced approach is determined within the social and political contexts of the host society. The political process eventually decides which interest groups and lobbies have more influence and say.

The third stream of research on tourism impact relates to how the 'West' imagines less developed, non-Western destinations. Western imaginations are seen to affect these host societies and bring about another form of colonization. Except for a few studies, such as from Morgan and Pritchard (1998), Ooi, Kristensen and Pedersen (2004), Selwyn (1993) and Silver (1993), this area of research has received limited attention. This paper is framed within this stream of research.

Studies of this sort tend to examine the insidious effects of destination images on host societies. Not only are the images superficial and caricatured, these images are being imposed upon and reified in the host societies, resulting in the so-called West dominating the less developed host communities. Such studies draw inspirations from Edward W. Said's critique of Orientalism (Said 1979).

This paper will compare how the three national museums of Singapore, namely, the Singapore History Museum (SHM), the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) and the Asian Civilizations Museum (ACM), present and assert different Asian identities<sup>1</sup>. I will argue that this is part of the self-Orientalization process in Singapore. This paper will demonstrate how western tourists have come to place demands on a destination like Singapore to become more Asian. This article's emphasis will be on how the Singaporean tourism authorities and government Orientalize Singapore through the national museums, so as to serve the needs of tourism and nation building. This article will question the Saidian-inspired focus on how the Occident dominates the Orient; host societies can and do appropriate and reinvent Orientalist images for their own identity projects. The Orientalism debate should not just be about how the Occident dominates the subservient Orient, powerful groups in host destinations may adopt and revise Orientalist images to draw benefit from the tourism industry and to reconstruct local identities. The Orientalization of host societies must be understood within the local social and political context.

In the next section, I will elaborate on tourism as a form of domination through a Saidian framework. Subsequently, I will present the case of the three national museums of Singapore. These museums are founded to make Singapore more Asian by the Singapore Tourism Board (STB). The SHM establishes Singapore as a unique country in Southeast Asia, the SAM asserts Singapore as the cultural centre of Southeast Asia and the ACM traces Singaporeans' ancestral roots to China, India and the Middle East. The section that follows discusses how each of these museums Orientalizes Singapore, and how they each introduces new narratives to shape both tourist and local imaginations. These presented narratives nevertheless must be understood within the social, cultural and political circumstances of Singaporean society. The concluding section summarizes the arguments and advocates a more nuanced understanding of tourism as a form of domination in critical tourism research.

## **TOURISM AND ORIENTALISM**

Following the critical footsteps of Foucault, Said (1979) interrogated and challenged Orientalist studies. Said entwined political and cultural imperialism and argued that Orientalists – 'western' writers and academics who

study the 'Orient' – have misrepresented, and still misrepresent, the Middle Eastern Islamic world in a manner that has eased the way for the West to dominate the Orient. Said argued that Orientalism is not only an academic discipline but an ideological discourse inextricably tied to the perpetuation of western power. Said reasoned that many western scholars who study the Orient present and distribute particular images of the Orient, centred on the distinctiveness of the Oriental mind, as opposed to the Occidental mind. Such images create, essentialize and caricaturize the Orient, and the images do not correspond to empirical reality and reduce the significance of the varieties of language, culture, social forms and political structures in the so-called Orient. Hidden in the ideological underpinnings of Orientalism, the Orient is often imagined as inferior, despotic and uncivilized.

The logic and premises behind Said's attack on Orientalism have inspired many scholars to think critically about how people imagine other societies, and how people inadvertently disperse particular geopolitical messages in their activities. Orientalist debates have been extended to the study of places like Africa (Jeyifo 2000; Mazrui 2000), East Asia (Clarke 1997; Dirlik 1996; Hill 2000; Hung 2003) and Eastern Europe (Ash 1989; Kumar 1992; Ooi *et al.* 2004). Orientalism has also inspired scholars to look at how discourses have come to misrepresent and caricaturize the Other with regard to sex and gender (e.g. Albet-Mas and Nogue-Font 1998; Lewis 1996; Mann 1997; Prasch 1996), race and ethnicity (Jeyifo 2000; Mazrui 2000) and religion (Amstutz 1997; Burke III 1998; Kahani-Hopkins and Hopkins 2002; Zubaida 1995). Similarly, the North—South, Rich—Poor divides are seen as parallels to the Orient—Occident dichotomy. As a result, tacit and biased discourses are highlighted by many anti-global-ization lobbies as they protest against the political, economic, social and cultural domination of the West (Chua 2003; Klein 2000; Shipman 2002). Tourism researchers like Clifford (1997), Echtner and Prasad (2003), Morgan and Pritchard (1998), Ooi *et al.* (2004) and Silver (1993), have also drawn inspiration from Said.

Said's challenge against Orientalism is critical and political. Such a critical perspective identifies who benefits, who is subverted, who disseminates the Orientalist discourses, how the discourses are disseminated and the consequences of reifying the discourses. This approach thus identifies the messages transmitted and

the embedded ideological meanings. In this perspective, all messages are seen as constructs that carry unequal relationships between the party that misrepresents the Other and the Other itself – words are chosen to load the presented messages, meanings are accentuated, while other meanings are selectively ignored. So for instance, in referring to the manner Singapore was presented in the British Broadcasting Corporation's *Holiday Programme* series, Morgan and Pritchard's (1998: 225-228) shows how Singapore's exoticism was selectively constructed with reference to Singapore's romantic colonial past, Chinese medicine (dried lizards, seahorses and scorpions) and autocratic rules. The programme did not mention that the current government was one of the parties who drove the British colonial masters out in the 1950s, few Singaporeans use Chinese medicine as the first choice of cure today and many of the so-called strict rules and regulations are also common in other countries, including the UK. Implicit in the messages are: Singapore is a successful colonial legacy (thanks to the British); Singapore is still an exotic Asian destination; and Singapore is not a democracy. Viewers will get to experience Britain's colonial heritage in Singapore, see how those Asians heal themselves and experience life in an autocratic regime. Such types of images and messages enthuse viewers, sell destinations and also caricaturize host societies.

Such images are Orientalist in character. Firstly, the images are superficial and based on misinterpretations but are presented with authority and as factual. Secondly, the caricatures presented aim to reaffirm widely accepted views of the Other, as in the case of Singapore, being a living colonial legacy, Singaporeans take 'strange' medicines and Singapore is not exactly a democracy. Thirdly, the misrepresentations are systematically and institutionally disseminated, including through the mass media, tourism promotion activities and even everyday hearsay. Fourthly, the messages construct the Other through the viewpoint of modern western societies and, inadvertently or otherwise, judge the Other through the eyes of the West. Let me elaborate.

It is a challenge for foreign tourists to know the host society because their visits are relatively short, they lack local knowledge and they rely on filtered information from tourism mediators (Ooi 2002b). A large majority of tourists have shallow, stereotypical and essentialized images of foreign destinations because their images are built from sources, including travel

reviews, news stories, guide books and tales from family and friends. Many of these sources are not reliable. For instance, movies help generate interest and create narratives for the consumption of places; popular movies such as *Braveheart* and *Lord of the Ring* have respectively promoted Scotland and New Zealand as tourist destinations. Not all movies-promoted narratives and images are positive and accurate. In the Hollywood blockbuster, *Tomb Raider*, which is partly set in Angkor Wat (Cambodia), it makes references to (non-existent) secret passageways, Egyptian hieroglyphs (in a Buddhist complex!) and subservient natives (submitting to the bad guys). To many conservationists, such references create new narratives for tourists that undermine the efforts to conserve the ancient Buddhist temple complex and introduce a more serious and historically accurate form of cultural tourism (Winter 2003).

While western tourists harbour Orientalized images, these images are also being institutionalized and promoted by the non-Western destinations themselves. That is partly because the large numbers of affluent western tourists are important for the local tourism industry. And these tourists' preconceptions have to be factored into when promoting the destination. For instance, Singapore is found to be clean, developed and efficient by most tourists but promoting such modern achievements alone will not persuade western tourists to come (Ooi 2002b). While these modern day comforts are important, Singapore, like many other Asian destinations, still needs to percolate and distil its Asian essence into tourist-friendly products to attract western tourists. The Asian images constitute Singapore's unique selling proposition to the West, the modern comforts are essential but not unique selling points (Ooi 2002b: 127). Many western tourists are still drawn to exotic places that are different and relatively untouched by modernization (Errington and Gewertz 1989; Jacobsen 2000; MacCannell 1976; Silver 1993; Sørensen 2003). And many of the promoted images feed into the 'western consciousness' (Silver 1993: 303).

Besides providing the images western tourists want, tourism promotion agencies also know that tourists' preconceptions affect tourists' experiences. Tourists seek out and affirm their preconceptions during their travels (McLean and Cooke 2003; Prentice 2004; Prentice and Andersen 2000; Waller and Lea 1999). Western tourists do not constitute a monolithic entity, neither do they have a single Orientalist tourist imagination,

tourism promotion agencies then have to figure out and imagine what the West generally wants from their destinations. These agencies – by frequently employing the help of major advertising companies based in western cosmopolitan centres, as observed by Pritchard and Morgan (2000) – attempt to meet the various demands of western (and also non-western) tourists; they do not only present Orientalist images of themselves, they also reify those images. As a result, 'authentic' cultural products are also created and staged for tourists. These products range from 'Voodoo' shows in Haiti (Goldberg 1983) to selling Jewish 'religious' objects (such as skull cap and candles) in Israel (Shenhav-Keller 1995) to visiting an 'original' Manggarai village in Indonesia (Allerton 2003). Many exotic images freeze the host society in the past and ignore the changes and development that the society has achieved. These images and reifications feed into the Orientalist tourist imagination. Therefore, researchers such as Echtner and Prasad (2003) and Silver (1993) have suggested that Third World representations in tourism foster a particular ideological position that place developing countries in an inferior position. These places are seen as backward, the people eager to serve and the destination is just a cultural playground.

Even museums, which are often institutions of authority and scholarship, have come to perpetuate the Orientalist imagination. Museums function as 'contact zones' (Clifford 1997: 188-219). Contact zones are sites where geographically and historically separate groups establish ongoing relations. Clifford (1997) examines the ways 'primitive' societies are represented in 'civilized' museums; they reflect an ongoing ideological matrix that governs how 'primitive' societies respond to and are perceived by 'civilized' people through these museums. Museums construct the Other under their own assumptions and worldviews, and the Other re-imagines oneself in, and responds to, the exhibitions. The museum has become sites for people to reflect on who they are, and the ideological matrix behind the identities presented is partly shaped by the imagination of the Other.

In sum, researchers have argued that tourism can be a form of domination, not just in terms of tourists' presence and meeting tourism demands, tourism also transmits a set of inaccurate discourses and misrepresentations on less developed and non-Western countries (Morgan and Pritchard 1998; Ooi *et al.* 2004; Selwyn 1993; Silver 1993).

As a result, 'tourism marketing is one of the many forms of Third World representation that, in sometimes subtle but nonetheless serious ways, serves to maintain and reinforce colonial discourse and the power relations and ideology it fosters' (Echtner and Prasad 2003: 672). Inadvertently or otherwise, these caricatured images may form the basis for non-Western destinations to imagine, re-invent and transform themselves (Morgan and Pritchard 1998; Ooi *et al.* 2004).

In considering tourism as a form of imperialism, there is a tendency to focus on how tourists dominate the destination as if the host society is passive and submissive. The view of a docile and submissive host society is not exactly correct, as I will show in how the national museums in Singapore Orientalizes the city-state. The Orient does respond creatively and assertively.

### REIFYING SINGAPORE'S ASIANNES

In 1995, while facing fierce competition in the tourism industry<sup>1</sup>, the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board (STPB)<sup>2</sup> and the Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA) released a blueprint to make Singapore into a 'Global City for the Arts'. Among other things, Singapore will have the SHM, SAM and ACM (Chang 2000; Chang and Lee 2003; STPB and MITA 1995; STPB 1996). These three national museums will showcase the island city-state's unique Asian identities. Since the late 1980s, Singapore finds its modern and efficient image less attractive, as tourists flock to more exotic destinations in Southeast Asia (National Tourism Plan Committees 1996). Singapore was then and still is being perceived as just another modern city (see Figure 1).

The thrust of the tourism strategy since the mid-1990s is then to communicate the image of Singapore as a destination where the modern blends with the old; the East blends with the West (Ooi 2004). So despite the ubiquitous modern manifestations in Singapore, the STB tries to show that aspects of the exotic East are actually embedded in Singapore's development and progress. For example, tourists are told that many skyscrapers in Singapore are built with the ancient Chinese practice of geomancy in mind, there are many restaurants serving international western dishes with Asian spices and most Singaporeans are able to speak their own version of English (known as Singlish) besides

standard English. Other attempts at making Singapore more Asian include conserving and enhancing Chinatown, Little India and the Malay Village, selling tour products that highlight the Asian soul in the city-state's modern settings and producing souvenir products that accentuate Singapore's Asianness (Chang and Teo 2001; Leong 1997; Ooi 2002b). The creation of the three national museums is yet another attempt to make Singapore unique and more Asian. The three national museums are managed by the National Heritage Board (NHB). These museums tell locals and foreigners about Singapore's 'Asianness'. Each museum constructs, interprets and asserts different Asian identities for Singapore.

The tourism industry is important to the NHB and the museums. For example, the Chief Executive Officer of NHB, Ms Lim Siok Peng, said in her organization's annual report:

*In May 2003 when SARS [Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome] peaked, tourists visiting Singapore dipped to an all-time low of 177,808, a drop of over 70% compared to May 2002. This had a knock-on effect on museum visitorship. Only 17,073 visited our museums in May – less than half a month's average (NHB 2004: 4).*

She further mentioned how NHB's Marketing and Corporate Communications Division then cooperated with tourism partners to attract more visitors during the crisis:

*We participated in Singapore Tourism Board's 'Step Out Singapore'. We also actively participated in joint promotions such as 'SIA's [Singapore Airlines's] Fabulous Offers', 'Roaring Great Deals', Great Singapore Sale, and the Association of Singapore Attractions's (ASA) recovery programmes (NHB 2004: 4).*

And to show that the NHB takes tourists seriously, it responds to the needs of the growing China tourist market:

*To reach out to the growing China tourist market, we produced brochures in both English and Chinese. About 100,000 copies each were printed and distributed at ASA racks in hotels, attractions, and Singapore Visitors' Centres. The brochures were also circulated at STB's regional tourism offices throughout Asia (NHB 2004: 4).*

Figure 1  
**ORIENTAL SINGAPORE? SKYSCRAPERS ALONG SINGAPORE RIVER**



The two-page annual review by the NHB's Chief Executive Officer focused very much on tourism (NHB 2004: 4-5). Funds are also available through the STB to help them stage certain exhibitions.

### **The Singapore History Museum**

The SHM is housed in the neo-classical national museum building. It has a chequered history since its

founding in 1887. It underwent dramatic changes and was named National Museum in 1965 when Singapore became independent. It then became the SHM in 1996 and in 2006, it will be renamed National Museum of Singapore in its refurbished and expanded national museum building (SHM 2005).

The SHM disputes generalized images people may have of Singapore as just another Asian country. The SHM aims to showcase trends and developments that have

characterized and influenced Singapore, highlighting the emergence of contemporary Singapore (STPB and MITA 1995: 17). Singapore's colonial past (from 1819 to 1963), the Second World War, struggle for self-rule from the British colonial masters, Singapore's volatile history with Malaysia and Singapore's independence in 1965 are the highlights in the museum. Among all the three national museums, the SHM is most involved in the national education programme, and it receives many school visits. The exhibitions complement the history taught in Singaporean schools.

Singapore's unique identity is asserted along these lines: Singapore was a striving British colony but the British could not protect it during the Second World War; Singapore suffered during the Japanese occupation; Singapore fought for its independence from the British subsequently; Singapore became part of the Federation of Malaysia (1963-1965) but could not fit in; and eventually Singapore blossomed and prospered as an independent country. Therefore, not only is Singapore not British, it is also not Japanese or Malaysian, Singapore is a unique Asian entity. For example, the museum tells visitors Singapore's situation during World War II:

*The Japanese come proclaiming themselves as liberators of their fellow-Asians from colonial oppression but they are oppressors too and treat their subjects even more harshly than the British ever did (NHB 1998: 31).*

Further accentuating the fact that Southeast Asia is not a homogeneous and harmonious region, the SHM recalls that Malaysia was created in 1963 with the merging of Malaya, Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore. This new country was not welcomed by the Philippines and Indonesia. The Philippines had already laid claim to Sabah in 1962. Indonesia did not want Malaysia's influence in Borneo. With the formation of the new federation in September 1963, a series of Indonesia-led violent sabotage activities took place around Malaysia, including in Singapore. The violence stopped only in October 1965 when Suharto became the president of Indonesia (NHB 1998: 70-71).

The museum tells visitors about Singapore's turbulent past, and at the same time, celebrates the country's social and economic achievements and the leadership of the ruling People's Action Party. This political party has ruled Singapore since its self-governance under British rule in 1959.

The policy of a Singaporean Singapore – with equal treatment for all citizens regardless of their ethnicity, encouraging Singaporeans of different ethnic groups to mingle, and other multi-cultural related social engineering schemes – has created a unique Singaporean identity. The museum also suggests that Singapore has prospered and developed much faster than all of its neighbours because of its strong and honest government. Singaporeans should be proud of what they have achieved.

In sum, the SHM story tells visitors that Singaporeans have their own identity. The SHM boasts of the city-state's economic achievements and inadvertently contrasts itself against its less developed Southeast Asian neighbours. It challenges any simplified preconceptions that Singapore is like its neighbours in Southeast Asia.

### **The Singapore Art Museum**

In contrast to the SHM, the SAM presents a Southeast Asian regional identity for Singapore. The museum opened in January 1996 and showcases contemporary Southeast Asian visual arts:

*The Singapore Art Museum (SAM) is one of the first art museums with international standard museum facilities and programmes in Southeast Asia. Dedicated to the collection and display of 20th century Singapore and Southeast Asian modern and contemporary art, SAM joins a league of new generation museums around the world with well-executed exhibitions and community outreach programmes. The Museum houses the national art collection of Singapore and has the largest collection in 20th-century Southeast Asian art by a public institution internationally (SAM 2005).*

The SAM plays a big part in the programme to develop Singapore into a reputable arts city and the cultural centre of Southeast Asia. Besides the SAM, the newly opened Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay (a gigantic complex by the sea and right in the city centre) play also a significant role in promoting Singapore as a contemporary art destination but by offering visual art performances. The SAM has plans to expand. Besides its current premises in a former missionary school, it will have its second wing in the majestic City Hall and former Supreme Court buildings.

In contrast to the SHM's message that Singapore is unique in Southeast Asia, the SAM presents Singapore as having strong and closely intertwined relationships with Southeast Asia. The SAM bundles Southeast Asia into an aesthetic entity. Southeast Asia is heterogeneous and does not have a clearly distilled identity. Many people around the world however perceive Southeast Asia as a region. And because the countries are geographically close, the countries are also assumed to be culturally similar. There is also the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand formed this regional grouping in 1967 as an anti-Communist political alliance. Other countries have since joined: Brunei, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. The current ten member states adhere to different religions, speak different languages and were colonized by different foreign powers in the last centuries. Some were even recent enemies, for example, Vietnam occupied Cambodia between 1979 and 1989, and was a Cold War adversary to the original ASEAN members. The SAM has now formulated yet another Southeast Asian identity; it is an aesthetic region.

The SAM acknowledges that the artistic communities in Southeast Asia and their experiences are diversely rich (Sabapathy 1996). So, the museum employs a harmony-in-diversity strategy to affirm Southeast Asia as an aesthetic entity. Common themes are used to bring disparate works of art together. 'Nationalism, revolution and the idea of the modern', 'Traditions of the real', 'Modes of abstraction', 'Mythology and religion: traditions in tension', 'The self and the other' and 'Urbanism and popular culture' are themes used to connect the diverse exhibitions in the museum. The SAM's curators are constantly reminded that they have to maintain their museum's unique proposition by presenting a Southeast Asian identity in their exhibitions.

The construction of such an aesthetic region is however politically sensitive despite pronouncements of close friendship amongst ASEAN members. For instance, ASEAN foreign ministers declare that '[w]hile fully respecting each member country's sovereignty and national property rights, ASEAN recognizes that the national cultural heritage of member countries constitute the heritage of Southeast Asia for whose protection it is the duty of ASEAN as a whole to cooperate' (ASEAN 2000: point 1). But SAM's actions are perceived as signs of Singaporean cultural imperialism by other Southeast

Asian countries. Individual countries want to keep their national art treasures at home. Other Southeast Asian countries want to be the contemporary art centre for the region too. In other words, other Southeast Asian countries have the same rights to claim a Southeast Asian identity, and they are competing to be the cultural capital of the region.

### The Asian Civilizations Museum

*The Asian Civilizations Museum (ACM) is the first museum in the region to present a broad yet integrated perspective of pan-Asian cultures and civilizations. As one of the National Museums of Singapore under the National Heritage Board, we seek to promote a better appreciation of the rich cultures that makeup Singapore's multi-ethnic society (ACM 2005b).*

The first wing of the ACM opened in April 1997 at the former Tao Nan School building in Armenian Street. It expanded in March 2003 to include the 14 000 square metre Empress Place colonial building next to the Singapore River, in the heart of the financial district.

*While Singapore's forefathers came to settle in Singapore from many parts of Asia within the last 200 years, the cultures brought to Singapore by these different people are far more ancient. This aspect of Singapore's history is the focus of the ACM. The Museum's collection therefore centres on the material cultures of the different groups originating from China, Southeast Asia, South Asia and West Asia (ACM 2005b).*

Besides being Singaporean, every citizen of Singapore has been assigned an ethnic identity. They are boxed into the Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others (CMIO) ethnic model; 99% of the Singaporean population is considered Chinese (77%), Malay (14%) or Indian (8%). There is also the miscellaneous category of 'Others' (1%). The CMIO model is politically defined, and is central to the state's nation building and social engineering programmes (Benjamin 1976; Chua 1995; Pereira 1997; Rudolph 1998; Siddique 1990). The ancestries of the Chinese, Malay and Indian communities are broadly defined as from China, Malaysia/Indonesia and the Indian sub-continent respectively. This model oversimplifies the immigration patterns and cultures of Singaporeans' fore parents. These three countries/

regions are not homogeneous within themselves, and the ACM acknowledges, but not harp, on the diversity. For instance in the case of China, it merely states:

*China is an aggregate of different regional cultures that was tied together by common bonds such as the imperial system of government, a common writing and a hierarchical social system based on Confucianism. It is not a homogenous country whose civilisation is dominated by Han culture (ACM 2005a).*

With the emphasis on the broad concepts of being Chinese, Indian and Malay Muslim, the museum suggests that Singaporeans should be proud of their ancestral pasts because these pasts are the sources of Singaporeans' Asian ethnic identities. In contrast to the SHM, which shows that Singapore is a relatively new country, the ACM re-claims historical links to China, India and the Middle East. While Singapore is in the middle of the Malay Muslim world in Southeast Asia, the ACM chooses to trace the Singaporean Malay Muslim population to the Middle East. Malaysia and Indonesia are Singapore's immediate neighbours. The accentuation of Singaporean ethnicities via other countries' pasts is a double-edged sword. While Singaporeans are asked to associate themselves with the pasts of other countries, they can also easily associate themselves with the present social and political situations in these same countries. Since Malaysia and Indonesia are Singapore's immediate neighbours, the Singaporean government officially acknowledges that Malay Singaporeans are at a greater risk of split loyalty if Singapore has conflicts with either of its two neighbours (Ooi 2003: 82-83). Since almost all Malays are also Muslims, the ACM then concentrates on the Muslim aspects of the Malay Singaporean population and link this group's heritage to the Middle East.

The ACM brings together priceless material heritage from the above mentioned places, offering visitors a sweeping view of Singaporeans' 'ancestral heritages' (STPB and MITA 1995: 17). Some of the spectacular exhibits include items like 18<sup>th</sup> century calligraphic implements from Iran and Turkey, 7<sup>th</sup> century Tang dynasty sculptures from China and 8<sup>th</sup> century architectural fragments from nagara temples in India. To promote the museum, it organizes so-called blockbuster exhibitions to attract even more visitors; these exhibitions include Buddhist artefacts from Indochina and treasures from the Vatican.

So, the ACM is a site that shows off the glorious heritages of old Asia. The grandeur and glory of Singaporeans' ancestors are celebrated, and the values embodied in the artefacts are said to be internalized in Singaporeans today. Unlike the SHM, in which Singapore's identity is accentuated by the country's differences with its neighbours, and the SAM, in which Singapore is said to represent Southeast Asia, the ACM asserts Singaporean ethnic identities by claiming ancestral links to selected historical periods of particular Asian countries and communities. These links are the deep roots of Singapore's Asianness.

## **TOURISTIFICATION AND ORIENTALIZATION PROCESSES IN CONTEXT**

The SHM, SAM and ACM are national institutions that assert Singapore's Asianness. They do not only play a part in the social engineering programmes, they also play a central role in making Singapore more Asian for western tourists. As mentioned earlier, Singapore has developed into a modern city and the STB realizes that Singapore has lost its exotic Oriental charm that many western tourists expect and demand. The museums are attempts to self-Orientalize Singapore.

Adorno and Horkheimer (1972) argue that there is a tendency for the culture industry to systematically insert secondary meanings, replacing original meanings in cultural artefacts. The self-Orientalization processes in the national museums of Singapore can be understood in this context. Let me explain. In museums, stories are presented and meanings are added to artefacts. New interpretations and meanings are often inserted into the exhibits. For example, the Museum of Scotland tells stories and stages myths of Scotland in the context of contemporary political cultural understanding of the country (Cooke and McLean 2002; McLean and Cooke 2003; Newman and McLean 2004). Meanings and contexts behind the exhibits are inevitably modified too, for example, scholars such as Hudson (1987) and O'Doherty (1986) point out that an exhibit, such as an old painting or a piece of sculpture, usually has an original functional setting such as in a church, temple or home, in which encourages a mood of relaxation and contemplation but when it becomes an exhibit in a museum, it is uprooted into a 'neutral, unnatural atmosphere, where it has to compete for attention with many other works of art.

In these circumstances, the emotions become anaesthetized, the intellect takes over and museums become temples of scholarship' (Hudson 1987: 175). Museums used as spaces for representation inevitably interpret and re-contextualize the exhibits. The SHM, SAM and ACM have created and inserted stories and narratives into their exhibits. These stories constitute part of the self-Orientalization of Singapore. There are however variations to the Orientalization process in these museums.

First and foremost, the SHM, SAM and ACM are engaged in the 'reasianization' (Hein and Hammond 1995) process. This process is not unique to Singapore. The process of reasianization is found among many Asian countries trying to seek and re-establish their relations with their Asian neighbours (Hein and Hammond 1995). Particularly in the 1980s and 1990s when the Asia Pacific region was economically vibrant, many Asian countries, like Japan, Malaysia and Singapore tried to assert their dominance. Many scholars and researchers also predicted then that many far eastern economies would overtake western economies. Such a view has inspired the reasianization process, as many Asia Pacific countries thought that they would collectively dominate world economics and politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Along side the reasianization process was the process of 'reverse Orientalism':

*This [reverse orientalism] process entailed the attribution of a set of cultural values to East and South-east Asian societies by Western social scientists in order to contrast the recent dynamic progress of Asian development with the stagnation and social disorganization of contemporary Western economies and societies. The contrast provided legitimation for some of the nation-building policies of political leaders in such countries as Singapore and was incorporated in attempts to identify and institutionalize core values (Hill 2000).*

Many people saw that the economic success of the Asian Pacific region as stemming from Confucianism. Confucian values, as supposedly practised in Japan and the Asian tiger economies (namely, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong) offer a set of work ethics – hard work, collective mindedness, thriftiness – that has an affinity with capitalism (Hofheinz and Calder 1982; Kahn and Pepper 1979; Vogel 1979). So suddenly Confucianism and Confucian values were seen as positive.

It was seen as anti-progress and anti-development before (Hill 2000). It was then in the 1980s that the Singaporean government started to celebrate Singaporeans' Asian roots and began the reverse Orientalism process (Hill 2000). That process has not stopped. Confucianism has since developed into another strain of Orientalist discourse (Chua 1995). Confucian values have equivocally come to mean Asian values in Singapore. Emphasis on Confucianism alone in Singapore will privilege the Chinese and marginalize the Malays and Indians. Regardless, the Singapore government embarks on a social engineering programme that has been Confucianized, so that Singaporeans will learn about social discipline, social solidarity and community responsibility (Chua 1995; Hill 2000; Lam and Tan 1999). The pride in being Asian has also been translated into tourism, as Singapore branded itself "New Asia" in 1996 (Ooi 2004). That brand and the current brand, "Uniquely Singapore", communicate the idea that Singapore is in an economically, socially and culturally dynamic region (Ooi 2004).

The SHM, SAM and ACM are part of the reasianization process to celebrate the expected rise of Asia. Singapore proudly self-Orientalizes itself because the images that the world has of Asia are changing for the better. The Singapore government could even use the positive parts of the Orientalist discourses to engineer, convince and persuade Singaporeans to be hardworking and authority-respecting subjects (Chua 1995). But there are different Orientalization strategies used in the three national museums of Singapore.

While celebrating Singaporeanness, the SHM attempts to *de-Orientalize* visitors' perceptions of Singapore. As presented earlier, the images that SHM presents of Singapore are specific and detailed. The SHM asserts Singapore's uniqueness in Southeast Asia; Singapore is very different from its immediate neighbours. The SHM gives historical examples of how Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and other neighbouring countries disagree and had violent conflicts. There are also exhibitions to show the distinctiveness of various Chinese communities in Singapore, showing that the Chinese in Singapore speak different languages and have different customs, beliefs and practices. Furthermore, Singapore is shown to be special because it has become an economically developed society due to good government, unlike most of its neighbours. In other words, Singapore is both Asian and modern but in its own way.

The SHM challenges Orientalist images visitors may have of Singapore as just another Asian country. It boasts of the city-state’s economic and social successes despite the strife and challenges facing an unstable Asia.

The SAM contrasts against the SHM, it creates a new set of Orientalist discourses on Southeast Asia. It *re-Orientalizes* Singapore and the region. The SAM firmly asserts Singapore as leader in Southeast Asia and constructs a set of Orientalist narratives about Southeast Asia as an aesthetic region. As mentioned earlier, the region is diverse: it has more than 500 million inhabitants, officially made of 10 different countries, and within most of these countries, there is a variety of languages and cultural differences. In terms of contemporary art, there is a wide variety, ranging from Chinese ink paintings to Javanese batik, Vietnamese impressionism to Singaporean abstract sculptures. It is a difficult task to construct a Southeast Asian art genre. The museum honestly presents the diversity of visual art forms from the region and then theme the works.

Regardless, the NHB and SAM must work within the confines defined by the museum’s blueprint (STPB and MITA 1995). So, the SAM celebrates the diversity of Southeast Asia but claims that the region is a somewhat artistically unified region. This unity invents yet another Southeast Asian regional identity. Effectively, it introduces a new set of Orientalist discourses on how to view the region. The promoted narrative firmly places Singapore as the art centre of the region. Therefore, the SAM is trying to replace the old Orientalist view of Southeast Asia that ignores the art in the region with a new view of Southeast Asia that makes Singapore the art and cultural centre. It re-Orientalizes Singapore and the region with its own narratives.

The ACM *reaffirms* certain Orientalist views of Asia. The ACM has even bigger ambitions than the SAM, in the sense that it is presenting the material cultures of the major ancient Asian civilizations. It does not however attempt to claim common roots between China, India and the Middle East, instead the museum works within the confines of common views of China, India and the Middle East.

Table 1

**THE ORIENT RESPONDS THROUGH THE NATIONAL MUSEUMS OF SINGAPORE – DE-ORIENTALISM, RE-ORIENTALISM AND REVERSE ORIENTALISM**

	SHM	SAM	ACM
The main messages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Singapore has its own cultures and identity</li> <li>• Singapore is distinct from other countries in the Southeast Asia</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Singapore is part of Southeast Asia</li> <li>• Southeast Asia offers a unique genre of art</li> <li>• The SAM is the place to experience Southeast Asian art.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Singapore is Asian</li> <li>• Asia is exotic and rich in history</li> <li>• Singapore society has deep Asian roots</li> </ul>
Type of Orientalization processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It de-orientalizes any simple images people may have of Singapore as just another Asian country</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It re-orientalizes Southeast Asia by presenting a Southeast Asian art genre</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It affirms Orientalist images that Asia is made up of clusters of civilizations</li> </ul>
Ways to attract more tourists to Singapore	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Celebration of Singaporean society</li> <li>• Singapore is a ‘Global City for the Arts’</li> <li>• Come experience Singapore as a unique country in Southeast Asia</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Celebration of Southeast Asia art and culture</li> <li>• Singapore is a ‘Global City for the Arts’</li> <li>• Experience the best in Southeast Asian art and culture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Celebration of ancient Asian civilizations</li> <li>• Singapore is a ‘Global City for the Arts’</li> <li>• Experience different exciting and rich ancient Asian heritages</li> </ul>
Role in social engineering and nation building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reverse Orientalism: be proud of Singapore</li> <li>• For national education</li> <li>• Singapore has a difficult history and the current government has brought about stability and prosperity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reverse Orientalism: be proud of Southeast Asia</li> <li>• To promote art among Singaporeans</li> <li>• Singapore is the cultural capital of the region</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reverse Orientalism: be proud of being Asian</li> <li>• Singaporeans should know their roots and they can see their ancestral pasts in the ACM</li> <li>• Encourage Singaporeans to accept prescribed ‘Asian values’</li> </ul>

These places are perceived as homogeneous social and cultural entities. And Singapore is a site where all these cultures influence the modern city-state. But the long histories of these civilizations were chequered with political revolutions and social evolutions. For instance, in China alone, the vast differences between dynasties, between Chinese languages and between communities are glossed over by the idea of a single Chinese civilization. The one-China culture impression is not only held by most people in the world but is also actively promoted by China; Singapore also takes the view of a single Chinese culture in its ethnic engineering programme (Benjamin 1976; Leong 1997; Rudolph 1998). The ACM reaffirms the generalized ideas of Chinese, Indian and Islamic civilizations. In other words, like the SAM advocating Southeast Asia as a somewhat homogeneous bloc, the ACM reaffirms the dominant clusters of civilizations view of Asia. While the curators know that the situation is much more complex, the messages communicated are basically that Asia is culturally rich and diverse along certain pre-defined boundaries of civilizations.

The three museums present Singapore and the region differently. These different messages and strategies are developed out of the needs of tourism and nation building. The Table 1 summarizes the arguments that I have put forward on the different forms of Orientalization in the national museums of Singapore.

Indeed, while serving the tourism functions, these museums have also become platforms for the Singaporean authorities to re-Orientalize and reverse Orientalize the city-state. Despite being visibly modern and developed, Singaporeans are reminded that they are Asian with good work ethics and high moral values. Tourists are shown that Singapore is essentially Asian and is still exotic. The Orientalist discourses that the museums have developed have also allude to Singapore's superiority to its neighbours. Singapore has inadvertently become the imperialist in the region.

## CONCLUSIONS

The SAM has created another set of Orientalist narratives for Southeast Asia. This set of narratives celebrates contemporary art from the region with Singapore in the centre. The ACM also celebrates Asia but in the context of its ancient civilizations. The ACM does not invent a new set of Orientalist discourses for Asia but

affirm the Orientalist imagination of Asia as being divided into sets of civilizations. The SHM contrasts against the SAM and the ACM. SHM celebrates Asia but argues that Singapore is different from other Asian countries, and Singapore is doing much better economically and socially than its neighbours.

New and secondary meanings can be easily added to cultural products. Therefore, in the context of the national museums of Singapore, what that has been presented and articulated must also be understood within the context of use. All knowledge is created within its age and is necessarily contingent, no knowledge can be unaffected by the circumstances under which it comes to be (Burke III 1998; Foucault 1972; Said 1979). With this holistic approach, presented stories and histories must then be read and understood as constructions by museum mediators within the contexts the stories function, rather than as objective and unadulterated accounts of reality. This paper has read the main stories of the three national museums of Singapore within the tourism and local social engineering context.

The comparison between the three national museums shows how Orientalist discourses can be subverted, reclaimed and celebrated. Orientalism is not just about the Occident misinterpreting and controlling the Orient, the Orient does respond. The Singaporean identities constructed are meant to attract tourists, assert Singapore's role as a cultural centre for the region and to generate pride in Singaporeans' ancestral pasts. The authorities in Singapore uses the knowledge to attract more tourists, social engineer its subjects and define the country's relationships with other Asian countries.

With these said, tourism must be understood within the wider context of cultural and social production, negotiation and reproduction. There is still much room for the development of a stream of critical tourism investigation based on a nuanced and questioning approach to Said's criticisms of Orientalism. Within this tradition of research, tourism is a political arena – behind all tourism activities, questions such as “who benefits?”, “who is subverted?”, “who disseminates the Orientalist discourses?”, “how are the discourses disseminated?” and “what are the consequences of reifying the propagated discourses?” must be asked. This paper is only but one study. If we are to promote a global tourism industry that is socially, culturally and politically sensitive and responsible, such a form of scrutiny would be an essential step towards such a goal.

## Notes

1. Data for this empirical study were collected between 1997 and 2006. Besides documents and visits to the museums, interviews and discussions were held with top officials in the ACM, SAM, SHM, National Heritage Board and STB.
2. The Singapore Tourist Promotion Board (STPB) became the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) in November 1997.

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