

NON-ASIAN TOURISTS' VIEWS ON SINGAPORE CULTURAL TOURISM

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Promoting ethnic cultural tourism is an important aspect of an overall tourism strategy in Singapore. The Singapore Tourism Board (STB) actively leverages the country's limited natural resources and short history to ensure the viability and competitiveness of this industry. In this research note, we examine non-Asian tourists' perceptions of Singapore's ethnic cultural tourism and make recommendations for future promotion. The results from a survey conducted in 2009 show that non-Asian tourists' participation in ethnic cultural tourism in Singapore is mostly accidental and is less for cultural aspects than for cheap shopping and low-priced food. The challenge for the Singapore tourism industry is to balance profit-generation with cultural retention and education.

Keywords: cultural tourism, Singapore, perception

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INTRODUCTION

Singapore's tourist industry plays a considerable role in the country's economy (Ooi, 2005; Ramchandani, 2012). The Singapore Tourism Board (STB) has advertised Singapore as a tourist destination using a variety of brands since the 1960s. One focus of these brands is the perception of Singapore as a nation that is home to multiple ethnic cultures. While Singapore has cultural sites for each of her main ethnicities, tourists' awareness and perception of these sites may not be in line with the STB's advertising goals. This research note seeks to examine tourists' familiarity with and thoughts about Singapore's ethnic cultural sites and make projections about how ethnic cultural tourism may



change based on the results.

BRANDING AND TOURISM

Promoting ethnic cultural tourism is an important aspect of an overall tourism strategy in Singapore. Over the past 50 years, Singapore has reinvented her brand at least five times. In the 1960s and 70s, Singapore promoted herself as “Instant Asia,” where a person “could find an array of Asian cultures, peoples, festivals, and cuisines conveniently manifested in a single destination” (Ooi, 2002, pp. 141-142). In her next incarnation in the 80s, “Surprising Singapore” emphasized the co-existence and contrasts between modernity and Asian exoticism and between the East and the West. With “New Asia – Singapore,” developed in 1996, the brand reiterated the idea of a multicultural nation that harmoniously encompasses tradition and modernity. This brand presented Singapore as the exemplar of energy and growth in South-East Asia. Another manifestation, “Uniquely Singapore,” again captured the integration of various cultures while embracing modernity and retaining tradition. In this version, the brand specifically emphasized Singapore’s ability to offer a unique and memorable experience, marking her as different from other Asian countries. In its latest manifestation, “Your Singapore,” cultural aspects are less prominently featured on its website, but a simple search yields a list of links to different areas of interest including festivals, precincts, and heritage sites.

The three main ethnic cultural sites in Singapore are Chinatown, Little India and Malay Village (e.g., Phua, Berkowitz & Gagermeier, 2012). These different Asian cultures are perceived and received differently by tourists depending on whether the tourists are Asians or non-Asians. Asian ethnic cultures are generally perceived as more exotic by non-Asians than Asians. This is not to suggest that ethnic groups within Asia have similar exposure to other Asian cultures. While ethnic groups in Asia are diverse, their historical, political, geographical and socio-economic relationships with one another often render them less exotic. As such, a basic distinction can be made between Asian and non-Asian tourists in terms of interest in and perception of Asian ethnic cultural tourism. In this research note, we focused on a non-Asian sample.

RESEARCH METHODS

Surveys were conducted in the summer of 2009. We employed a purposive sampling approach where we focused on interviewing non-Asian tourists. In order to find participants for our survey we frequented several tourist destinations. Our sample included 104 tourists (49% men, 51% women). Age ranged from 18 to 70 years old. Forty-six percent of participants were first-time tourists to Singapore. The three countries most represented in our sample were England (27%), Australia (21%), and USA (18%). These three countries are the only non-Asian countries in Singapore's top ten tourist-sending countries from 2003-2007 (Singapore Tourist Board, 2008). Other countries represented in the sample include Germany, Norway, Argentina, Hungary, Russia, Slovakia, and Trinidad and Tobago. When quotes are used, we report the country of origin and the age of the participants.

TOURISTS' REACTIONS

When we asked tourists to list the top three sites in Singapore that they wanted to visit, the most popular answers included Sentosa (a beach resort island), the Night Safari, shopping malls (specifically Orchard Road), the Singapore Flyer, and the Botanic Gardens. Chinatown and Little India were also mentioned, with Chinatown being the more popular choice. When asked about their reasons for wanting or not wanting to visit these cultural areas, most tourists preferred Chinatown not necessarily for its cultural value, but more for its shopping opportunities. Few tourists mentioned their interest in wanting to "know more about the culture" (Germany, 39). A Norwegian tourist (51) actually intended to skip Chinatown entirely because "it is almost demolished" in his opinion. Other comments included:

"It's lovely, but you can't see the buildings." (Switzerland, 32)

"Great food; a touch of old Asia." (Australia, 62)

"Vendors are not as pushy as in other countries." (Switzerland, 31)

One interesting reason for their poor impression or lack of desire to visit Chinatown is that some tourists find Chinatowns in different cities too similar:

"I'm not interested...it's in Sydney." (Australia, 31)

"I expect it to be the same as other Chinatowns." (Hungary, 38)

"It is the same as other Chinatowns." (England, 26)

The two most common comments about Little India are about its good food and that hostels are located there. An English tourist (59) mentioned that he likes Little India because it is “quite like India.” A female tourist from England (22) mentioned her discomfort: “I felt vulnerable there...there weren't really other tourists.” Even when prompted, no tourist mentioned the Malay Village or Kampong Glam (site of the Malay Heritage Centre). When described to them, some tourists became interested mainly because they wanted to see everything Singapore had to offer.

ETHNIC CULTURAL TOURISM AND AUTHENTICITY

An important aspect of ethnic cultural tourism is its representation of the culture. This is not simply a question of authenticity as the concept of authenticity is not static and falls into the grey area of whether any staging is involved (e.g., MacCannell, 1973). Appropriate representation of ethnic cultures has to do with respect and education as well, though these are heavily intertwined with the contested idea of authenticity. One issue is whether tourists are experiencing authentic Singaporean ethnic cultures. Singapore's Chinatown and Little India are known for inexpensive shopping. The Chinatown Heritage Centre, a museum that exhibits the history of life in early Chinatown, is hard to find as it is hidden among and overshadowed by the rows of colorful gift shops. In some ways, Little India offers a more authentic experience as the shopping is not as deliberately catered to vacation tourists, but to immigrant workers and Singaporeans. That being said, Chinatown also attracts Singaporeans as the food courts, otherwise known as hawker centers, have a long history of providing some famous local food. As such, visiting these sites involves some staged experiences (e.g., some would argue that the landscape is staged through renovation, even if the attempt was to re-create specific architectural style), as well as some presumably more authentic interactions with or alongside Singaporeans (e.g., these places are also great shopping areas for native Singaporeans, and their presence is not deliberately catered to the tourist gaze). However, without some deliberate effort to inform non-Asian tourists of their ethnic cultural values and distinct diasporas, these sites may lose their uniqueness, giving the impression, for example, that all Chinatowns look alike.

A few tourists argued that these areas, while important in showcasing different ethnic cultures, also represent segregation – “Little India and Chinatown seem more of ‘segregative’ areas” (Australia, 64). A US

tourist (40) noted that that “Singapore has a campaign about accepting others,” thus it is not surprising that different ethnic groups appear to have a “blend of all the various cultures.” This suggests a critical and potentially contentious role the government has played in this area (e.g., Teo & Yeoh, 1997). It is worth noting that the concept of authenticity is not only a construct, but is multi-dimensional and contested (e.g., Littrell, Anderson, & Brown, 1993).

Farmaki (2012) noted that it is important for tourist destinations to promote their strengths and upgrade facilities in order to increase the perception of quality. While the STB has promoted cultural tourism as a strength in the past, the current brand, “Your Singapore,” does not have a strong cultural focus. Singapore’s ethnic neighborhoods, specifically Chinatown, have undergone construction in the past in an attempt to improve their appeal to tourists, but at the expense of its perceived authenticity. The STB has identified cultural fusion and harmony as a Unique Selling Proposition (Naidoo, Ramseook-Munhurrin & Durbarry, 2012), but it is possible there has not been enough attention drawn to cultural neighborhoods as areas for ethnic cultural tourism. Though their renovation has been catered to tourists, if tourists are unaware of these neighborhoods, the upgrades will have little to no effect on their perceptions. Thus, it may be beneficial for the STB to continue to promote Singapore as a multicultural nation and increase awareness of ethnic cultural tourism opportunities by advertising the various cultural neighborhoods.

CONCLUSION

With more tourist attractions being launched in recent years (e.g., Night Safari, Singapore Flyer, casinos) ethnic cultural tourism in Singapore is becoming more and more accidental. This is most evident in the latest brand, “Your Singapore,” which is heavily tourist-focused (consumer-focused). In part, this approach is inevitable in a highly competitive industry where tourists’ preferences are ever-changing. However, such an approach may threaten the survival of some culturally important, but less popular sites. This strategy may lead to the transformation of these sites into something that no longer retains their original characteristics. Scholars have argued that what is good for conservation of culture is not always good for tourism and vice versa. Due to this conflict, travel destinations are often faced with an outcome of either less money from tourism or a less authentic culture. Jamal and Kim (2005) posit that

heritage tourism has the potential to foster “joint understandings, peace, tolerance and equity.” Particularly with non-Asian tourists, ethnic cultural tourism is a form of education and exposure. The challenge for the Singapore tourism industry is to balance profit-generation, cultural retention and education.

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