Making Memories in Singapore:  
A Study of Authenticity and Conservation in Singapore

by

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ABSTRACT

In September 1998, the Singapore Tourism Board announced a plan to revitalise Chinatown with theme gardens and street bazaars. This sparked off a heated debate with members of the public complaining of the ‘thematisation’ of the district. A public forum was eventually organised in February 1999 during which feedback was collected and opinions were debated. Many voiced concerns that the plans of the STB will rob Chinatown of its ‘genuine’ spirit. Some argued that the STB, has fallen prey to forces of tourism-economics by commodifying the heritage of Singapore. A key point of attack on the STB revolves round the issue of ‘authenticity’ and ‘genuineness’ of the place. Of great concern to the public is the approach suggested by the STB which seems to imply an overt ‘dressing up’ of the area. Such ‘dressing up’ of the ‘tourist space’ has been well investigated by Dean MacCanell in his seminal theory on ‘Staged Authenticity’ – a concept subsequently further developed by Erik Cohen. This paper adopts the concept of ‘Staged Authenticity’ as an analytical tool in investigating conservation efforts in Singapore, in particular, the ‘ethnic’ historic district. It will show that efforts by STB have a consequential effect on the perception of cultural tradition in Singapore by actively ‘inventing’ tradition.

The paper is divided into 4 parts. In part one, we investigate theories of authenticity and understand its relation to conservation and tourism. This will provide the theoretical framework for the case studies. Part two takes us into a brief history of conservation in Singapore and also provides an explanation of the conservation procedures in Singapore. This will set the context for understanding the case studies. Part three of the paper provides analyses of conservation works that have been carried out to date. Specifically, we will examine aspects of ‘authenticity’ and provide a critique of the current conservation efforts. Part four concludes the paper by arguing that the desire to ‘make memories’ for tourists in Singapore has resulted in the tempering of local ‘reality’ through architectural conservation and this could lead to the invention and acceptance of pseudo-tradition in the long run.

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