

## **‘We need something of our own’: Representing Ethnicity, Diversity and ‘ National Heritage’ in Singapore**

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Everywhere in Southeast Asia, the evidence of cultural diversity is overwhelming. Like many postcolonial states, Singapore encompasses a large number of disparate groups with different languages, religions and lifestyles. Over the past few decades, government policies have attempted to portray Singapore as a ‘community of communities’ – a nation of discrete heritages, united by their co-existence in the same geographical location, but made unique by the presence of an ‘indigenous’ Peranakan culture.

The focal point for this paper is the national museum of Singapore which, interestingly, comprises a network of new museums representing the various cultural minorities that make up the Singaporean population (the recently refurbished Singapore History Museum and the two new wings of the Asian Civilizations Museum). In particular, I wish to explore the reasons why, and the processes through which a cultural phenomenon (in this case the culture of the Peranakans) becomes defined as ‘national heritage’ by the state. Relatedly, I will also consider how different definitions of heritage are interpreted by Singaporeans and how constructions of a multi-ethnic heritage may co-exist in harmony with the state’s hegemonic aims. To do so, I will focus first on the Singaporean museums’ attempt to invent a Peranakan heritage and appropriate a sense of ‘indigenouness’ in the project of nation building, and secondly on a recent exhibition on marriage which, I believe, attempts to put forward a Singaporean identity based on the portrayal of the nation as a multi-ethnic ‘community of communities’.

This paper has developed out of doctoral research which uses case studies of new Asian national history museums<sup>1</sup> - their objects, displays, and professional dynamics - to explore the construction of postcolonial national identities. It is based upon material from the final chapter of my dissertation, which addresses two modern museological 'problems' – multiculturalism and the commodification of indigenous heritage. The rise of the postcolonial nation state accentuates particular conditions within which there is a need to develop and assert a sense of national identity in order to reinforce belief in the existence and legitimacy of the nation. The recovery (or perhaps 'fabrication'?) of 'national heritage' and the revival of 'ethnic' traditions are, I believe, key to promoting a sense of the nation within the populace as well as 'selling' it to international visitors.

This paper examines Singapore's new network of national history museums, and analyses the means by which they interpret and articulate particular ideas about 'nationhood', ethnicity and memory in a shifting global political and economic theatre. Like many postcolonial states, Singapore encompasses a large number of disparate groups with different languages, religions and lifestyles. Over the past few decades, government policies (and therefore their expression in public museums) have attempted to portray Singapore as a 'community of communities', a nation of discrete heritages, united by their co-existence in the same geographical location, and made unique by the presence of an 'indigenous' Peranakan culture.<sup>2</sup> It is the construction of this sense of 'homogenization through difference' that I wish to explore.

In this way, I hope to shed light on the various ways the national museum contributes to the construction of 'the nation' and its citizenry by simultaneously reminding people of their multi-cultural heritages and the shared experiences and histories that bind otherwise disparate groups together, while drawing people together through the construction of a unique indigenous heritage, providing a focal point for national identity and symbols of unity. I would argue that the case of Singapore represents just one example of a larger (perhaps world-wide?) movement to forge connections among diverse populations through heritage practices, creating both new publics, and strengthening existing ones.

### The Peranakans: One Heritage for All?

Rather than having to fight for national independence, the 'nation' as a political entity was somewhat reluctantly thrust upon Singapore (Kwok 1998: 25). This had some crucial ramifications for the construction of a national culture, particularly with regard to the role of ethnicity. Simply put, not having a coherent national culture upon which it could fall back necessitated the construction (or 'invention') of a national heritage that transcended the accepted colonial definitions of Singapore's ethnic groups.<sup>3</sup> As Kuo Pao Kun, founder of The Substation gallery, comments:

As a former colony...[we] have no nation, or culture, to go back to. We started as a people made up of immigrants coming from different places - big cultures, great cultures - but they brought to Singapore only bits and pieces of the great cultures and we have always been preoccupied with making money, making a better living. I think we have

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1 Specifically, the new history museums of Singapore, Hong Kong and Macau.

2 The Peranakans are an ethnic group that is characterised by a unique synthesis of Chinese and Malay influences, and their descent can be traced to Chinese traders who settled in Southeast Asia during the seventeenth century and married local women. As a group, the Peranakans believe they have retained a unique identity that is different from that of other Chinese immigrants to the region

3 Instituted under Stamford Raffles, Singapore's population has traditionally been divided along ethnic lines into 'Chinese, Malay, Indian and Other' (CMIO).

been marginalised, and we keep on marginalising ourselves... We call ourselves 'multicultural', but actually none of the cultures we have inherited are whole (Kuo 1994: 26).

While political independence prompted public discussion about the need for some form of national identity, little thought was given to the importance of heritage in such a construction (Yeoh and Huang 1996: 412). It was not until the 1980s and 1990s that official discourse turned to the need to understand and appreciate Singapore's cultural heritage as part of the larger nation building project. The clearest indication of a willingness to engage with the question of heritage first came in 1988 when a 'National Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts' was established, tasked with making recommendations to 'encourage Singaporeans to be more widely informed, creative, refined in taste, gracious in lifestyle and appreciative of our collective heritage in the context of modern Singapore' (Committee on Heritage 1988: 2). The concern with national heritage is evident in extracts taken from the 1988 report below:

Though Singapore's modern history is short, it contains a unique heritage which can play a vital part in nation building (6);

With wider and deeper appreciation of our heritage, Singaporeans will face the future with a deeper sense of confidence and purpose in building a nation of excellence on solid foundations (6);

Properly treated, our heritage can contribute towards the building of a rich cultural identity. It is the substance of social and psychological defence (26).

(excerpts taken from *Committee on Heritage* 1988).

Today, still, concerns with promoting Singapore's heritage remain on the agenda. As the 2002 Annual Report of the National Heritage Board reflects:

Self-government, which was instituted in 1959, did not result in a united society. There was still conflict among the different communities in multiracial Singapore. The government was faced with the challenge of instilling a sense of unity and national identity and belonging in Singapore (NHB 2002b: 5).

In response to these calls for heritage, the Singaporean government, in co-operation with its national museums, has begun to fashion a 'national heritage' out of its ethnically diverse population by putting forward its *mestizo*<sup>4</sup> 'Peranakan' population as the nation's 'indigenous' culture.

The Peranakans are an ethnic group that is characterised by a unique synthesis of Chinese and Malay influences, and their descent can be traced to Chinese traders who settled in Southeast Asia during the seventeenth century and married local women. The term 'Peranakan' is believed to be derived from the Malay word *anak* (child), referring to the ancestors of these intermarriages (Henderson 2003: 30-31). As a group, the Peranakans believe they have retained a unique identity that is different from that of other Chinese immigrants to the region, and also highlights their adaptation to aspects of Malay life such as

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4 *Mestizo* is a term of Spanish origin used to designate the people of mixed European and indigenous non-European ancestry. See Juan De Castro (2002) for example, who focuses on *mestizaje* discourse in Latin American literature, which proposes the existence of a homogenous Latin American culture out of American Indian, black, and Iberian elements. Usner et al (2000) similarly stress creolization as 'mutual cultural interchange'.

dress and food (Henderson 2003: 31; also see Tan 1993). A separate language of their own also evolved, 'known as "Baba Malay", a synthesis of Malay and Hokkien Chinese' (Henderson 2003: 31). Peranakan culture thus involves a fusion of Chinese and Malay cultures, as well as European and Indonesian influences.

During the colonial period, Peranakans for the most part enjoyed a relatively high socio-economic standing. Many occupied prominent positions in public life, and prosperity was apparent in their elaborate domestic furnishings, fine porcelain, embroidery and ornaments, as well as an active social life (Wee 2000: L4). The end of British rule marked a turning point in Peranakan history, however, as they were no longer needed to support the colonial administration. The ethnic and political justification for their separate existence diminished, leaving Peranakan identity to be expressed mainly through material cultural forms (furniture, dress etc.) that proved difficult to sustain without a wider sense of group solidarity (Rudolph 1998: 280).

An older gentleman was quoted in a recent newspaper article about the demise of Peranakan culture in Singapore:

It is quite impossible to live the Peranakan lifestyle in this day and age. The language is dying, and the knowledge of complex customs has been lost (Tan Boon Hui quoted in Wee 2000: L4).

Indeed, many Singaporeans say that with independence, Peranakan identity became subsumed under the more dominant Chinese identity. Some of the reasons for this might be the recent governmental push for all Singaporeans to learn Mandarin, despite Peranakan families being more likely to speak Malay at home, and intermarriages with non-Peranakans becoming more common, further diluting their identity (Wee 2000: L4). Moreover, within the governmentally imposed racial framework of 'Chinese, Malay, Indian and Other', in place since the colonial era, Peranakans are classified as Chinese for the purposes of identity cards (Benjamin 1976). In many ways, therefore, the unique characteristics of the Peranakans have been systematically devalued and their sense of identity weakened (Rudolph 1998: 282).

However, during a conversation with a Peranakan woman who has spent her entire life in Singapore, she made the following observation:

Suddenly younger Peranakans want to learn how to cook authentic *Nonya* food, and they are asking their mothers and grandmothers for the recipes. I don't know why there has been this revival (Oon, conversation, ACM, July 2002).

Mrs. Matsumura, a tour guide at the Asian Civilizations Museum, made a similar comment regarding this apparent 'local' cultural revival:

It's strange to show schoolchildren the Peranakan clothes, and then to see them wearing them later in the day. The *sarong* and the *kebaya* are there in the museum, but today, young people don't wear them together. So maybe I'll see girls on Orchard Road wearing the *sarong* with a T-shirt, or the *kebaya* with jeans. But they're the same clothes they were in the nineteenth century (Matsumura, conversation, ACM, July 2002).

From my observations in Singapore, moreover, it was immediately apparent that it is the promotion of Peranakan distinctiveness that has become a major source of their attraction for locals and tourists alike. Through the construction of various Peranakan sites around the city, such as the 'Peranakan Place' shopping complex, numerous 'authentic Peranakan' restaurants, and two new museum galleries, it is clear that the prominence given to the invention of heritage on Singapore's national agenda in recent years is deemed necessary as part of an attempt to build and support national identity.

Unlike the Singapore History Museum's undeniably nationalistic origins, it was largely the complexities of the ethnic situation in Singapore that brought about the establishment of the Asian Civilisations Museum. In the years after British departure, mounting racial tension, and even some instances of violence, prompted the government to devise ways of promoting 'pan-ethnic' values as the basis for a more unified cultural identity (Chua and Kuo 1990: np). As part of this drive, the ACM was created with an explicit focus on 'shared values' and as an attempt to formulate a set of 'pan-Asian' social principles with which people could identify and upon which one could construct a genuinely national identity (Kwok 1999: 164).

The Armenian Street wing of the ACM, for instance, is in the process of evolving into a gallery wholly devoted to the display of Peranakan culture, entitled, 'The Peranakan Legacy'.<sup>5</sup> The exhibits introduce these 'indigenous Singaporeans' as inhabitants from 'the early days' who gathered in the Katong District, and describes the objects on display as providing insight into the 'complex hybrid origins' of a culture 'forged between the Chinese, Malay and European worlds during the period of 1850 and 1950' (Museum Text, 'The Peranakan Legacy', ACM, 2002). The displays are organised around themes and materials, in which visitors view displays of social customs such as betel chewing and weddings, the *nonyas*' production of elaborately beaded textiles, stylistic developments in dress and jewellery fashions at the turn of the century, and the 'important legacies of silver and porcelain that were handed down as family heirlooms' (Museum text, 'The Peranakan Legacy', ACM, 2002).

Throughout the exhibit, the material and textual focus is on the creation of a *distinct* Peranakan aesthetic, which, as the museums text reads: 'can be seen in their taste for elaborate designs executed with exquisite skill' (Museum text, 'The Peranakan Legacy', ACM, 2002, see **Fig.1**). This is illustrated materially by nineteenth century examples of Malay-style brooches (*kerosang*) with rose-cut diamonds (*intan*) produced exclusively by Peranakan jewellers. Further on, examples of metalwork demonstrate the blending of Malay techniques and Chinese designs. Heidi Tan, one of the curators involved in producing this exhibit, commented to me about the challenge of exhibiting cultural blending while promoting the unique culture of the Peranakans in Singapore:

One of the curatorial challenges of the exhibition was to address the need for greater contextualisation, despite limited collections. People experience 'Peranakan-ness' differently, especially the Peranakans themselves. Different Peranakans have different ways of living. Some families live their culture within the Buddhist-Taoist belief system, some in Catholicism, some in Protestant Christianity, for example. And so for them it is essential that we don't portray 'Peranakan' as a rigid stereotype. This is hard, though, because at the same time, Peranakan culture holds great nostalgia and significance for Singaporeans and is an attraction for overseas visitors who want to discover a unique Singaporean culture. This is the challenge for the museum – not to perpetuate the Peranakan stereotype, while maintaining their uniqueness (Heidi Tan, interview, ACM, July 2002).

In the resulting displays, however, the Peranakans are represented as a homogenous entity, represented by distinct, easily recognisable objects that set them apart from *sinkeh*, or Chinese migrants to Southeast Asia. In other words, the displays emphasise the relatively superficial, external and therefore non-threatening manifestations of ethnicity that are most accessible to visitors - costumes, arts and crafts, food and furnishings, represented as if the ethnic group is living in an ahistorical 'ethnographic present' (Ooi 2001: 116).

Figure 1.

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5 I note here the ACM Armenian Street branch's closing in December of 2005 for refurbishment into an exclusively Peranakan museum (see <http://www.acm.org.sg/home/home.asp>).



It is also the more eye-catching aspects of Peranakan culture that are promoted – those artefacts most appealing to tourists who tend to be most attracted to colourful displays of local uniqueness (Henderson 2002: 42). Groupings of red and gold bridal furniture, for example, and a namwood house altar set with offerings are among the most visually impressive, and a clear success with tourists. According to Ashworth (1994: 25), museums will almost always offer a homogenised and aestheticised view of national heritage: ‘In order to be useful in museums and be easily understood by the widest group of people, a “rich and complex past” has to be reduced to a set of easily recognizable characteristics.’ In displaying the more traditional and beautiful Peranakan objects, then, the museum makes that unique heritage more familiar and accessible to everyone.

In a similar vein, a newly developed gallery in the Singapore History Museum, the ‘Rumah Baba’, recreates the interior of a Straits Chinese<sup>6</sup> or Peranakan bungalow in the early years of the twentieth century. Text panels describe how the community draws inspiration from Malay-Indonesian and colonial English customs as well as Chinese tradition, and the highly syncretic character of the society is illustrated by many examples of Peranakan furnishings. The material culture of a unique ethnic group – framed photographs, clothing, spittoons, furniture and other related objects – are used to create a ‘lived-in’ ambience. Peranakan food is also extolled as ‘the closest Singapore has to an indigenous cuisine’ (Museum Text, ‘Rumah Baba’, SHM, 2002). At the SHM, not only can one learn about the 350 Peranakan objects on display, the museum also features activities and workshops related

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6 Peranakans are also commonly referred to as ‘Straits Chinese’, which refers to those Chinese who settled in the three port cities - or ‘Straits Settlements’ - of Melaka, Penang and Singapore. The terms Straits Chinese and Peranakan are used interchangeably, although the Straits Settlements no longer exist.

to Peranakan culture: cooking demonstrations, beading workshops, dance classes, and even an annual Peranakan fashion show.<sup>7</sup>

Both the museums' exhibits thus reflect the hybrid yet unique nature of Peranakan culture. Although these people have retained some of their Chinese roots, they have also absorbed Malay, Indian and European influences. Yet in many ways, as suggested in the above descriptions of the Peranakan's unique material culture and traditions, the exhibits simultaneously celebrate an ethnically distinct heritage. As Ms. Tan commented: 'The hybrid style of the Peranakans is one that is unique to Southeast Asia and one which we can truly claim is ours' (Heidi Tan, interview, ACM, July 2002). In this case, I would argue, Singaporean identity is bound up in the discursive strategy of essentialising Asian traditions, which are then transformed them into 'national heritage' through their display in the museum.

In talking to a variety of people in both the ACM and the SHM, it was clear that museum visitors believe Peranakans to be Singapore's true 'forefathers':

This is unique to Singapore. It is not borrowed. It belongs to Singapore (Female visitor, age 20-25, conversation, SHM, July 2002).

Peranakans represent the whole of Singapore, as they are a blend of different cultures, just as Singapore is a blend of different cultures (Mr. Lee, conversation, SHM, July 2002).

It is so uplifting to see the sparkle of interest in Singaporeans' eyes as they learn about their roots (Mrs. Khoo, conversation, ACM, July 2002).

Knowing how our forefathers lived, endured and achieved over many generations helps us appreciate better how we came to be Singaporeans. This will give Singaporeans pride in what and who we are (Male visitor, conversation ACM, July 2002).

This 'rediscovery' of Peranakan culture within the museum context thus lays the ground for the construction of a heritage that puts forward Peranakan culture as encompassing the heritage of *all* Singaporeans.

In a 1993 article, Singaporean postcolonial theorist W-L Wee described Singaporean identity as being a 'messy hybrid, where parts of each culture leak[...] into the other parts' (Wee 1993: 716). Through simplifying (or perhaps 'cleaning up') Singaporean identity by focusing attention exclusively on Peranakan culture, these new displays show that while it is indeed a multi-ethnic nation, postcolonial Singapore is also seeking to be a culturally distinct entity, unique and separate from other nations. As Chang *et al* write (1996: 288): 'Specialization, therefore, entails that destination areas capitalize on local resources and accentuate unique identities within the context of a globalized economic system.' To have a unique culture is sophisticated, and will act as a lure for contemporary travellers, while also providing a cultural focal point for local visitors. The construction of a distinct 'national heritage' therefore centres on presenting distinguishing images to both citizens and international tourists.

It is important to note here that the marketing of heritage is a field that involves national image-management, and as a result a hegemonic agenda may be involved. As MacCannell (1992: 1) notes, heritage tourism 'is an ideological framing of history, nature and tradition; a framing that has the power to reshape culture and nature to its own needs.' In the case of Singapore, Hall and Oehlers claim, the People's Action Party's actions can be interpreted as an example of 'tourism as politics', the intention being to display the party's 'centrality to the

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7 <http://www.nationalmuseum.sg/>

successful development of Singapore and thus secure its pre-eminent position in Singaporean politics' (Hall and Oehlers 2000: 86). The state, in other words, is concerned with projecting unique and 'politically correct' images, as is demonstrated in the promotion of Peranakan culture to represent the *real* heritage of Singapore.

### Multi-Ethnicity: Problem or Strength?

As discussed earlier, one of the greatest concerns in defining national identity in Singapore has been the constant need to address social issues in terms of the multi-ethnic composition of its population (Clammer 1985: 162).<sup>8</sup> Throughout Singapore's history, its mixture of ethnic affiliations has been one of its defining characteristics and a significant political issue. In spite of the numerical and social/economic superiority of ethnic Chinese (70 per cent) in proportion to Malays (15 per cent) and Indians (8 per cent), it has been necessary to 'openly recognise ethnic equality as a means of neutralizing ethnic nepotism in matters pertaining to national interest' (Chun 1996: 60). Along with promoting Singapore's unique Peranakan heritage, then, the government simultaneously goes to great lengths to encourage the existing ethnic balance in an attempt to regulate (and maintain) the colonial era's state-imposed ethnic divisions, and also to prevent a future recurrence of past racial tensions (such as the race riots of the 1960s) (Siddique 1989: 36). The state authorities exercise considerable power, reinforcing political ideologies through the communication of messages about preferred versions of identities. However, the representations discussed below also convey something of the complex realities of identity in Singapore, and the government's recognition of the significance of its multicultural make-up.

Since its refurbishment and re-opening in 1997, the Singapore History Museum has launched a number of temporary exhibitions which focus on the unique traditions of Singapore's different ethnic groups. The 2002 exhibition, 'I Do, I Do: An Exhibition on Weddings and Marriages in Singapore' is a case in point here. A large cross-cultural display on the marriage traditions of Singapore's different cultural groups, its interplay of images and words, memories and things, builds a rich and moving display that acknowledges the pluralities and complexity of modern Singaporean society.<sup>9</sup> The opening text panel reads:

No matter who you are, or where you live, getting married is one of the most important steps you will ever take. Different cultures' marriages differ in detail, but the major steps are always the same. This exhibition looks at how Singapore's diverse cultures follow the steps of life's most beautiful and important dance (Museum Text, 'I Do, I Do...', SHM, 2002).

Television monitors placed throughout the exhibition space played footage of modern Singaporeans from many cultural backgrounds talking about their weddings and marriages. There were also audio recordings of different wedding-associated music playing in the background at different points in the exhibition. This allowed for a variety of voices to be heard, as the exhibition moved dramatically between the various media and across a range of narrators. The multicultural nature of Singaporean society was truly apparent in this exhibition.

Alongside the TVs, cases of Malay wedding objects, Hindu and Tamil trousseau items, and European wedding decorations were among the many objects displayed. Wedding clothes from each of Singapore's main cultures were also displayed side-by-side, which was clearly a favourite part for visitors, judging by the great crowds of people I observed examining the

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8 See also Chiew 1983; Benjamin 1976 and Siddique 1989 for more on Singapore's ethnic makeup.

9 <http://www.nationalmuseum.sg/>



objects and pointing out differences between the various dresses and jewellery associated with the different cultures (see **Figs. 2 and 3**). While highlighting the nation's different cultures, however, I noted that efforts had clearly been made to ensure that the idea of race was 'politically non-threatening, being subsumed under national identity and defined largely in cultural terms and politically controlled' (Lai 1995: 195). The government's strategy here, in other words, has effectively relegated identity matters to the realm of culture, disguising its role in national politics.

Figure 2.



Figure 3.



Thinking about this exhibit during my fieldwork, I came to the conclusion that the underlying political objective must be the need to maintain harmony between Singapore's ethnic divisions. Multiculturalism in Singapore, the displays said to me, does not necessarily *replace* a sense of national homogeneity; the concepts of sameness and difference are presented in 'I Do, I Do...' as compatible rather than opposed. In other words, this vision of the nation does not require cultural homogeneity, rather constructs a form of homogenisation through difference.

The display also addressed the issue of inter-marriage, an increasingly common phenomenon in Singapore, and ‘always a tense issue’ (Mrs. Chew, conversation, Singapore, July 2002). A text panel read:

Fusions of the traditions of different ethnic groups have resulted from mixed marriages...For some, these changes may signal a loss of tradition...but for all the prejudices against them, marriages between Singapore’s diverse communities have always been part of Singapore’s heritage as an Asian melting pot...they characterise how the diverse cultures of Singapore influence and shape each other (Museum text, ‘I Do, I Do...’SHM, 2002).

ACM curator Heidi Tan reflected on the exhibition in an interview:

The cross-cultural aspect is very important to play up. It goes down very well with people higher up and also the tourists, who want to see something uniquely Singaporean...not just more Chinese material culture (Heidi Tan, interview, ACM, July 2002).

Iskander Mydin, a curator at the SHM, also commented on ‘I Do, I Do’:

We’ve tried to include exhibits which look at cross-cultural mixes rather than just a monolithic view. I don’t know if we do enough, though. The museum is still very monolithic! (Mydin, interview, SHM, July 2002).

There is thus also a cosmopolitan aspect to Singaporean identity being promoted in addition to ‘Peranakan’ national heritage: ‘the people have gradually acquired a distinct identity as Singaporeans while retaining their traditional cultures and lifestyles’ (Ministry of Culture 1984: 4, SHM museum clippings). Political scientist David Brown explains:

The ethnic cultures of Singaporeans have now been largely ‘sanitized’ by the state so as to remove their politically destabilizing connotations... Therefore the ethnic cultures can be employed as the distinct but compatible building blocks for the articulation of the new ‘umbrella’ national culture of ‘Asian values’ (Brown 1994: 92).

This view was echoed to me by a SHM staff member, who, reflecting on the treatment of ethnic divisions in Singapore, said: ‘We make ethnicity amenable to our politics and purposes. The taming process succeeds best when ethnicity finally becomes freeze-dried’ (Staff member, conversation, SHM, July 2002).

Moreover, considering the ACM’s new Empress Place wing, we can also observe the incorporation of representations of all the cultures of Singapore, giving every group’s traditions its own special recognition while allowing each to contribute with equal importance to shaping the nation’s identity. Lowenthal (1994: 43) claims that ‘heritage distils the past into icons of identity, bonding us with precursors and progenitors, with our own earlier selves, and with our promised successors.’ In tracing Singaporeans’ ancestral roots to China, India and the Middle East, the museum celebrates Singaporeans’ ethnic identities, illuminating how the ACM positions the postcolonial nation as a ‘cosmopolitan society (read: harmonious, tolerant, diverse, but not divided)’ (Yeoh 2001: 460).

The nation state of Namibia offers an interesting comparative example of how museums play a role in portraying postcolonial national heritage, with a particular focus on cultural unity. Modern Namibia is a multicultural society that includes a wide variety of cultural groups. An official government campaign of ‘state-induced racial harmony’ is promoted through museums and tourism literature, seen by some to be an effort to avoid addressing the multicultural makeup of the population (Zedde 1998: np). The state has even gone to the extent of adopting the Benetton advertising campaign of ‘United Colours’ to illustrate

Namibian national identity. Moreover, English has been declared Namibia's national language despite the fact that it is spoken by only 2% of the population - part of an effort to portray itself to the international community as a modern, cosmopolitan nation (Schidlkrou 1995: 70.), depicting the nation not as it really is, but as it wishes to be seen by others.

Namibia's capital has two main state museums, one which deals with 'history' and the other with 'natural history and ethnography'. The 'history' museum employs a type of postcolonial nostalgia for the former dominant German and Afrikaans cultures, and portrays national identity using terms and stories infused by European culture for foreign tourists, who usually visit that museum exclusively (Zedde 1998: np). On the other hand, the state museum of natural history and ethnography shows a different side of the nation, and is frequented primarily by locals - mainly non-white Namibians (Schidlkrou 1995: 70). Each type of visitor is offered a Namibian heritage they recognise, and expect to see.

The Canadian Museum of Civilization also provides an interesting comparative case here. Like many postcolonial states, Canada encompasses a large number of disparate groups with different languages, lifestyles, and political interests. In a similar fashion to Singapore's museums, the CMC (opened in 1989) reflects the government's commitment to the country's multicultural policies. The 1971 Multiculturalism Act, for example, divided citizens into 'cultural groups', and acknowledged 'the freedom of all members of Canadian society to preserve, enhance and share their cultural heritage' (Burgess 1996: 52). Canada was reconfigured as a 'cultural mosaic', with each group theoretically preserving their differences while living in harmony. In a similar fashion to Singapore, then, the Canadian government has concentrated on promoting ethnic harmony in an effort to counteract the forces of cultural fragmentation that were thought to be threatening to break apart the Canadian collective. As Canadian historian, J.L. Granatstein, wrote in his book *Who Killed Canadian History?* (1998: 5): 'It is a nation of regions, languages, religions, and disparate cultures; there is much to dis-unify Canadians, and, all too often, very little to join them together.' Debates about national and cultural heritage, and relationships between groups of people, are thus of particular salience in Canada.

Within this context, the CMC has been developed to play an essential role in preserving and promoting the heritage of Canada and all its peoples. It attempts to be a unifying institution in a very different way from traditional museums such as the Smithsonian or the British Museum, its purpose being to bring together representations of all the cultures of Canada, giving every group's traditions its own special recognition while allowing each to contribute with equal importance to shaping the nation's identity. For example, the central symbolic motif of the Canada Hall, where the CMC's main narrative unfolds, is that of the nation as a 'cultural crossroads', a place where people of different cultural backgrounds have come together to produce a diverse national community and a unique national identity (MacDonald and Alford 1989: 99). The Hall includes representations of a number of different cultural groups that have contributed to the 'Canadian mosaic' - Basques, Acadians, Métis, Germans and British. Like the SHM, however, multiculturalism is displayed not as displacing a sense of national homogeneity, but reinforcing it. Founding Director George MacDonald's intention, in other words, was to showcase the diverse contributions of Canada's various ethnic groups, and in promoting a strong sense 'intercultural understanding,' he believed the museum would become a 'symbol of our nation' that would prepare visitors to become contributing members of the global village (MacDonald 1989: 38, 31).

Displays such as those found in Singapore's museums, as well as Namibia's and Canada's, can thus be seen in many ways as instruments of social control, incorporated into nation building strategies to aid in reinforcing 'one central culture and its values', while also accommodating 'peripheral cultures within a dominant core' (Graburn 1997: 199). In

moulding the nation, in other words, the People's Action Party has endeavoured to construct an overarching national identity based on multiculturalism, but within which ethnic loyalties take a back seat to being Singaporean, 'fostering ethnic consciousness as a resource for nation building and political development, while at the same time guarding against the emergence of competitive ethnocentrism' (Henderson 2003: 29, citing Brown 1994: 110).

In a similar fashion to the colonial regime in Singapore, the government practices a strategy of 'divide and rule' by placing all groups on a theoretically equal footing. Cultural diversity in Singapore has thus been symbolically embraced within the wider construction of a homogeneous nation. And indeed, it is important to note that funding is a powerful agent of change, and the Singaporean government has made it clear that financial support will be awarded to those heritage projects that contribute most to transforming national consciousness (Committee on Heritage 1988: 30). Another dimension to add, moreover, is that although the objective of 'dual ethnic and national identification' has been pursued (Hill and Lian 1995: 104), the continued dominance of the Chinese majority is a source of considerable resentment, and there are significant differences across the groups in terms of the distribution of wealth, educational qualifications and career prospects (Benjamin 1976: 116). The reality is, therefore, that ethnicity remains a highly charged, politically-driven issue in Singapore.

In another, significant way, the SHM focuses on Singapore's multi-ethnic character so as to portray an exotic and culturally rich image for tourists. Coupled with its other displays of Singapore's modern history, multi-ethnic exhibitions like 'I Do, I Do...' provide an effective counterpart to images of Singapore as a 'modern metropolis', creating a perfect mix of 'exotic cultures' with a Western standard of service for modern travellers. This is reflected in the Singapore Tourism Board's slogan of 'Singapore New Asia', which it has employed as a brand since 1996, hoping to convey the exciting mix that exists in Singapore, 'a city with its head in the future and its soul in the past' (STB 1998: np). Thus, the latest in modern technology co-exists with traditional values and customs in 'a young nation which looks ahead but does not forget its heritage' (STB 1998: np).

It is, of course, crucial to remember that heritage development serves many objectives beyond the obvious economic goals of attracting tourists, generating employment, and creating revenue (Chang *et al* 1996: 299). The strengthening cultural identity and promoting cultural healing might be another pursuit, as might the development of national unity. Displays like those discussed above, in other words, are created to meet local demands for cultural enrichment, as well as to fulfil political agendas. To reiterate, in Singapore politics plays a key role in heritage conservation, serving as a vehicle for the state to assert its agenda on matters relating to ethnicity. In addition to the museum, for example, the equal representation of Singapore's four main ethnic groups is depicted throughout the city (heritage districts, religious buildings and restaurants, for instance). The aim is clearly to affirm in the minds of both tourists and residents the harmonious co-existence of races in Singapore. Thus, '[w]hat is successfully presented for consumption by outsiders also redefines the parameters of legitimacy and authenticity for indigenous audiences...[t]his is what tourists are looking at and, therefore, that must be what we are and what we do' (Simpson 1993: 170-171).

Working to complement each other, the various displays in the ACM and SHM can thus be seen as an attempt to strike a meaningful symbiosis between indigenous values and racial harmony. In other words, represented by Peranakan culture, the 'Rumah Baba' and 'Peranakan Legacy' exhibitions promote Singaporean national identity as founded upon a unique heritage. In contrast, the SHM's incorporation of displays like 'I Do, I Do...' draws attention to Singapore's multi-racial composition, and attempts to mould identity in a way that neutralises the potential divisiveness of its ethnic composition, focusing instead on promoting

‘unity in diversity’. Of course, these images are not only intended for tourists. Local residents, by visiting the museum, are none-too-subtly encouraged to act out this interpretation.

## Conclusions

As citizens and tourists alike grapple with issues of identity politics within the context of increasing industrialisation and globalisation, it seems that economic success on its own has proven to be inadequate ground for inspiring feelings of national identity. Postcolonial nations, in particular, have experienced intense pressure, from within as well as without, to define themselves in particularistic or culturally-unique terms, engaging as a result in various ‘culture building’ projects. As the World Tourism Organization notes: ‘consumers are demanding new, more imaginative and varied tourism products and services’ (WTO 1990: 10, cited in Chang *et al* 1996: 289). James Clifford also refers to the growing appeal of exoticism: ‘Tourism thrives on such startling juxtapositions, on what might be called the tourist surreal – the foreignness of what is presented to its context of presentation’ (Clifford 1981: 563, cited in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995: 371). These cultural projects are also ideologically driven on a more local level, however, with tourism development adding legitimacy to political regimes, and heritage sites supporting state-imposed images of ethnicity and national identity. In much the same way that Clifford describes, Singapore has tapped in to a Peranakan identity that is simultaneously unique and ‘foreign’, providing contrasting images to the ultra-modern, highly Westernised skylines, and are therefore seen to provide a more meaningful experience for both tourists *and* locals.

Singapore is thus an excellent example of new a nation trying to ‘specialise’ in order to market itself to tourists, and also to provide a unifying sense of identity within an extremely diverse population. Through the above discussion of recent museum developments, I have shown that museums can be very much a part of this movement. In a multicultural society, the problem facing national museums such as the SHM and ACM is to reflect an identity that has national validity, yet is relevant to individual ethnic groups. By marketing Peranakan culture as distinctive, Singapore differentiates itself from other destinations in the region, and creates a unique selling point both at home and abroad. As Robins argues, even in ‘the most disadvantaged places, heritage...can be mobilized to gain competitive advantage in the race between places’ (Robins 1991: 38).

This case is also significant because it goes against current beliefs about globalisation, particularly the notion that unique places and identities have become homogenised as a result of the emergence of ‘global culture’ (Peet 1989; Massey 1993). The interaction between global forces like international tourism and local processes of cultural preservation are clearly depicted in Singapore’s museums, where the celebration of a unique indigenous culture places an emphasis on local identity, while highlighting the global trend in cultural tourism.

As M. Estellie Smith notes, forms of heritage development, including tourism, can serve the interests of a national elite by:

Stabilizing their dominant position through the creation or expansion of the popular affiliation to an historically ‘real’ national identity and [by] encouraging socioeconomically ‘divergent’ groups to adopt [certain] lifestyles (Smith 1997: 200).

My point here is not to evaluate the positive or negative consequences of these particular constructions of heritage, but to point to their productive power in stimulating the development or revival of ‘unique’ heritages for promotion internally and externally. By its nature, tourism both illuminates and questions processes of cultural construction – How are specific elements selected for tourism promotion, and how are these reconciled with the need to assert national identity? This discussion has shown that the museums and identities

promoted in Singapore are partly based on how those in control would like tourists to imagine Singapore – as a destination that is both unique and modern in character – and how they would like Singaporeans to view themselves – as a unified nation where ethnic divisions are seen as compatible, highlighted by the existence of an indigenous and exotic culture which encompasses the national heritage of all.

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### **Internet**

Asian Civilisations Museum, <http://www.acm.org.sg/home/home.asp>  
 National Museum of Singapore, <http://www.nationalmuseum.sg/>

### **List of Interviews and Documented Conversations Cited**

Note that in the case of formal interviews, a specific date is given, whereas 'conversations' are cited more generally, as they do not necessarily refer to a particular moment of dialogue, but to comments, chats, walks, lunches, and general museum life. In the case of the interviews, also note that many of my contacts were interviewed more than once, however I have only listed those that are cited in the body of this paper.

**Table 1. Museum Staff and Other Professionals**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Museum/Institution</b>	<b>Date</b>
Lee Mui Ngah	Docent, Peranakan origin	ACM	25 July 2002
Ms Heidi Tan	Curator, Southeast Asian Collections	ACM	26 July 2002
Mrs. Matsumura	Tour Guide	ACM	18 July 2002
Iskander Mydin	Chief Curator	Singapore History Museum	31 July 2002 5 August 2002



**Table 2. Visitor Conversations Cited**

<b>Name (if given) and sex</b>	<b>Other Identity Information</b>	<b>Location/Museum</b>	<b>Date</b>
Mrs. Chew	Local Chinese, age 61 (host family in Singapore)	Singapore	July 2002
Mrs. Oon	Peranakan woman, age 45–50	ACM	23 July 2002
Anon, female	Age 20–25	SHM	July 2002
Mr. Lee	Local-born, male, age 30–35	SHM	July 2002
Mrs. Khoo	Chinese	ACM	22 July 2002
Anon, male	No other info recorded	ACM	22 July 2002