# Asian tourists and cultural complexity: Implications for practice and the Asianisation of tourism scholarship

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## ABSTRACT

Asian tourist behaviour is often characterised along essentialistic terms such as Asians are collectivistic and hierarchical. The essentialist approach to understanding culture faces serious criticisms. In using cultural complexity instead of culture, this paper introduces functional culture and negotiated culture perspectives, as derived from structural functionalism and conflict theory respectively, to situate Asian tourist behaviour. Cultural complexity is manifested as a dynamic web of stable and yet changing social manifestations. The pool of contrasting and contradicting cultural manifestations is a resource for members of society to express, control and navigate the variety of situations they encounter in life. The diversity of potential cultural expressions also provides society room to experiment, respond and manage changing circumstances. This paper offers implications from the functional culture and negotiated culture perspectives on the management of Asian tourists. It also addresses the academic implication, in the context of the Asianisation of tourism scholarship.

## 1. Introduction

Culture and tourism come together at various intersections. Culture offers a plethora of tourist attractions, ranging from physical objects such as buildings and crafts to less intangible ones such as history and social behaviour (Ooi, 2002). Culture is also embodied in tourists and residents, leading to cross-cultural communication and management opportunities and challenges. This theoretical paper begins with an observation: To many foreigners, east Asian tourists look alike, speak alien languages, have odd food customs and behave strangely. Furthermore, east Asia is diverse, and within each country, it is heterogenous. The diversity and complexity of the region and within the region should not be ignored but parts of the practice and research communities have done so.

Two strategies to understand and manage Asian tourists are usually deployed. The first is to work with the different cultural behaviour and norms, such as offering chopsticks and chopstick-friendly dishes for Chinese tourists, and using guides who speak their language. The other strategy is to find the cultural logic that explains their different behaviour, and manage accordingly. The following section presents the most common way through which Asian tourists are understood and "culturalised"; it is the essentialist culture approach. Essentialist culture is an attempt at simplifying and reducing cultural complexity into core enduring elements (Hall, 1981; Hofstede, 2001; Javidan, House, & Dorfman, 2004). As it will be argued, the essentialist approach is a macroscopic-level understanding of society, and applying the findings to specific Asian tourist behaviour would result in the ecological fallacy. The ecological fallacy is committed when a generalisation is applied to individuals in the group, assuming that all members comply to the generalisation. Profiling arising from the ecological fallacy treats all individual Asian tourists from a country as similar. As will be explained later, even though it is frequently committed and justifications are offered to tolerate this lapse in logic, the ecological fallacy cannot be justified, nor should it be tolerated. The social consequences can even be dire, such as the perpetuation of racism and sexism.

Because of the serious shortfalls in applying the essentialist approach to understanding tourists, the subsequent sections offer alternatives. The two alternatives take issue with the static essentialist concept of "culture", and focus on cultural complexity. Cultural complexity refers to the diverse contrasting and contradicting cultural manifestations existing in society, and that culture necessarily changes and evolves as the community responds dynamically to changing circumstances. The cultural complexity alternatives are based on two fundamental and contrasting sociological paradigms, namely structural functionalism and conflict theory. They are deployed to understand cultural complexity, and to situate Asian tourist behaviour, practices and habits. Instead of flattening social complexity into a set of symbols, meanings and actions and label it "culture", this paper highlights the wide variety and range of intertwined social expressions that we have come to understand as culture. The arguments here focus on changing

circumstances that shape social life and cultural practices, and the responsiveness of individuals within social cultural milieus. The multiplicity of social cultural actions and expressions complements, contrasts and may even contradict each other, for instance many modern societies proclaim gender equality but discrimination of women remains largely prevalent. Structural functionalism and conflict theory have evolved and been debated, and scholars have built new insights and theories (Demerath, 1996; Harvey, 2005, 2014; North, 1991; Ooi, 2015; Ritzer, 1988b; Schultz & Hatch, 1996). These paradigms have splintered into more specialised and differentiated theories (Bianchi, 2009; Demerath, 1996). But the relevance of structural functionalism and conflict theory remains as works of founding scholars such as Durkheim, Parson, Marx and Weber are still studied and referred to, and their contrasting understandings of how society works underpin many newer sociological approaches. Using both the structural functionalist and conflict theory paradigms, cultural complexity as a dynamic web and myriad of social manifestations is considered necessary for the working of any society. The range and variety of cultural manifestations is a resource for society to manage new situations and challenges. Cultural complexity is also a resource for members to express, control and navigate diverse situations and encounters. Like any human, Asian tourists respond to circumstances, and are capable of reacting through a range of social behaviour even when they travel.

Besides contributing to a theory of cultural complexity, this article addresses two sets of implications when we investigate culture through the lenses of functional culture (based on structural functionalism) and negotiated culture (based on conflict theory). The first is practice-oriented. The second implication is academic, namely on the Asianisation of tourism scholarship. Essentialist culture to date has inevitably created images of the Other that need to be challenged. Research from Asian scholars, with relevant insights from structural functionalism and conflict theory, will enrich our understanding of Asian tourists. There are however four challenges in the Asianisation of tourism scholarship. The paper will conclude with a summary.

## 2. Essentialist culture

Japanese takes deep bows, Chinese likes the colour red and number "8", Thais love spicy food and they all seem incapable of saying "no". These casual observations can be easily challenged but remain common. The myriad of different Asian tourists and their different behaviour are often bewildering for many foreigners, even if they are Asians themselves. Attempts are made to make sense and categorise the assortment of diverse behaviour. Making sense is important because the industry wants to make their customers feel welcomed and comfortable, and to cater to their cultural mores and needs (Ooi, 2008; Tham & Raciti, 2018; Yagi & Pearce, 2018). Tourists have different cultural norms, and that will affect the perception and satisfaction of services they receive (Bowden, 2006; Weiermair, 2000).

One of the most popular culture frameworks is Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions. It is essentialistic. Culture is seen as the software of society, so that members of society are wired to share and communicate in accepted ways. Culture is constituted by core essential elements that are enduring, deeply rooted in history and transmitted across generations (Hofstede, 2001). Based on a survey in the 1960s of more than 120,000 employees in IBM around the world, Hofstede identifies four universal dimensions of national cultures. Since then, two more dimensions have been discovered after new data were added, and the data further mined (Hofstede, 2018). The six dimensions are: power distance; uncertainty avoidance; individualism versus collectivism; masculinity versus femininity; pragmatic versus normative; and indulgent versus restraint. Asian countries are generally seen to be more hierarchical, more group-oriented, less disagreeable, and less indulgent than Western ones. This generalised imagination has guided tourism operators in adapting to the cultural demands of their international customers. This approach, for instance reaffirms the image that Asian

tourists like to travel in groups and always seem agreeable (Cai, 2018; Leung, Au, & Law, 2015; Reisinger & Turner, 2003; Zhang & Heung, 2002). Another cultural dimensions-inspired study is GLOBE. The world is divided into regions, including Anglo, Germanic Europe, Confucian Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East, Southern Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin Europe, Nordic Europe and Latin America (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004; Javidan et al., 2004). The study finds that Confucian Asia, which is the focus of this paper, is seen to score relatively high in the team-oriented leadership dimension, low on the participative leadership dimension, and high on the self-protective leadership dimension. This contrasts to the Middle East, which scores lower in the team-oriented leadership dimension but similar in the participative leadership and self-protective leadership dimensions. This suggests that when a multinational hotel chain goes overseas, for instance, the firm must be aware that its leadership style must be adjusted to the host country. Cultural adaptation is needed in international management. It is not just about catering to tourists.

Hall (1981) is yet another influential and essentialist culture-researcher but who frames culture as communication. When people communicate, their messages, manners and behaviour are embedded in how they organize the world, time and space. By concentrating on communication and language use, Hall argues that there is a cultural filter through which people interpret things. To Hall, there are some cultures that are high-context; people in these cultures assume many unspoken ideas when they communicate. East Asians, to Hall, are predominantly high-context in their communication, do not usually speak their mind in clear terms and thus do not necessarily express their displeasures explicitly, for instance. Tourists may consider their guides rude but the guides may not even realise that because the tourists do not display their displeasures. Similarly Nisbett (2003) examines the contextual thinking in Eastern cultures. He postulates that cognitive structure is shaped by history, the physical and the social environments. Drawing from the ancient philosophies of Aristotle and Confucius, Nisbett argues that members of Confucian societies tend to think more of relationships and relatedness between phenomena, while the Greek (and Westerners) think in abstract attributes.

These essentialist culture approaches are attempts by researchers to make sense of other cultures, organizing the diversity into deep-rooted and enduring dimensions and other similar elements. Practical lessons are offered from these theories. For example, advice was offered on how to manage Japanese tourists in the 1990s (Ahmed & Krohn, 1993; cited in Reisinger & Turner, 2002):

1. Japanese travel in groups and seek comfort in togetherness
2. family influence, which dictates the purchase of gifts for close friends and family members;
3. empathy, which demands taking into account the feelings of others and not expressing true personal feelings, including displeasure;
4. dependency, which requires loyalty and devotion in exchange for security and protection;
5. hierarchical acknowledgment, which demands behaviour in accordance with social status;
6. propensity to save, which demands accumulating funds for an emergency and saving for a home to overcome feelings of insecurity;
7. the concept of *kinen*, which teaches the collection of evidence of travel to prestigious tourist destinations;
8. tourist photography, which implies the importance of photography;
9. passivity, which avoids participation in physical activities; and
10. risk avoidance, which demands avoiding adventurous leisure pursuits.

These pieces of specific advice are built predominantly on Hall's and Hofstede's dimensions, highlighting their high context, collectivist, non-confrontational and hierarchical mindsets. With some modifications, one can similarly frame Chinese, Koreans, Vietnamese, Thai, and other

east Asian tourists in comparable ways. In a more recent study, power distance as a cultural factor is used to explain differences in how "Asian" and "Western" tourists evaluate relational quality in services (Tsang & Ap, 2007). Higher power distance is said to shape service perceptions, and Asian tourists see guest-contact employees as of lower social status and expect less high-level professional services. Consequently they conclude that Asian tourists prefer basic and practical aspects of service, while Western tourists seek intangible aspects of service that go beyond basic service provision such as being made to feel welcomed and perceived willingness to help. Such approaches are not unique to tourism studies, as many cross-cultural management and interaction studies use similar perspectives (e.g. see Chan, Yim, & Lam, 2010; House et al., 2004).

These essentialist culture generalisations are the lenses to understanding specific tourist behaviour. This leads to several severe criticisms. They include:

1. An essentialist approach presents a presumed universal model of understanding culture. This universal model however is not neutral but in fact is a set of lenses to perpetuate a western-gaze on the rest of the world (Håkanson & Ambos, 2010). As it will be argued later, an essentialist culture approach is an Othering process. It creates images of Asians in inherently negative ways. For example when many Asians are said not to speak their minds, and do not say, "no", it is assumed that they are averse to risky confrontations, are high context and/or that their collectivism does not allow them to be disagreeable. But no society can function without members having the space to say "no" or to disagree. It is more likely that many foreigners have not acquired the local knowledge and understanding, and thus missed the communication cues when these Asians say "no". Instead of acknowledging that they have not immersed themselves into the society enough, they suggest that these Asians are "high context" and incapable of communicating in a direct succinct manner. This is ethnocentric; scholars who propagate such a view have used themselves and their own cultural backgrounds as the standard to judge others.

2. Every society is diverse and heterogeneous. To apply a macroscopic generalisation at the microscopic level, that is, on specific cultural manifestations is to commit the ecological fallacy. For instance, many essentialist researchers suggest that Asians travel in groups because they are collectivistic. As will be explained later, there are many reasons for doing so, and are dependent on personal resources, situations and circumstances. Members of Asian societies also pursue individualistic aspirations and behave non-collectively. The ecological fallacy is flawed thinking and should not be accepted or tolerated. The fallacy draws conclusions on individuals from a generalisation, e.g. the majority of British people voted for Brexit (generalisation), and the ecological fallacy is committed when one assumes that any British person one meets supports Brexit. The ecological fallacy is the flawed logic that discriminates against individuals because of some generalised characterisations, such as those based on ethnicity, gender and sexuality. Using generalisations as a starting point to judge an individual creates biases that these individuals must overcome, e.g. a female is first assumed to be less suitable for certain jobs means that she must prove herself more than a male applicant during the job application process.

3. Social behaviour is always situational because people respond to their circumstances and environment. An individual will tap into a range of social behaviour that one considers appropriate and relevant, as one negotiates with the environment. To think that specific responses are tied to general cultural dimensions is to commit the ecological fallacy.

4. Culture changes, and an essentialist approach ignores the dynamic processes of change. For instance, to think that Confucian values in China, Korea, Japan and Taiwan have not changed drastically over the centuries, and that each generation has not progressively re-

interpreted Confucianism is to ignore the transformation in these culturally rich and diverse countries.

Hofstede, one of the most prominent proponents of essentialist culture, has since responded to these criticisms (Hofstede, 2001, p. 73). He agrees that his work is at the macroscopic level of analysis, and thus his generalisations should not be applied at the microscopic level. It should not be used to analyse specific human behaviour or to understand particular individual's actions. Although it is commonplace in many studies to explain specific social expressions with his cultural dimensions (e.g. Asian tourists travel in groups reflecting their collectivistic culture), he maintains that he cannot be blamed for these people who might have ignorantly committed the ecological fallacy (Hofstede, 2001, p. 73).

An essentialist culture imagination is prevalent in tourism practice and scholarship (e.g. see Leung et al., 2015; Reisinger & Turner, 2003; Zhang & Heung, 2002). Have we created and perpetuated caricatures of Asian tourists? If applying essentialist culture is problematic, what are the alternatives? As pointed out earlier, this paper will take a step back and return to two fundamental sociological theories to take stock on how we might understand cultural behaviour of tourists. The following section will be on functional culture and negotiated culture. They both highlight cultural complexity, accentuate the dynamic and holistic links between structures, institutions, circumstances and situations, and acknowledge the responsiveness of individuals.

## 3. De-essentialising the Asian tourist: two alternatives to essentialism

With the diverse range of behaviour, habits, values, beliefs and practices, it is possible to organize the world of cultures in many ways. Researchers have to be careful not to perpetuate a seemingly universal but in actuality perpetuating views of an Other, that is, creating an imagination of a group of people based on one's own standards and perception of differences (Asad, 1986; Said, 1979). The Other is always tacitly and inadvertently portrayed as inferior. Yang, Khoo-Lattimore, and Arcodia (2017a, 2017b), for instance, challenge many gender and ethnic stereotypes by looking at solo Asian female travellers. They reveal how Asian women were and are imagined as subservient travellers, for instance as companions to men, with few being able to travel independently. A western and patriarchal position still holds currency and have made independent female travellers predominantly marginal if not invisible in research. The perpetuation of an Orientalist Other, meaning propagating a fictitious and inferior view of the Other that justifies domination of that group (Foucault, 1972; Heehs, 2003; Ooi, 2003; Ooi, Kristensen, & Pedersen, 2004; Said, 1979), is another form of colonisation. A more nuanced and layered understanding of another culture entails respecting that culture in its own terms, understanding why people in the community behave in certain ways, and how they relate to their circumstances and environment. Functional culture and negotiated culture perspectives provide understanding in that direction.

The perspectives of functional culture and negotiated culture are derived from structural functionalism and conflict theory respectively. Both structural functionalism and conflict theory are macroscopic level theories that understand society in relation to the environment, social structures and institutions. Culture – as in everyday life values, social practices and norms – are largely "informal" or non-formalised, in the sense that they complement and evolve alongside formal institutionalised structures, regulations and laws. For instance, friendship and organisational cultures develop in a bureaucracy, complementing professional relations in the formal establishment (Ooi, 1995; Rawlins, 1992). Structural functionalism traditionally sees society as largely stable and tends towards equilibrium but more recent functionalist discussions on culture have moved towards dysfunction, anxiety and conflicts as part of the orienting mechanisms of adjustment and stability in society (Demerath, 1996). As for conflict theory, the many streams of

cultural studies today have roots in understanding how sexism, racism, homophobia and the like are tacitly manifested through discourses, identity politics, practices and structures of meta-governance (Hall, 1996; Hall & du Gay, 1993; Williams, 1976). Both paradigms challenge an essentialist understanding of cultural identities, as they acknowledge cultural complexity, diversity and change in society.

### 3.1. Functional culture

The functional culture perspective is derived largely from the structural functionalist paradigm. Society is viewed not only holistically but that social manifestations – including culture – serves functions in society to bring about social equilibrium and continuity (North, 1991; Ooi, 2015; Ritzer, 1988b). Culture is not a monolith. The diverse range of social manifestations, including values, behaviour, practices and habits, is not necessarily coherent, if not contradictory. For instance environmental values have permeated into most societies but many accepted practices in these societies remain environmentally unsound. Culture evolves and must be understood within their social, political and economic system, with cultural meanings maintained and changed in response to a dynamic web of social relations and social meanings. To further the climate change example, increased awareness of environmental challenges have also led to a proliferation of greener practices in recent years, which can be observed by many tourists embracing greener practices around the world (Budeanu, Miller, Moscardo, & Ooi, 2016).

The diversity in culture is necessary because of the complex and even unpredictable circumstances members of society encounter. The range provides flexibility and social options for members to evaluate, choose and navigate challenges in society. Without social ambiguity and openness, society would not be flexible and malleable enough to stay stable. The drastic transformation of Singapore is an example of how cultural practices in the society have changed with the economic development of the tiny island-state. In the last five decades, it has been transformed from a developing country to a globally connected clean, green and efficient city-state (Chong, 2011; Chua, 2017; George, 2017; Ooi, 2005b; Singam & Thomas, 2017). That transformation comes with cultural changes that are necessary for the new economic situation. They include increased female participation in the work force, supplanting many old superstitions with a stronger respect for science, replacing crony practices in business with professional practices, and embracing English as the national lingua franca. New habits, practices, values and norms emerge and become more dominant, while old ones become less relevant in the changing society. Many Singaporeans are still capable of speaking in the traditional vernaculars, celebrate traditions and identify themselves as Asians but they are also able to engage in international business, and to travel confidently, behave professionally and speak English. From a functional culture perspective, the wide range of habits, practices, values, norms and behaviour are necessary for members of society to function in the diverse range of situations and circumstances in society. In other words, Singaporeans have become capable of asserting their Singaporean identity by behaving in a mixture of old and new cultural ways. Similarly when they are overseas, many will behave in manners that are considered appropriate for an experienced tourist.

Individual members of society are responsive, and they use the myriad of cultural values, norms and practices as resources to navigate through the range of situations and circumstances they encounter everyday. Members form habits, as established ways of doing things and seeing the world reduce transaction and coordination costs in society (North, 1991). But at the same time, practices, norms and values wither away as circumstances change and make them less relevant, for example, many societies have adopted new information technologies, resulting in individuals adopting new ways of doing tourism (Ooi & Munar, 2013; Smith, 2012). How tourists behave and experience arise from their normal everyday life experiences (McCabe, 2005; Prentice,

Witt, & Hamer, 1998; Urry, 1990). As their home country's situation changes, the variety and range of their values, behavior and habits will similarly change, which in turn affect their travel behavior. So in order to understand tourist behaviour, it is also important to situate tourist actions in the home context and circumstances. It is also important to know that within a society, there is cultural complexity, and that complexity is a resource for members of society to manage their lives.

### 3.2. Negotiated culture

In contrast to the functional culture perspective is the negotiated culture perspective. Culture is an arena of conflicts, where social processes are forces of persuasion, manipulation and coercion (Gare, 1995; Harvey, 2014; Ooi, 2015; Pitt-Rivers & Gellnes, 1965; Ritzer, 1988a). Negotiated culture stems from Marx and the conflict theory paradigm. Functional culture and negotiated culture perspectives complement each other as much as they contrast. Starting with the same position as functional culture, human behaviour from a negotiated culture perspective is also embedded in the economic-social-political structures and the physical environment. Negotiated culture also sees culture as a range of social cultural behaviour, practices, norms and values. New cultural manifestations emerge as policies, regulations, incentives and opportunities arise; they may replace or subjugate existing ones. Cultural changes can be manipulated and directed. The main contention between the two perspectives is the understanding of the dynamics of social processes and change. While functional culture tends towards the status quo in maintaining social equilibrium and stability, negotiated culture sees the status quo as one that has been manipulated to further the agendas of powerful interests in society.

Forces of negotiation, persuasion, coercion and manipulation have always been used when traditions are invented and communities civilised (Elias, 2000; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). In contemporary consumer society, marketing activities have become part of society even though these activities intentionally manipulate and shape consumer behaviour. Facebook, WeChat and other social media have not only become marketing platforms but have succeeded in transforming if not creating new friendship cultures around the world, as new modes of social communication replace old ones. Travel practices have subsequently changed as people rely on reviews from friends and post photos for all to see (Gyimóthy & Larson, 2015; Munar & Ooi, 2012; Ooi & Munar, 2013). And in the context of shaping mainland Chinese tourist behaviour, the bourgeoning presence of Chinese tourists has generated an increased number of complaints, so much so that the China authorities have issued guidelines for their citizens (China National Tourism Administration, 2013; Huang, 2017; The Economist, 2013). Chinese citizens are provided tips on becoming "civilised", such as not spitting and talking loudly in public places when traveling. There are also more specific ones, like (China National Tourism Administration, 2013, p. 29):

> In England, do not casually ask others "Where are you going?" or "Have you eaten?" as you do in China. It is considered impolite.

The attempt at civilising Chinese visitors is also tied to the wider soft power or charm offensive strategy of the Chinese government (Kurlantzick, 2007). Starting with the navy, the Chinese armed forces seek only recruits who are tall, polite and good-looking because they will represent the Middle Kingdom at home and when abroad (BBC News, 2006). Engineered or otherwise, culture is not a firm determinant of social behaviour but is a resource for individuals to negotiate and manage the dynamic social environment. Individuals behave differently when they are on holiday and abroad, in contrast to when they are at home. Rowdy behaviour in European societies which are not normally appropriate back home may be flaunted in stag parties in Mallorca, for instance (Munar, 2013).

Like in functional culture, negotiated culture accentuates cultural complexity, where there is a variety and range of culturally appropriate

**Table 1**
Comparison of three cultural perspectives: essentialist culture, functional culture and negotiated culture.

| | Essentialist culture | Functional culture | Negotiated culture |
|---|---|---|---|
| What is culture? | Culture is the software of society that enables members of society to interact, communicate and function together as a community. | Culture or cultural complexity is the range of values, norms, beliefs, practices established in a society. These social manifestations facilitate interaction. The diversity in culture is a resource in society to manage different and changing circumstances and challenges. | Culture is a range of values, norms, beliefs, practices established in a society. These social manifestations do not only facilitate interaction, they also perpetuate the interests of powerful and wealthy elites. Cultural diversity and complexity is a resource, and often for elite groups to persuade, manipulate and shape society, so as to further their own interests. |
| Culture in society | Culture is embedded in society, and founded in its history. Cultural values are stable even if society changes. | Culture and cultural complexity provide the flexibility and malleability in bringing about social stability and equilibrium, as circumstances changes in the society. | Culture and cultural complexity are integral to society, and are shaped by the political economic structures of society. Cultural values, norms and practices can be maintained, manipulated and changed, often engineered by powerful resource-rich elites. |
| Individuals in society | Culture is internalised by individuals. | Individuals use the myriad of cultural values, norms, and practices to manage changing circumstances in their lives. While their behaviour fits into established norms, individuals behave and respond appropriately to the circumstances. Norms wither away as they are no longer relevant to new situations. | Individuals use the myriad of cultural values, norms, and practices to manage changing circumstances and trends in society, including regulations and fashion. Wealthy powerful interest groups compete, and use resources to initiate and engineer members of society. |

ways of doing things. This range is a resource for interest groups to exploit. To add to the social media example mentioned earlier, the 2017 scandal arising from Cambridge Analytica and Facebook pointed to how communities can be manufactured and values can be manipulated in a wrought social environment (The Economist, 2018a). Personal views and voting behaviour were engineered with fake news and a sense of virtual social support. From a negotiated culture perspective, the social engineering process is ongoing, and competing manipulators tap into the range of social cultural tools to create new values, habits, norms and practices. New cultural practices, values and behaviour may gain currency as they become more relevant and integrated into the lives of the community and its members.

Both functional culture and negotiated culture perspectives do not see culture as a monolithic social institution. Instead a society is constituted by a plethora of contrasting, complementing and contradicting cultural manifestations. Individual members of society play roles and are responsive. They behave appropriately in situations to facilitate social interaction and community building from a functional culture perspective. From a negotiated culture perspective, incentives and disincentives are used to social engineer culture and the society, as in marketing campaigns and social policies. Members of society internalise the range of habits, behaviour, values and practices at home and will acquire new ones. They will also respond to situations when they travel. For example, Cai (2018) looks at "donkey friends", which is a homophone for "travel" in Mandarin. Both terms sound similar, and donkey friends refer to Chinese backpackers, and invoke images of young travellers carrying their luggage on their backs, like transportation donkeys. Such a reference can only be made in Mandarin. These young Chinese backpackers are tech-heavy users when they travel; besides seeking information they use social media to seek assistance and to broadcast their adventures. They use technology to close information gaps and to communicate when they travel, as they do at home. Their trips are also shorter than western travellers' because of the limited days they can be away from work or school. Chinese backpackers are also more likely to start off their trips in groups (seeking out donkey friends before they leave home) rather than make new friends when traveling. This is because they want to reduce risks and share out travel expenses. Just as importantly, these Chinese travellers have embraced independent traveling like western tourists but do not have the luxury of time or the linguistic confidence of making new travel mates quickly while on the road.

In another study on Chinese tourists, Ma, Ooi, and Hardy (2018) examine the anxieties of Chinese tourist in Australia. Language barriers and health and safety concerns affect their practices and behaviour. Many travel in groups but for those who are fluent in English, they

demand more local experiences and travel more independently. With the increasing number of Chinese capable of conversing in English, we can then expect the Chinese tourist profile to change significantly. These tourists are also aware of the bad image members of the host countries may have of them, and many are cautious and are deliberately behaving in the "proper" manner.

Both studies highlight the responsiveness of Chinese tourists when they travel. For some of these tourists, they can travel in groups or independently. For many others, they do not have the capacity or capability because of language skills, financial ability and time resource. These stories also tell of a changing China. Generational and social class differences have evolved as the country experiences strong economic growth, made educational progress and has developed a growing sense of national pride. Superstitions as reflected in preferences for certain numbers (eight) and colours (red and bright colours) are often used to characterise Chinese tourists but many Chinese are also embracing minimalistic Nordic designs with monotone colours (Ooi, 2008). The forces of globalisation have not ignored Asians. For the practice community, ignoring the range of preferences and habits of Asian tourists is to miss out on a diverse set of resources that they can use to cater to their needs.

Table 1 compares the theoretical perspectives of essentialist culture, functional culture and negotiated culture. It highlights the different ways culture is conceived, the role of culture in society and how individuals behave in the context of their culture.

To complement the more theoretical Table 1, Table 2 compares essentialist culture, functional culture and negotiated culture's interpretations of the phenomenon that Asian tourists always travel in groups.

## 4. Practical and Asianisation of scholarship implications

As mentioned earlier, essentialist culture is popularly used even though its application results in the ecological fallacy. One issue is to find alternatives to understanding Asian tourists. Functional culture and negotiated culture offer some directions. There are implications for both practice and scholarship.

### 4.1. Practical implications: invoking behaviour

Using the functional and negotiated culture perspectives, culture refers to a variety and range of values, behaviour, norms and practices in society that are considered appropriate and collectively understood. This range arises from a need for members to respond to diverse circumstances, and for society to manage and cope with the dynamic

**Table 2**

Asians travel in groups: analyses from three different perspectives.

| | Essentialist culture | Functional culture | Negotiated culture |
|---|---|---|---|
| Collectivism as a cultural value | This is their entrenched cultural value | That is one of their values, like in most societies. Collective behaviour is exercised in context. Not all Asians travel in groups. Asians who travel in groups may find their travel more efficient, comfortable and seamless. They get a sense of security, can save on costs, and make friends. | That is one of their values, like in most societies. Collective behaviour is exercised in context. Many Asians do not travel in groups. Those who do may be persuaded by the media and mediators. Their travels may be more efficient, comfortable and seamless. They get a sense of security, can save on money, and make friends. |
| Culture emerges | Collectivism is entrenched in Asian culture and is hard to change | With global influences and economic development, new emerging habits, behaviour and practices arise to maintain an ever emerging social equilibrium. Those who choose to travel collectively do so because it is an acceptable and affordable way of traveling, and it suits their own personal circumstances. | With global influences and economic development, more Asians learn to speak the global lingua franca, and learn international norms and behaviour, their travel behaviour will similarly change,. Asians who travel in groups may do so because they have been sold of that idea by mediators, or their circumstances demand it. |
| Responsive social behaviour | Some Asians travel independently but group behaviour remains the norm for them | Individuals who travel in groups will relate and respond to their fellow travellers and also their host communities in ways that they deem most appropriate. Misunderstanding may still occur despite good intentions. | Individuals who travel in groups will relate and respond to their fellow travellers and their host communities in ways that they deem most appropriate. Pressures from host societies may remind the travellers to behave "properly." |

environment. The variety of habits, values, and behaviour can change as circumstances change. People are capable of a range of behaviour, such as being multilingual, being able to behave formally and informally and being capable of playing different social roles. Functional culture and negotiated culture do not deny that there are cultural differences, such as languages, food customs and casual behaviour but people are able to broaden or change their behaviour according to context. There are western tourists struggling with chopsticks in Japan, just as there are Chinese tourists clumsily using fork-and-knife at the dining table; individual tourists experience and learn. Their actions are responsive and malleable.

Since behaviour and responses are situational, managing tourist behaviour is also about setting up situations and circumstances to invoke preferred reactions. For instance, when Disneyland in Shanghai opened, domestic visitors littered, vandalised and even urinated publicly (General, 2016; Tan, 2016). Domestic visitors still constitute the biggest crowds there but non-civic social behaviour is almost gone; people queue, do not litter and move around in an orderly manner. Besides keeping the place clean, the resort and government authorities issued explicit guidelines and find ways to disperse the crowds in the theme park (Shanghai Disney Resort, 2018). With constant reminders, visitors responded positively and created a virtuous cycle.

Because functional culture and negotiated culture point to the range of cultural behaviour and the situations that invoke them, the practical implication is to use that range of potential responses as a resource to manage Asian tourists. Tourism mediators can help set the scene and conditions to invoke certain types of desired behaviour (Ooi, 2005a). There are at least three principles to consider when doing so.

*4.1.1. Tapping into common knowledge and stories, even controversial ones*

Preconceptions affect tourism experiences (Lee & Shafer, 2002; Mannell & Iso-Ahola, 1987; McIntosh & Prentice, 1999; Stamboulis & Skayannis, 2003). Tourists' preconceived ideas and expectations are shown to affect how they consume, evaluate and experience the product. Asians have a range of diverse preconceptions, which can be tapped into. For instance, because of the education system, Chinese visitors are familiar with Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales, besides the Chinese classics. The Danish authorities are using the knowledge the Chinese already have to help build Chinese tourist experiences of their country (Ooi, 2008; Ren & Ooi, 2013). Contrasting knowledge can be storied together in drawing comparative lessons between religious myths or approaches to nudity, for instance. There is a wide body of latent knowledge that tourists have, and bits of that can be tapped to invoke desired experiences of host cultures. Controversies are often

avoided in devising tourism stories. That is a safe strategy. The functional and negotiated culture perspectives allude to the ability of individuals to respond to controversies, as disagreements and contradictions are parts of cultural complexity. Controversial examples, such as the Japanese involvement in the Second World War, can be used to bring perspective to local stories, e.g. perspective of the same war in Europe. When controversial stories are presented respectfully and in a balanced non-judgemental manner, they often draw discussion and engagement (Ooi, 2005a). As in everyday life, Asian tourists can and even welcome controversies, when the context is properly spelt out.

*4.1.2. Invoking established aspirations*

From both functional and negotiated culture perspectives, members of society carry a number of common aspirations. They are dreams and values that gel society together (functional culture) or are part of the social engineering programme (negotiated culture). Those aspirations are resources to provide certain tourism experiences and activities. For example, travel may relate to improving one's psychological mood and well-being, asserting self-identity or learning about other places and cultures (Lee & Shafer, 2002; Prentice et al., 1998). Stories related to better health, good luck, altruism and heroism, and increased prosperity seem to resonate with a majority of people around the world.

*4.1.3. Addressing anxieties*

Tourists often find themselves in circumstances that are uncertain and uncomfortable. This is often an area that is rarely discussed in the practice and research communities. Tourists experience anxieties (Ma et al., 2018; Ooi, 2002, 2005a; Ritzer & Liska, 1997). Language proficiency, lack of travel experiences, food safety, and the like may generate concerns. The fear of tourist traps and being cheated will also trigger anxieties. Tour packages and cruises alleviate many of these anxieties; these packaged trips are clear from the outset about how much the trips will cost, provide assurance of the quality of food served, and give necessary travel advice (Ooi, 2002; Ritzer & Liska, 1997). Anxieties create distractions and affect tourist experiences. It is necessary to address those anxieties by either preparing tourists for the trip, assuring them of quality and prices, and assuring them that they are in good hands. Tourists who are on a tight schedule at a shop may generate a stressful environment when shopping there. Without the anxieties, tourists are more likely to behave in a calmer manner. Also from the cultural complexity perspectives, new group dynamics may emerge during travels. For instance, an English-speaking teenage daughter can be elevated into a figure of comfort and authority for a traveling Korean family in Australia, as she has the ability to communicate with locals,

and seek solutions for the group. Tourism businesses should be cognizant of emerging group travel dynamics that lowers travel anxiety.

These principles point to the tourist situation and the context they will experience the destination. Many members of the practice community are already aware of them. In taking the functional culture and negotiated culture perspectives, competent tourism mediators play an important role. They guide and point to good behaviour. They tap into the cultural complexity that tourists embody, and set the scene and invoke desired tourist responses. However the process of mediating tourist experiences is an ongoing and emergent one.

### 4.2. Academic implications: Asianising scholarship

A second implication in this paper is academic. The functional and negotiated culture perspectives take a holistic and situated understanding of culture and society. They inherently promote cultural relativism, that is, all cultures must be understood and interpreted in their own terms and circumstances. Moreover instead of western scholars imposing their own lenses on an Asian culture, the social, economic and political dynamics of an Asian society can best be understood and appreciated through those who live in the community. This concern is reflected by many scholars such as Chang (2015a), Chambers and Buzinde (2015), Edensor (1998), Winter (2009), and Yang, Lee, and Khoo-Lattimore (2018) who have highlighted that the scholarly conceptualization of the tourist is largely from experiences of the Anglo-western world. Such a conceptualisation has resulted in an assemblage of post-colonial projects (Albet-Mas & Nogue-Font, 1998; Chambers & Buzinde, 2015; Park, 2016; Tucker & Zhang, 2016; Wang & Law, 2017). Essentialist culture profiles Asians, and the effects of general profiling can be insidious and create an Other. The Othering process is inherently tied to an assertion of a superior Self. For instance, Denmark participated in the 2010 Shanghai World Exposition, with the aim of promoting the country in China, so as to enhance Danish soft power, increase trade and promote tourism (Ren & Ooi, 2013). The Danish authorities highlighted Danish society and industry through the lenses of its welfare system and Hans Christian Andersen fairy tales. The pavilion is called "Welfairytales". The message was that Denmark is economically strong, environmentally sustainable and authentic. Tacitly it deployed an Orientalist view of the Chinese when designing the pavilion. The narrative was embedded with ideological meanings, revealing a view of a Chinese Other that is inferior. For instance, the famous statue of the Little Mermaid, for the first time in history, was displaced; it moved from the harbour in Copenhagen to Shanghai for 2010. That statue was the centre piece of the pavilion and was also the most photographed tourist icon in Copenhagen. The removal of the statue created anger and divided Danish society. The exercise was to invoke fond memories of H.C. Andersen's fairy tales in China; Chinese school children read those fairy tales. The Danes took the opportunity to present a self-perceived image of themselves but also revealed how they imagined their differences to the Chinese host. By bringing over the original statue, framing that as a work of creativity and art, and invoking a furore at home, the Danish World Expo team was making a statement of difference, that their host is somewhat less innovative, are copy-cats, and have a collective consensus mentality.

Essentialist culture is not an innocent way of understanding the world. It frames cultures around the world from a western perspective and assumes the measures are universal (Håkanson & Ambos, 2010). They are not. Essentialist culture is just an example of how tourism research may inherently carry a postcolonial tinge. The call for the indigenisation of tourism scholarship is getting louder (Chang, 2015b; King, 2014; Yang et al., 2018). According to King, the Asianisation of tourism scholarship is "to address and develop our conceptual understanding of the character, experiences, encounters, perceptions and motivations of local, national and intra-regional tourism rather than to continue to base our concepts, perspectives, emphases and analyses on Western-Asian interactions and on transformations in the West" (King,

2014, pp. 3–4). Indigenous scholarship should be promoted and encouraged, so that local expertise and experiences can enrich the fabric of knowledge creation. Scholarship is a big tent, and diversity of interests is welcomed (Munar, Pernecky, & Feighery, 2016). This is part of the call to decolonise knowledge and respecting knowledge of other peoples, and respecting different ways of communicating, searching for knowledge and doing science (Morgan, Pritchard, Causevic, & Minnaert, 2018; Munar et al., 2016). Celebrating and building up local indigenous knowledge and scholarship will complement and contribute to established scholarship (Keen & Tucker, 2011; Winter, 2009). Including and embracing indigenous scholarship will promote a multitude of centres of scholarly knowledge outside the global north, and should be based on a dialogue among equals (Grosfoguel, 2006). With knowledge created through lived experiences, the epistemological and ontological foundations will also be challenged thus decolonising knowledge at the foundational level (Chambers & Buzinde, 2015).

In sum indigenous scholarship flourishes and rise from the same roots that the studied society emerges, and not from an alien framework. This means that concepts and taxonomy established in understanding non-Western tourists must thus be interrogated, followed by developing localised narratives, concepts and frameworks (Winter, 2009). Fortunately Asian universities are fast becoming centres of Asian scholarship (Winter, 2009, pp. 29–30).

The functional and negotiated culture perspectives would serve well in creating a more nuanced understanding of tourist behaviour. Besides highlighting the dynamic emergence of circumstances, the analyses will be strengthened by local knowledge of Asian researchers. Caution however must be exercised when we privilege local experiences and knowledge. Many Asian scholars work in international environments, whether in another country or locally collaborating with colleagues from different places, what is considered local understanding has become unclear. Inter-cultural marriages, enjoying American movies, eating Italian pizzas, using the English language, embracing universal values such as human rights and equality, and the like have made the idea of an Asianised scholarship distinctive difficult. In the spirit of functional culture and negotiated culture perspectives, knowledge production is also a social cultural phenomenon.

First, the creation of knowledge, such as the study of culture is inevitably "packaged" (Ooi, 2007) and are only "partial truths" (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Presented cultural elements are necessarily chosen, as the presentation of culture is inherently different from the culture itself, even if they are presented by local scholars. For instance, the felt and experiential reverence for the royal family by Thais can only be approximated when translated into description and understanding. There is an innate gap between lived reality and presented reality. There is also an agenda when knowledge is packaged (Foucault, 1972). The replacement of postcolonial scholarship with a celebration of indigenous scholarship may simply shift one form of politics to another. The knowledge production process is not neutral.

Following from the first point, second, privileging cultural relativism in the promotion of indigenous scholarship can be regressive, if not dangerous. Many Asian countries discriminate members of society based on gender, sexuality, ethnicity and religion. Superstitions and religious beliefs exist in the social world and scholars respect that. A problem arises when we doubt institutionalised scientific practices and replace them with "pre-enlightened" modes of knowledge production, allowing these modes to be considered scientific methods. When we Asianise scholarship, it is necessary to stay focused on "scholarship" rather than "Asian". And in the context of global scholarly exchange, Asian researchers may have internalised post-colonial knowledge and use them for indoctrination purposes. For instance in line with Singapore's social engineering programme, best-selling author and Singaporean diplomat, Mahbubani (2009) laments the lack of creativity and independent thinking in Asian societies. And today education systems around Asia are trying to make their children more experimental, creative and not be caught by group-think, as governments attempt to

social engineer and become more developed and more like modern western economies (Schumpeter, 2015; The Economist, 2003, 2018b).

Third, Asianisation may give rise to another set of colonisation politics. An alternative image of the Other can be invented and perpetuated by local scholars (Ooi, 2003; Park, 2016; Wang & Law, 2017). For instance, the case of the national museums in Singapore demonstrates how curators, scholars and other professionals have embraced and adopted various de-Asianisation, re-Asianisation processes in creating three venerable cultural institutions in the city-state (Ooi, 2003). The creation of the Singapore History Museum (now National Museum of Singapore), the Singapore Art Museum and the Asian Civilisations Museum in the late 1990s were and are predominantly led and run by local scholars and experts. The respectability of the institutions are sustained by the world-class facilities, with interesting and engaging exhibitions and strong curatorial teams. Regardless, the tacit grand narrative for each museum fits into the country's nation-building machinery. The National Museum of Singapore celebrates modern Singapore and its rich and diverse cultures; the city-state is presented as an efficient cosmopolis that fought hard against the British and is now independent. In contrast, the Asian Civilisations Museum Asianise the continent by celebrating the major ethnic groups in the country, namely the Chinese, Malays and Indians. The diversity within each group is cursorily acknowledged but each ethnic group is principally maintained as coherent; the museum imagines Asia through the nation-building ethnic categories of Singapore. The Singapore Art Museum asserts Singapore's supremacy in the regional art world by inventing "Southeast Asian art"; this museum asserts Singapore's leadership in the arts in the region (Ooi, 2003). Scholarship on Asia from the West may be wanting but replacing it with Asian scholarship may not reduce the politics but simply moving the politics from a rock to a hard place.

Finally, the study of Asians and their cultures has often centred on the symbolic and discursive, with focus on beliefs, values, meanings and interpretations behind social actions, practices and other social manifestation. The functional and negotiated culture approaches shift the analyses towards institutions and structures that produce contexts and situations. Regardless, the symbolic and discursive remain central. Bianchi (2009) argues strongly against such an approach because the symbolic and discursive may highlight power and inequality but they neglect to connect with structural analyses of power and inequality in tourism. This is a timely reminder. While we look at Asian tourists and the Asianisation of tourism scholarship, we still need to locate our enterprise within the global and neoliberal capitalist structures (Hales, Dredge, Higgins-Desbiolles, & Jamal, 2018; Jamal, Taillon, & Dredge, 2011). Bianchi embraces a neoMarxist approach and if the Asian scholarship is to be inclusive and push for respect, equality and non-oppressive scholarship, then it should move towards an exercise that is "emancipatory in substance" (p. 498). Following Higgins-Desbiolles and Whyte (2013) who indicate that hopeful tourism has failed to engage with the problematic nature of researching oppressed and marginalised communities from a position of privilege, the promotion of Asian scholarship seems to be in the same trajectory. The current approach is perfunctory rather than sophisticated and liberating for tourism scholarship.

## 5. Conclusions

The research and practice communities have an inherent challenge when dealing with foreign tourists. Tourists are diverse. Attempts are made to make sense of their behaviour. Essentialist culture is arguably the most common framework used to culturalise tourists, and in understanding their values, beliefs, behaviour and practices. Essentialist culture analyses are macroscopic by nature. The generalisations that reduce cultures into dimensions are well researched but they cannot be applied to the microscopic manifestations of society. The ecological fallacy would otherwise be committed.

This paper proposes that we look at cultural complexity instead of culture. Cultural complexity as manifested as a web and myriad of social manifestations is necessary for the working of a society. The range and variety of cultural manifestations is a resource to manage diverse situations. And the range is also embedded in social institutions and structures that solve and manage social, political and physical circumstances. Culture is a resource for members to express, control and navigate the variety of situations they encounter. Functional culture and negotiated culture perspectives, as derived from structural functionalism and conflict theory respectively, situate cultural complexity in society. Culture evolves with the changing needs of society, either organically (as seen by functionalists) or through coercion (as argued by critical theorists). Asian tourist behaviour must be understood in context; Asian societies are heterogenous. Members speak different languages, have different financial capabilities and have different competence in English; these affect individual tourist behaviour. As these societies change, the members will also change when they travel.

The final sections of this paper point to the practical and academic implications of situating cultural complexity through functional culture and negotiated culture perspectives. In practical terms, suggestions are provided on invoking desired behaviour from Asian tourists, tapping into their cultural resources and alleviating their anxieties. As for the academic implication, the Asianisation of tourism scholarship is welcomed. Nonetheless, if we see scholarship as a cultural enterprise, then we should also be aware of the shifting politics. Indigenous scholarship may actually be regressive. This means that all researchers must be reflexive and self-critical, as we produce knowledge and develop scholarship.

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