

EVOLUTION OF SINGAPORE TOURIST POLICY (1965-2015)

Alfredo Mena Navarro

Fernando Almeida García

Rafael Cortés Macías

Universidad de Málaga

almenas60@yahoo.es, falmeida@uma.es, rcortes@uma.es

The history of Singapore as an independent state is recent. It began in 1965 after its proclamation as a republic. The new country faced many challenges: lack of natural resources, constraints of space, economic problems, social conflict, and difficult relations with its neighbouring countries. The governing party, People's Action Party (still rules Singapore as a virtual one-party state) implemented a successful development programme that changed the structures of the country. Singapore, which fifty years ago was "a third world" country (Lee, 2000), experienced rapid growth and is now widely acknowledged to be among the world's most prosperous nations.

Tourism has played a major role in this process. This industry has generated substantial economic benefits, and brought along consequences on society, culture, international relations and urban landscape. Despite this success, however, little attention has been paid to tourism policy in Singapore. In addressing this gap in the literature, the purpose of this paper is to present a case study of the evolution of the tourism policy in Singapore for the period 1965-2015. In order to support the aim of the study, there are three specific objectives that needed to be fulfilled:

- (i) to look into the influence of the factors from outside and inside the tourism system in the policy decision-making process;
- (ii) to examine the decisions and actions taken by the government with respect to tourism;
- (iii) to identify the key elements of the Singapore tourism model success.

The present work is part of a line of research that has acquired greater importance among tourism researchers since the 2000s (Airey, 2015). It focuses attention on the links between the environment, the political system and the outcomes of tourism policy (Hall & Jenkins, 1995), that is, the process through which the tourism policy is developed, implemented and modified, rather than the content of it (Dye, 2008).

As for the theoretical framework, Airey and Chong's model (2011) is selected to guide the fieldwork. This model is based on the premise that policy is determined by a set of factors from outside and inside the tourism system (inputs) that interact (process) to generate decisions and actions (outputs). The main reason why this model has been chosen is because it allows bringing together the factors that affect policy-making and implementation in an organized and systematic way. Airey and Ruhanen (2014: 153) explain that any model of this kind is a simplification of the policy environment. However, as with all models, the important thing is that these do not become barriers in the analysis.

The case study is the most adequate research method for the main goal of this research, since it allows developing a dense description and analyzing less tangible aspects of the tourism policy, such as ideology or values. It facilitates a better understanding of this complex and multidimensional phenomenon (Stevenson, Airey & Miller, 2008, p. 734).

The choice of Singapore as a case study is motivated by the success of its tourism development model and unique attributes, strongly controlled by the government, highly globalized and connected with the world. Singapore is a leading tourist destination in the Asia-Pacific region, with great influence on its neighbouring countries.

The evolution of the tourism policy from 1965 till 2015 reflects three key phases:

1. Take-off phase (1960s and 1970s)
2. Development phase (1980s)
3. Maturity phase (1990s to 2015)

The criteria followed for this classification are based on the growth of tourism activity and its influence on the political agenda of Singapore.

The findings are presented in chronological order in each of the identified phases. The goal is to frame them in their temporal context and offer a broader view of the relationship between the macro, meso and micro levels in the tourism policy-making and implementation processes.

For the purpose of this research, and in order to achieve the objectives, both primary and secondary data have been collected: official documents (Singapore Tourism Board annual reports, plans and schemes, legislation, etc.); journals and newspapers (The Straits Times, Business Times, etc.); statistical data from Singapore Tourism Board and Singapore Department of Statistics, and literature review. Qualitative data have also been gathered from face-to-face semi-structured interviews with key informants from the M.I.C.E. (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, Exhibitions) and tourism sectors of Singapore. It should be noted that, although these interviews have not been used specifically for this article, but are part of a more extensive research, they have provided a more complete and deep insight of this subject.

The data have been analyzed using an inductive documentary analysis. The software Atlas Ti has facilitated the identification of key issues in Singapore's tourism policy by coding information from primary documents and establishing links between registered codes.

The findings of this research afford valuable insights into the dynamics of the tourism policy process. The study is one of the few analyses focused on the factors that have

influenced both the decision-making process and the product of those decisions. These findings could be used to guide the decisions and actions of policy makers from Singapore or governments interested in learning from its experience

Singapore is an example of how a country with limited resources has managed to transform itself into a very competitive tourist destination with great influence within its region, Southeast Asia. This success story is linked to the design and implementation of a tourism policy that has responded to local and international elements and dynamics throughout the different phases identified (takeoff, development and maturity), principally the political system, the economic framework, the territorial context and globalization.

The study of Singapore's tourism policy reveals that it cannot be separated from its context (Henderson, 2015), since it is an activity framed in a specific space and time and influenced by external factors and factors internal to the tourism system itself (Airey & Chong, 2011; Lawrance & Dredge, 2007) that interact with each other.

From this perspective, the analysis of the links between the environment and tourism policy has been fundamental to understanding the keys to the success of its tourism development model, where a series of patterns of action have been repeated, giving it singularity.

Tourism in Singapore has been distinguished by a strong state intervention in all aspects related to it. This fact is closely related to the political system that emerged after the independence of the country in which a single political party, the PAP, has remained in power continuously until now. It has exercised its leadership and influence in all spheres of the nation, favouring the development of a policy characterized by strong control and authoritarianism (Hall & Oehlers, 2000; Henderson, 2014). This way of understanding power has materialized in top-down planning and in the assignment to the STB of functions that have gone beyond tourism, including economic, social and urbanistic actions.

The design and implementation of tourism policy have always been subordinated to the economic, social or political objectives considered as priorities by the government. If, in the takeoff phase, tourism was conceived as a tool of economic development, the country's evolution and the need for survival of its political regime also made it a useful tool for social control and propaganda (Henderson, 2015; Leong, 1997; Ooi, 2001). The institutional framework has permeated all aspects of Singapore's tourism policy.

However, this research, in line with Dredge and Jamal (2015), also highlights the interaction in the country of other elements and dynamics that have escaped government control and have had a great influence in the formulation of the tourism policy.

The national and international economic framework has also been a determining factor in the evolution of Singapore's tourism sector, which has had to adapt at every stage to the economic logic of the moment. In this sense, tourism has been considered in the take-off phase as an effective instrument to overcome the serious socio-economic crisis that the country was experiencing. Subsequently, the demand for a change in the production model, especially in the maturity phase, brought a redefinition of the concept of tourism, where the focus was placed on the search for internationalization and the commitment to quality.

On the other hand, the Singapore tourism model is very dependent upon the international demand, being reduced the national one. Despite having a tourist image of an efficient, safe and attractive destination for shopping, business or gambling, tourism

demand in Singapore has suffered fluctuations and changes. Singapore is very sensitive to the impact of globalization and the international situation. Since the beginning, this factor has had consequences on the tourism policy process. Actions and strategies (the Tourism Development Plan 1986-1991, Tourism 21, etc.) have aimed at transforming and continuously reinventing Singapore (Teo & Chang, 2000) in order to adapt this destination rapidly and efficiently to new times, new trends and unforeseen events like financial crisis, wars, etc. Singapore has shown at all times its capacity to adapt to different circumstances.

Likewise, the growing competition from other Southeast Asian countries has also influenced the tourism policy-making process. This issue has increased the need of the country to maintain a very competitive tourism product in order to meet the expectations of the demand, every time more sophisticated and demanding. The way Singapore has faced this challenge is by being an innovative and creative destination in terms of tourism products and promotional strategies.

Top-down planning, adaptability, pragmatism, innovation and promptness in finding solutions have been, therefore, the principles by which Singapore has been able to succeed in tourism.