Tropical spa cultures, eco-chic, and the complexities of new Asianism

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Asia is like God. You cannot categorically deny or affirm its existence.
No one knows where it begins, where it ends, or whether there is a
way to define it.

Goenawan Mohamad¹

Western travellers, tourists and scholars have long perceived the 'Orient' as authentic, sensual and mysterious, and for many even today, Asia represents all that is lost to modern (Western) man. Such musings say more about the Western audience's longing for a sensual other expressed through a depiction of the East as a place of splendour, purity and its inhabitants' closeness to nature. However, more recently the Southeast Asian middle and upper classes themselves seem to have tapped into such stereotypes in order to retrieve an authentic life experience that, according to many, has been threatened by ongoing modernization, globalization and, most feared of all, Westernization. As an answer to these threats, over the last few years a regional culture has emerged that ironically uses the vocabulary, ideas and images of a lifestyle of health, beauty and spirituality that currently is so fashionable in the same West. In this contribution I focus on the most eye-catching manifestation of this 'New Asian' lifestyle, the tropical spa.

Spas are often traced to the thirteenth-century iron-bearing spring at the Wallonian town of Spa (Crismer 1989). Yet curative baths only become a trend in fifteenth-century Renaissance Europe when scholarly treatises devoted to the subject first appear and rudimentary spa directories were composed in England and

1 As quoted in Jong Won Lee 2006:2.

Italy.² By the mid seventeenth century it was an accepted habit for European elites to spend their time at mineral springs or at seaside resorts and eventually such resorts also provided Europe's newly developing bourgeoisie with leisure time away from industrial life (Mackaman 1998). The three – new rich, leisure, and spa – would from the nineteenth century onwards be even more closely knit together. As spas became commercially interesting, water from curative springs was bottled and exported as far as the United States. In 1826 a first American spa resort was opened up in Saratoga, New York, its name being derived from the word for 'medicine water' in Mohawk, the language of Native Indians who had settled the area (Corbett 2001:171). Within the context of the new American 'superspa' the Native American link was not only used to give credibility to the curative powers of the springs but was soon appropriated in tourism, a strategy that ever since has been widely used in the spa industry. In the late 1970s the first truly modern day spas appear, a process that was given impetus by the wellness revolution of the 1990s with its desire for slow living and an emphasis on bodily well-being. It was accompanied by a return to more craftsman-like practices and an appreciation of local products (Parkins and Craig 2006), and traditional and exotic prescriptions such as massage and Chinese medicine seem to fit this new bill. It is this renewed concept of the spa that attracted well-to-do visitors from Asia and in the early 1990s was also taken up by the first destination resorts in Thailand.³ Since then the spa industry is one of the fastest growing sectors in Southeast Asian travel and leisure, the spa even being used as a component in development strategies.⁴

2 These books included William Turner's *A book of the natures and properties of the baths of England* (1562), and two Venetian publications: Andrea Bacci's *De thermis* (1571) and Thomasso Guinta's *De balneis* (1553), which listed over 200 springs in Europe (Crebbin-Bailey, Harcup and Harrington 2005). Mackaman (1998) refers to nineteenth-century French directories and novels as a profitable industry serving both to promote and earn from spa tourism. For an early twentieth-century example, see Duguid (1968).

3 The development of the modern Asian spa market as a tourist phenomenon is hence relatively young, and starts with the opening of three major spas (including the Oriental and Chiva-Som) in Thailand in 1993 (Crebbin-Bailey, Harcup and Harrington 2005:30). These Asian spas focused especially on the art of massage, with limited use of mechanical equipment so as to distinguish them from ordinary beauty saloons. Spreading to major tourist resorts such as Phuket, Samui, and Bali, spas would soon become popular in the Southeast Asian hotel scene, but also as day spas in malls or shopping centers.

4 In South India, the states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala have, since the late 1990s, promoted themselves as health tourism destinations for both Westerners and visitors from well-off Asian economies (Hudson 2003:283). In Malaysia the promotion of spa resorts has similarly targeted the well-to-do in neighbouring countries.

Today, tropical spa is a term that refers to resorts, most of them located in Southeast Asia (hence the adjective ‘tropical’) where well-to-do tourists from both the East and West are pampered in luxurious, exotic and often ‘mystical’ settings.⁵ Tropical spas offer a myriad of services including beauty, fitness, medicine and spiritual relief. Whereas most spas are open to both men and women, consumption of their practices seems highly gendered in nature and conditioned by the demands of industrial society (Hudson 2003:287): men are generally attracted by health and functionality of their bodies whereas women are more concerned with their appearance. However, in this contribution I am more interested in the different ways visitors from the East and West consume spas. I focus on the ways the tropical spa is attracting Western participants through guides, coffee table books and web directories, a method that historically has proven to be very successful. But the tropical spa phenomenon also serves to promote a New Asian lifestyle among the local well-to-do. It does so by emphasizing the spa as a tradition with local roots, and by using elements of local landscapes that visually stress Asianness. In various ways, this New Asianism is expressed through ideas of health, beauty and spirituality. Let us now turn to the first symptoms of this new Asian lifestyle.

RISE OF THE WELLNESS INDUSTRY OR EMERGENT REGIONALISM?

Early 2005 saw the publication of Erlinda Enriquez Panlilio and Felice Prudente Sta Maria’s book *Slow food; Philippine culinary traditions*, which not coincidentally is dedicated to the founder of the Manila chapter of the International Wine and Food Society. The book offers a lush variety of Philippine foods under headings such as ‘Pospas – my mother’s legacy’, ‘The vanishing Tawilis of Lake Taal’ and ‘Christmas of my childhood’, shading authentic dishes into the memories of a passing age. ‘Today one wonders about the future of Philippine cooking’, the introduction notes, ‘Slow food ... traditional food ... food prepared from scratch with no shortcuts, using only the finest ingredients acquitted at the peak of their season, is a vital and valuable component of every Filipino’s sense of self’ (Panlilio and Prudente Sta Maria 2005:6-7).

Elsewhere, a Javanese businesswoman, Martha Tilaar, popularly known as the ‘mother of natural based cosmetics’, launched her

5 In a 2006 survey on most popular spa resorts by the UK based magazine *Traveller*, 6 out of the 10 most popular spas worldwide were located in Asia. See <http://www.cntraveller.com/ReadersAwards/2006/Spas/> (accessed September 2006).

Dewi Sri line of body scrubs, which is now popularly advertised as 'the secret of the tropical Goddess'. Her website⁶ explains that 'an old Indonesian folklore tells of an ancient remedy inspired by the Goddess of fertility and prosperity of rice fields and crop harvest. Her beautiful, healthy skin is the emanation of a timeless beauty ritual enhanced by traditional bathing. Based on this secret, a series of treatments was born.' Tilaar's recipes are believed to be based on the traditional ingredients used by the princesses of the palaces of Central Java, which only adds to the products' aura of mystery. These ancient secrets for beauty and health are now also available to ordinary women in both the East and the West.

Finally, moving eastward, the island of Bali was once called the Island of Gods but has since gradually become more of a sanctuary for those looking for self-actualization. Since the late 1990s it has been the Island of Tropical Spas as there are literally hundreds of spa resorts on the island, varying in size and facilities on offer. Here one can enjoy a traditional massage, aromatherapy, or simply relax, and afterwards enjoy an *al fresco* organic dinner while listening to traditional gamelan music. Slow food Filipino style, the ancient secrets of Javanese beauty, and in particular the Island of Tropical Spas: these are but few examples of the recent boom in Asian style eco-chic.⁷ But, what do these products have in common and why are these and similar products suddenly so enormously popular throughout Southeast Asia?

Products that stress the local, the slow, and the natural are a current fad among the new wealthy of Southeast Asia's cities. The well-to-do often have come to consider consuming such products to be indispensable in dealing with the alienating effects of those difficult-to-handle, abstract processes of globalization, modernization and Westernization. While this remedy is very local in nature, I suspect that similar things can be found throughout the non-Western world, and argue that this model of consumption contrasts with its Western counterpart. For this reason the Southeast Asian middle and upper classes' current fascination with beauty, health, and all things natural can be seen as a distinct interpretation of global culture: an Asian

6 See <http://www.dewisrispa.com/> (accessed September 2006).

7 The term ethnic chic as a development is traced to the 1990s when Euro-American populations started to desire clothing and items that were ethnically inspired. The term is now used to refer to the cultural production of formerly ethnic clothes that have moved into the mainstream fashion arenas internationally. Niessen, Leshkovich and Jones (2003), for example, signal the emergence of Indo chic; haute couture interpretations of Vietnamese peasant and elite clothing. From the world of fashion the terminology has spilt over into interior design. Here ethnic chic (or 'etnik chic') comes to stand for 'the use of carvings that are ethnically inspired and applied in the context of modern living houses' (Susilowati and Zi 2003:1).

response to the wellness industry of the West. Especially the nouveau riche, who until recently primarily defined themselves through their patterns of consumption, but who otherwise lack a shared identity, now seem to desire a more 'authentic' cultural experience. At the same time, the preference for natural, local, and more authentic products confronts us with a rupture, as the Southeast Asian middle class suddenly no longer seems solely obsessed with consuming the West and its 'symbols of modernity'. On the contrary, it is now modern and fashionable to read the 'Asian philosophies' of Deepak Chopra or to build a house based on the principles of Feng Shui or Vastu Sastra. Rather than fast food chains like McDonald's or Pizza Hut, the latest buzz word is slow food: one eats *nasi kampung* (village-style fried rice) in posh restaurants and drinks traditional and organically grown coffees at Starbucks or local equivalent of such classy coffee bars.

These practices, which I group together as Asian style eco-chic, are modish combinations of lifestyle politics, a dash of environmental awareness, and an urge to get back to the natural and authentic.⁸ More than that, they are increasingly part of the identikit of the well-to-do in this part of the world. In mimicking the lifestyle and shopping practices of their equivalents in the West, they seem to demonstrate their cosmopolitan consciousness, combined with an appreciation of local (read: regional and Asian) culture. One of the ironies of such global flows is that as a result Asia rediscovers itself through the West!

What are we dealing with here? Cultural nostalgia, self-Orientalism, or some sort of elite cosmopolitanism? It surely is a cosmopolitan consciousness, which is then expressed in often patriotic ways: Philippine food as a sense of self, Dewi Sri as an ancient Javanese secret, or, as we will see, the tropical spa as 'Asia's botanic and cultural heritage'. In that case one could speak of cosmo-patriotism (see also Jurriëns and De Kloet 2007) a very rooted kind of cosmopolitanism. Being local in a globalizing world was long considered far from hip or modern, and thus locality had to be transformed and reinvented in new ways. Eco-chic Asian style offers such new opportunities for constructing community, and, as I will argue, it has therefore become part of an All-Asian renaissance and an elite lifestyle associated with it: New Asianism. A similar stress of a shared pan-Asian culture can elsewhere be found in fashion, cinema, science and not the

8 According to Tanqueray (2000), living an eco-friendly lifestyle has become chic. The dust jacket of her book *Eco-chic* states that 'not so long ago, environmental awareness was left almost exclusively to the experts or the eccentrics. However, now a more environmental friendly approach to life is something more and more people aspire to [...]. No longer the domain of the "brown rice and sandals" brigade, eco-consciousness means knowing that you don't have to sacrifice taste or style to look after your body and the environment.'

least politics. However, Asian style eco-chic is the most visible of these manifestations and one that can be found in the everyday domain. It's in the ways the well-to-do dress, what they decide to eat, and more broadly in one's approach to life as such. For many Asianism has become a preferred lifestyle, though one that is full of contradictions, not least because it is one that most Asians can hardly afford; it is neither new nor solely based on the ancient secrets so often used in its advertisements; and it is a contradictory mixture of outright commercialism with a touch of instant spirituality. Importantly, it is neither fully Western inspired nor completely Asian. Apparently different audiences are consuming Asia in different ways and for different reasons as the case of tropical spa culture here will illustrate.

The tropical spa is the place where ideas of a cosmopolitan lifestyle, eco-chic and Asianism merge. Tropical spas are lavishly designed destination resorts where one can stay overnight and where visitors are offered an amalgam of beauty, health and spiritual practices. It is perhaps more appropriate to speak of tropical spa cultures rather than of a unitary phenomenon as they are a conglomeration of different sorts of newly invented or old, often profoundly romanticized traditions and therapies. The resorts, which today are primarily found in Southeast Asia (hence the adjective 'tropical'), are aimed at the wealthy Western and East Asian traveller but in many cases also at the local well-to-do. Although these groups might consume spa culture for various reasons as we will see below, tropical spas are seldom run either solely by Westerners or exclusively by Asians. These resorts are typically international ventures: the luxury resort Chiva Som, for instance, has a Thai manager and a Swiss hotel director, which counters the easy accusation that this is merely an imported foreign phenomenon. Moreover, in its outward appearance and in line with other forms of eco-chic, the tropical spa culture as a rule stresses the local, for example either indigenous practices or well-known traditions from neighboring Southeast Asian societies.

The past few years have seen an enormous boom in these tropical spas, and hundreds of them can be found in Bali alone. Bali, however, is but one of the many areas visited by the international leisure class that travels between similar resorts in Phuket, Kerala, Manila, or Singapore. Moreover, these spas have given rise to numerous derivative products, ranging from Martha Tilaar's Dewi Spa body scrubs, CDs with spa lounge music, and beautifully illustrated coffee table books that promote the new tropical spa culture as a New Asian life style that also can be enjoyed by the less wealthy. Before looking at such derivative products and the ways they spread spa culture beyond the resorts, we must first look at the ancient tradition of healing waters. It will help us understand the current popularity of tropical spas.

FROM HEALING WATER TO ASIAN BEAUTY

Although ironically the idea of the spa is a modern import from the West, Asian societies have long been familiar with the healing qualities of water, especially springs. One of the most famous examples is the Godavari River. Shelter to Rama and Sita in the Hindu epic *Ramayana*, it is believed to flow underground, invisible to the human eye. The river is said to be connected to underground basins, flowing into fountainheads or bowls supplying holy water to India's many temples. Holy purification water or *tirta* is also central to Balinese religion. The purification water is generally seen as a gift from the ancestral deities to their descendants, and almost each Balinese temple has its own source of water that is used to produce it. *Tirta* can help its consumers to remain conscious, free from sorcery and it can even save one from death (Ottino 2000). Hence, *tirta* is both vitalizing and purifying, albeit the latter tends nowadays to be stressed. In the aftermath of the growing worldwide popularity of the wellness industry and eco-chic, ideas of healing water are reinterpreted, both in the West and in Asia, with luxury spas becoming Asia's hottest trend of the 1990s.

Figure 1. Tirta Empul, Bali

Whereas nowadays Southeast Asia is a popular destination for spa and wellness tourism, water is also here no longer the only medication used. Nevertheless some spa resorts, like the Begawan Giri ('noble hermit of the mountain') and Mandara ('a reference to the mythology of the sacred centre in Hinduism'),⁹ both located in Bali, are built next to what are respectively considered a sacred spring and the supposedly powerful confluence of two rivers. Emphasis also has slowly moved towards prevention rather than cures, putting beauty on an equal footing with health. A Los Angeles visitor summarizes the appeal of the Southeast Asian spa as follows:

A must see for anyone who wants to witness paradise. I made my way up there [...] and found something so magical and beautiful that it was inspirational. I could not stop talking about it for days. The Asian Spas are so much more intoxicating and beautiful than the European Spas. The packaging of the products with natural fibers, banana leaves, lotus leaves, etc. is perfectly pleasing. They are politically correct and appealing ('Bali is becoming the Asian Spa Mecca, October 30, 1999').¹⁰

Tropical spas include Bali's pioneering Nusa Dua Spa, founded in 1994, where nowadays 26 therapists perform approximately 80 therapies a day. But they also include the 26 million US dollar Chiva-Som in the Gulf of Siam, a health resort that prides itself in blending well-being with exquisite luxury. One American visitor commented that:

If you are looking for a relaxing spiritual cleanse coupled with a daily workout program, this is the place. I woke up to yoga, had 3 great tasting healthy meals and a massage each day. I couldn't ask for more. I felt the staff was extremely accomodating [sic] and paid close attention to little details (they even presented me with a basket of beautiful roses and a small cake on my birthday - that was truly a surprise!) The menu of spa services was excellent - my most memorable was an hour consultation with a monk and an hour with a hypnotherapist. I had my first Thai style massage there also.¹¹

What we are dealing with here is simply a successful commercial practice that is targeted at the well-to-do, mostly Western tourists. The first part might be true, because like most life style practices,

9 A mythological mountain of Balinese Hinduism from which flow the waters of eternal youth.

10 From Amazon.com reviews of *The tropical spa*, see <http://www.amazon.com/Tropical-Spa-Secrets-Health-Relaxation/dp/0794602622> (accessed September 2006).

11 Hua Hin: Chiva-Som Luxury Health Resort: 'Great stay at Chiva-Som', 10-9-2005: A TripAdvisor Member, Seattle

tropical spa culture has definite commercial aspects, explaining civilizations in terms of commodities and showing that what is so often despised by many Asians is Western liberalism and not the modernity of late capitalism. Regarding the last part of this criticism, however, not only the Western affluent make up the audience here, but also their Asian counterparts, although both categories of participants partake in spa culture for different reasons. Western, but also East Asian travellers visit spas as the resorts address the wish for an unpolluted, pure and very consumer-friendly version of the tropics. The local well-to-do, on the other hand, interestingly seem to frequent spas to pronounce and revalidate their own cultural roots. Different needs and tastes are also reflected in the sort of spa one visits. Whereas foreign travellers have a preference for spa destination resorts, where they can take a swim, enjoy a massage, while making the resort a background to their holidays, Javanese middle class members, as an illustration, seem to prefer so-called day spa salons. To them such spas are the place to prepare bride and groom for upcoming weddings, occasions that in this part of the world may take up to several days with the couple, for each episode, being donned in different clothing, make up, but also, and here the spa comes in again, being subjected to various ritual baths. Well-known spas, such as Martha Tilaar's salon Day Spa, offer so-called 'pre wedding packets' (*paket pengantin*). Such packets generally include services such as *mandi Ken Dedes* (a 3,5 hours treatment, including herbal baths, purification with scented smoke and the use of 'romantic' oils), facial treatment, and manicure. All of these services are offered at various occasions and to both bride and groom.¹² These services can be enjoyed at the spa compound but also back at home. The latter variant does obviously not differ much from the more traditional services offered by the *dukun pengantin* (traditional beautician for brides on Java) as described by Puntowati (1992).

In addition, many Javanese middle class women regularly visit nearby day spas, to have a traditional cream bath, or to enjoy aromatherapy and to them spas have become inherent to a modern though very genuine Asian lifestyle. In participating in spa culture, they have rediscovered treatments their grandmothers were fond of, but, by putting them in the context of an international spa culture, such therapies suddenly have become very modern and are no longer deemed backwards, village-like and therefore cheap. For these women (and to a lesser extent men) spa culture addresses various needs: it not only offers health, beauty and spiritual practices, a

12 Ken Dedes was the queen of Singosari and famed for her beauty. Legend has it that her bathing place was situated in Singosari, just outside of Malang. The local population believes that taking a bath at this spot would make one look young, charismatic and shiny (Suwardono 2007).

place where one in a relaxed atmosphere can meet with like-minded people, but it significantly also covers the need for social make up.

According to Bengé (2003:15), it is exactly the focus on nature's abundance and her rich aromas that gives Asian beauty such an enormous worldwide appeal. In this it falls in line with eco-chic's fashionableness; 'while a deepening commitment to a kind of environmental consumerism now grips people in the West, it has been the mainstay of Asian culture until recent economic development'. Back to the basics, however contradictory this might sound, is therefore the 'new concept' of modern beauty. At present these spas, while focusing on traditional Asian beauty treatments, also include health therapies and ways to get back in touch with one's spirituality. Some spas, like the Banyan Tree spa in Pukhet, explicitly embrace Buddhist philosophy. Others only make vague references to any of the world's religions or promote themselves as karmic resorts that offer programs to de-stress or overcome trauma. In some societies spas more overtly address religious particularities. Responding to the emergence of an ever increasing Muslim middle class and its need to publicly express itself, Muslim day spas have become a lucrative niche in the market in Indonesia in places such as Jakarta, Yogyakarta and Palembang. Muslim salon spas exclusively target a female Muslim audience with services that are roughly similar to their more secular equivalents, but overall they promise a more serious and secluded atmosphere.¹³

In sum: Over time spas have come to emphasize leisure and wellness, and as a consequence spa culture has become a favorite destination for many, both in the West and in the East. Although spas are said not to be traditional to Asia, centuries of its health and beauty practices are being used and repackaged as the 'worldwide vogue for spiritual and mental, as well as physical, fitness has been at the core of Asian beauty custom since the beginning of time', as one handbook for spa aficionados notes (Bengé 2003:11). Access to the spa resorts seems restricted to the happy few, for now. That said, there are other ways in which to share in the tremendously popular spa culture, ways that make an important contribution to the wider recognition of the spa ideals of beauty, health, and spirituality and, for that matter, New Asianism, of which it is increasingly becoming a part. To study the ways New Asianism as a lifestyle is gaining ground among affluent Southeast Asians it is informative

13 Combining the wellness industry with the religious is very much in line with the desecularization of other domains of public culture (Forbes and Mahan 2000). Illustrative of this phenomenon is a wide range of Christian health centres that today offer their services to a devout public, but also publications such as *Simply relevant* (2007:5), whose introduction reads 'Ok, so what's a Bible series got to do with a spa, you ask? Well this series is all about how we find refreshment in Jesus – how much he wants to renew and bless us. And what better metaphor for that than a spa?'

to have a closer look not only at the resorts, but also at the ways spa culture has been traditionally disseminated through public media.

SPAS MEDIATED, OR ASIA BROUGHT HOME

The tropical spa is in all respects a sanctuary for the senses: blending taste (spa cuisine ranging from after-massage snacks to Asian golden muesli), touch (a sensory spa journey consisting, for example, of a four hand massage) and smell (aroma therapy is one of the most popular treatments at tropical spas), thus breaking with the adage that our age is primarily a visual one. Still, the visual continues to matter, as it is instrumental in spreading spa culture's message beyond the resorts. Brochures, books and websites (see below) tell the story of an elegant fusing of indoor and outdoor spaces, the modern and the traditional, primitive (read: authentic) and the convenient mixing of, for example, five star amenities with a genuine local ambience. It is to these visual elements that I now turn.

Nowadays respected resorts have their private-label products, like the Spice Islands oils from *Esens* (available at the Nusa Dua Spa, Bali) or the *Dewi Sri* line of body scrubs with which to recreate the spa experience in your own home. One of the most eye-catching, or better ear-catching ways to do this has been the recent trend of repackaging otherwise traditional tunes as spa music.¹⁴ Here, however, I will restrict myself to print magazines and coffee table books and the way they represent and disseminate tropical spa culture and associated eco-chic practices, as these are among the most important carriers of what is now fast becoming the trend of New Asianism. Without the authors possibly being aware, these books and magazines historically have their predecessors in the early spa publications of the sixteenth century, nineteenth-century guides and novels describing spa life in France (Mackaman 1998) or in-flight guides such as the 1960s Pan Am spa directory. Each in their way promoted spa tourism for a particular audience. Visiting any up-market bookstore (or try Amazon.com) one will be struck by the literally thousands of titles that deal with the healing potential, the true power or *The holy order of water*. Titles include among others *SalonOvations*; *Day spa operations* (1996), *The spa encyclopedia* (2002), *Spa & wellness hotels* (2002), *Spa and salon alchemy* (2004) and *Spa &*

14 A good example is a CD that I bought two years ago in the Central Javanese town of Yogyakarta. This CD, which offers traditional *gendhing* music, was nothing new. Rather, it was a traditional recording that is now sold under the title 'Java relaxation and spa'. Another strategy is to record old tunes in a new age style, complete with bird song and other natural sounds, and sell it as 'Synbotanic aromatherapy spa music', as I found on a Chinese CD.

health club design (2005), all of which focus on a worldwide evolving spa culture. Many of these coffee table books are exclusively about Asian spas. They sometimes consider a particular national tradition, such as the *Japanese spa* (2005), or the *Thai spa book* (2002), but more often portray it as a regional all-Asian phenomenon, such as *Spa style Asia* (2003), or *Ultimate spa; Asia's best spas and spa treatments* (2006).

In this section I shall focus on two publications: Sophie Bengé's best-selling *The tropical spa* published by Periplus in 2003,¹⁵ and the internationally available glossy *AsianSpa* (2004-2006). Both are published in Asia. Bengé is an expatriate who lived in Asia for seven years, while the editorial staff of *AsianSpa* is made up of both Western and Asian journalists. Again, neither publication seems to exclusively address a Western or Asian audience. Rather, they cater specifically to the urban middle or upper classes. As important to *The tropical spa* as its explanatory text, and in line with what is said above about stressing the visual, are the stunning photographs by Luca Invernizzi Tettoni.¹⁶ *The tropical spa* is in fact a catalogue of some of the better-known Southeast Asian spas (although criteria for their selection are strikingly absent). The book also offers stress releasing therapies under witty titles like 'Rites of massage', 'Hair story' and 'Face value', thus giving the reader access to a holistic and uplifting life style. I will regularly quote from this book below, but let us first briefly look at *AsiaSpa*, the other publication.

AsiaSpa (not to be confused with the similarly named *SpaAsia* magazine) is one of the countless new life style magazines in South-east Asia that increasingly act as 'missionaries of modernity' (Heryanto 1999). The bi-monthly magazine, which was first published in 2004, is now sold in Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, China, the Philippines and several other Asian Pacific countries. Like *The tropical spa*, *AsiaSpa* magazine clearly caters to the wealthy, as can be concluded from its advertisements for Hyatt resorts, expensive chocolate, and Aston Martin and Rolls Royce automobiles. The latter are items that are typically aimed at a male market and *AsiaSpa* in no way pretends to be a women's magazine, in spite of the orientation of some of the spas found in Southeast Asia today. The magazine's up-

15 Sophie Bengé was formerly the deputy director of *Elle Decoration* magazine in Hong Kong. At present she lives in London where she works as a journalist and is a consultant in an integrated health centre for women. Periplus is also responsible for other wellness and do-it-yourself eco-chic books like *Jamu; The ancient art of herbal healing* and *A handbook of Chinese healing herbs*. Turtle and Archipelago Press similarly published spa books such as the *Thai spa book; Natural Asian way to health and beauty* (2003) and *Spa style Asia* (2003).

16 Tettoni is considered to be one of the best spa photographers in Asia. He also did the photography for books such as *Bali modern*, *Tropical Asian style* and *The ultimate spa book* as well as many spa portfolios for hotels and resorts throughout Asia.

market orientation is confirmed by its use of English, chosen in this case not so much because of its international (for example, Western) readership, but rather because this is the language of the new Asian middle class and therefore a marker of modernity and cosmopolitanism. The magazine is widely available in flight libraries, airport shops and in the lounges of various Asian airline companies, once again linking it with a wealthy leisure class and the modernity their lifestyle is generally associated with. Large segments of society thus seem excluded from the world of *AsiaSpa*, but it can be argued that, like other glossy magazines, its readership acts as a role model, displaying a middle class life style that is aspired to by many.¹⁷

Figure 2. *AsiaSpa* glossy

17 This is proven by the recent attention spa culture has for example received in Indonesian newspapers and locally oriented and Indonesian language magazines such as *Seri HomeSpa*.

AsiaSpa magazine and its associated websites¹⁸ are publications of the Hong Kong based AdKom group. Their editorial staffs are composed of Asians and Westerners, men and women. Most of the contributors to this and comparable magazines are people who are involved in the wellness industry as journalists, consultants or therapists. *AsiaSpa* magazine contains such regular features as SpaTalk, Urban Spa, Book Watch, Spa Finder and Dare to Dream, the latter being a section on the ultimate indulgence, unfolding people's wildest dreams of consumption. It also has special features, like articles on Angkor Wat revisited and, in the anniversary issue, an A to Z of Asian Therapies.

While to a large extent being advertisements for and by the industry, one cannot help noticing how superficial and shallow some of the modern day guides actually are. In their praise for a much romanticized mythical past everyone seems to have been healthier, more beautiful and noble then, and stereotypical images of spiritual traditions typically abound. Frequently such descriptions include clearly invented traditions and misrepresentations of the people who supposedly practiced them. In describing the Datai hotel on Langkawi Island in Malaysia, *The tropical spa*, for example, comments that 'with your third eye it is not hard to see a Dayak tribesman emerging from the trees to appear on the jetty of your spa suite. Stick to real vision and your visitor will likely be one of the many monkeys to whom this Malaysian slice of rainforest really belonged before the Datai (hotel) arrived.' (Benge 2003:40.) Nowhere is it explained that the Dayak people actually do not live in Langkawi, but on the relatively far off island of Borneo. Having said so, magazines and coffee table books will be referred to below as we consider the role they play in shaping a New Asian lifestyle by providing the new visualities and stressing alternative temporalities tropical spa culture has become known for.

SPA SCAPES: VISUALIZING THE PARADISE ASIA IS

An important aspect that is commonly stressed in spa culture is the way the spa is turned into part of a wider natural setting. Resorts are often located at very scenic spots and are carefully designed in accordance with the natural surroundings. The Tjampuhan Spa in Bali, for example, is housed in the former guest house of the royal prince of Ubud, that was once also home to international artists such as Spies

18 www.asiaspa.com and an all Indian version, www.asiaspaindia.com.

and Bonnet, and starting point of the Western inspired art movement Pita Maha.¹⁹ Today, the resort offers open views of the river valley, 'with all buildings enjoying the natural insulation of traditional Balinese thatched roofs and surrounded by tropical greenery and flowers' (from its brochure). Massage rooms are located along the water, where the sacred Oos and Tjampuhan Rivers meet, and situated just opposite the 900 year old Gunung Lembah temple complex. Not seldom, and this is intentional, it is difficult to distinguish where the spa resort stops and nature is taking over. If such natural environment is not at hand, and many spas are nowadays found within larger Southeast Asian cities, such natural landscapes are artificially created. Summarized, this means that the spa can extend within nature, or that nature is simply invited in using such elements as natural or man-made caves, streams, or small bushes, but also organic materials, such as wood, stone and flowers. Again it is a tropical image that is constantly invoked, but one that is cautiously adapted to the needs and taste of the modern day urban visitor.²⁰ In any case, landscaping, e.g. adapting the resort to its direct surroundings, is an important process often undertaken by skilled architects and designers and inherent to the atmosphere that is thus created within the spa. By lack of other bodily experiences, and in absence of taste, smell and sounds, such visual cues are even more stressed in the magazines and coffee table books that represent tropical spa culture. It is through these visual cues as well that a shared Asian world seems to be drawn for both the Western as well as the local readership.

'The pictures are just so well taken, you feel like you want to go there' one reader of *The tropical spa* is quoted in an Internet review site. Indeed, some readers simply do so. A Singaporean girl tells that she bought the book in Bogor (Java) at the Novotel gift shop while on vacation. During this trip she visited the Chedi and the Mandara spas where 'foods are as portrayed in the book' (again, food is here merely reduced to a visual matter). Like a modern pilgrim she further visited the San Gria Spa and Resort in Lembang (Java) and the Dharmawangsa in Jakarta, concluding that: 'having had spa treatments in both the U.S. and Indonesia, I have to say that Asia can do it best!' Julia, a Malaysian woman from Kuala Lumpur, is similarly convinced:

19 Pita Maha (literally 'Grand Ancestors' and referring to the deity Brahma) was the art society in 1936 founded by local aristocrats and international artists. Pita Maha was successful in getting works by local artists into international art exhibitions (Clark 1993:23). Seemingly proud of this glorious past the staff of the hotel and spa prefer the old time spelling of *Tjampuhan* rather than its modern day equivalent *Campuhan* to refer to the river valley at which it is located.

20 In one case, in a Balinese spa, I found out that the management even prided itself in a weekly extermination of all insects and bugs, this by spraying the whole area covered by the resort.

One Day Spa Entrance

The Spa enjoys a lush river valley setting, centred on a unique grotto decorated with traditional carvings and stonework. Facilities include hot and cold whirlpool baths, sauna and steam rooms.

In-house guest - US\$12

Outside guest - US\$15

Spa Beauty Package

Enjoy the facilities of the Spa for one full day, including one of the traditional treatments available.

In-house guest - Single US\$39/Couple US\$71

Outside guest - Single US\$49/Couple US\$89

Spa Adventure Package

Before enjoying the facilities of the Spa, guests are invited to join an invigorating half-day trek through the peaceful riverside scenery and traditional villages. The walk begins in Payogan village, descending through valley to the holy temple of Pura Gunung Lebah in Tjampuhan.

In-house guest - Single US\$50/Couple US\$95

Spa Harmony Package

A full day to enjoy the facilities of the Spa, with the addition of your choice of one traditional spa treatment, plus a delicious, specially-prepared meal with beverages from the Spa Cafe.

In-house guest - Single US\$55/Couple US\$105

Traditional Balinese Massage

A full body treatment massage with Tjampuhan Valley aromatic oils, with a choice of Ratu Bidadari (Angel Queen) and Rajawangi oils (Royal Essence).

60 minutes - US\$25

Traditional Mandi Lulur

The epitome of Balinese massage - detoxifying and stimulating herbal skin preparation flushes away tension, followed by a cooling yoghurt rub for pH balance, with the final touches of a Bali flower bath and fresh pressed herbal tonic.

120 minutes - US\$33

Traditional Balinese Boreh

Essence of the spice islands - clove, ginger, nutmeg and root of galangal ground together in a volcanic stone mortar - lightly applies a blood circulation and detoxifying scrub in preparation for a full body Swedish massage, complemented by sandalwood moisturizing.

120 minutes - US\$33

Swedish Massage

Absorb the essences of Tjampuhan Valley aromatic oils while our Swedish technique massage therapist soothes and stimulates, stretches and re-aligns both body and spirit.

60 minutes - US\$25

Acupressure Massage

Direct contact massage, from head to toe, providing overall body rejuvenation focusing on the breathing techniques essential to effective acupressure therapies.

60 minutes - US\$25

Head/Neck/Shoulder Facial Massage

Stimulating and refreshing the upper body with Biokos toner and mask connecting face, skin, bones and nerves with your inner spirit.

60 minutes - US\$30

TJAMPUHAN

Spa

Hotel Tjampuhan - Jalan Raya Campuhan - PO Box 198 - Ubud 80571 - Bali - Indonesia

Tel: (62 361) 975368 - Fax: (62 361) 975137

e-mail: tjampuhan@indo.net.id - homepage: <http://www.indo.com/hotels/tjampuhan>

Figure 3. Price list Tjampuhan Spa, Bali

Being Asian and proud of my heritage, I grew up watching my late grandmother prepare her own home-made facial products with natural herbs found in the forest. The resorts featured [in *The tropical spa*] offer travelers an incomparable and convenient setting for discovering the Asian secret to the ultimate relaxation and indulgence for the senses. A must have for all Spa lovers! (April 28, 2000).²¹

Needless to say, the spas do not always meet the visitors' expectations, Western or Asian, created by the books, magazines and websites. A German tourist who visited the Chiva-Som, one of Asia's most luxurious resorts in the Gulf of Siam, complained that:

In contradiction to the pictures you see on Chivasom's website this hotel is not located on a quiet beach! These pictures must be very old...The hotel is surrounded by high apartment buildings (up to 20 stories), the beach is very dirty (also directly in front of the hotel) and I personally didn't want to swim in the ocean after looking at all the garbage, ... dead jelly fish, and leftovers from the dogs and horses (August 19, 2005).²²

However, *The tropical spa*, like *AsiaSpa* magazine and its equivalents, contains spectacular, visually stunning photographs, and in the tradition of coffee table books it could be argued that Bengé's texts merely complement Tettone's photographs rather than the other way round. The text on the dust jacket of the similar *Spa Style Asia* (Lee and Lim 2003) does not exaggerate when it states that 'spa prices and services will appeal to destination-oriented travellers, while the extensive color shots of spa surroundings, both interior and exterior, offer plenty of ideas for homeowners who would create smaller versions of paradise'. Or, as the brochure of the Balinese Wibawa Spa reads: 'designed as a Healing Sanctuary it is situated *seemingly away from everything*'. Both the tropical spa and its representation here through books and magazines are therefore not so much trying to sell an outstanding reality but rather the dream of something of a different yet to be realized world, more beautiful and out of place and ordinary time. This touches upon the representative possibilities inherent in the spa's depiction of both Asian nature and culture and second the paradise-like qualities spa culture clearly wishes to invoke.

21 Both quoted from Amazon.com reviews of *The tropical spa*, see <http://www.amazon.ca/Tropical-Spa-Secrets-Health-Rejuvenation/dp/9625932658> (accessed September 2006).

22 From <http://www.tripadvisor.com>, offering online reviews of among others Chiva Som Luxury Health resort (accessed September 2006).

Figure 4. Cover of *The tropical spa* by Sophie Bengé

The tropical spa depicts a much-idealized world or at least a miniature version of it, where it is 'the mood of yesteryear [that] inspires the imagination and treatments somehow feel better in a truly authentic setting' (Benge 2003:67). Spa architecture reminds one of representations of the 'traditional' in World Expositions or in the invented traditions of modern day heritage displays, and it makes possible 'a world of images more real than real' (Hendry 2000:70). Whereas some tropical spas, such as the Oriental Spa in Bangkok, purposely invoke the somewhat decadent atmosphere of the colonial architecture of pre-Independence Asia, the Oriental palaces of former eras seem to be even more popular as a source of inspiration. Carved, painted double Majapahit doors are incorporated in some Indonesian spas evoking a princess's chamber, referring to a glorious and mysterious past. Finally, so-called chambers of 'ethnic chic' are added, again stressing the tropical or Asian aspect of the place.

In some cases whole 'traditional villages' have been recreated at a spa resort. An example is the Balinese Jimbaran Spa, where landscape designer Made Wijaya combined English Cotswold architecture with the ambience of Balinese village layout. In other Balinese spas, Benge (2003:33) adds, 'even that nostalgic image of maidens bathing naked at the water's edge is realized by the local village girls'.²³

The spas, *The tropical spa* thus states, 'adopt an earthy ambience in tune with the powerful landscape surrounding them'. In fact tropical spas are miniature landscapes, or one might say spa-scapes, which play with the nature-culture distinction and often substitute one for the other in fusing indoor and outdoor spaces. Among spa culture's top attractions are, for example, *al fresco* dining, eating organic food outdoors rather than at home and 'offering that all-Asian frisson of showering naked next to nature' (Benge 2003:43). Other spaces, too, have a supposed otherworldly quality, setting them apart from everyday life. This brings me to the second feature that spa-scapes seemingly share; its invocation of an Asian paradise.

The Nirwana Spa at the Meridien hotel in Bali, for example, is built on a much-contested site, although none of the spa books

23 Nowhere near the Tajampuhan spa did we ever, during our two week visit in 2006, run into the bathing girls. The image clearly seems to be given by colonial fantasies of an island of 'bare breasts'. This image dates at least to the twentieth-century photo albums that emphasized the physical beauty of Balinese bodies, especially nude Balinese women taking their bath (Picard 1996:28) and it illustrates how the breasts of Balinese women no doubt constituted a major attraction to the island during that time.

mention this. It is located next to the famous temple at Tanah Lot, which *The tropical spa* (Benge 2003:54) links to 'a 16th century Maja-pahit priest who suggested to local villagers that this was a sacred spot'. Similarly, *AsiaSpa* magazine's special feature for January 2005 speaks of Cambodian spas taking us 'into the mists of time to Angkor Wat whose spiritual ambiance is recreated within the surrounding resorts'.

'Creating your own paradise' is thus a very popular slogan on the dust jackets of spa books; 'whether you're a traveller seeking the ultimate spa, or a homeowner seeking ideas for reproducing paradise in your own backyard'. Paradise in this case seems to be nothing less than Asia itself, or at least a landscaped and much idealized version of the best it has to offer. Thus, the Divana Spa in Lang Suan, Bangkok, Thailand claims that 'On earth there is no heaven, but there are pieces of it', and such pieces are being shaped by ethnic chic, colonial style and the glory of palaces of former eras. The same advertisement also promises its audience a future twenty-first-century aristocracy, in 'unveil[ing] the royal secret of wellness', laying a link between spa culture and a new Asian royal life style that clearly deserves more attention.

SPA TIME I: TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY ROYAL LIFESTYLES

The pages of *Asia Spa* magazine of January 2005 contain a stylish black and white advertisement for the Intercontinental Spa in Hong Kong. A Eurasian woman is shown in profile, obviously enjoying the pleasure of water trickling down her nude body. The accompanying statement that 'For once, it's all about me' further intensifies this sensual and intimate atmosphere.

Indeed, 'spa' seems to be a 'mantra for the growing band of worshippers at the altar of self-preservation' as Benge (2003:9) also suggests. *AsiaSpa* magazine confirms that 'your spa experience is all about you – what you enjoy and what suits you'. These are not just empty slogans but are representative of the ways in which readers and wannabe visitors are encouraged to take time for self-actualization without having to be ashamed of the common association with hedonism. Not coincidentally, coffee table books always show individuals alone, in an isolated spa, clearly enjoying the supposed silence of what must really be a rather packed resort. Tropical spa culture thereby obviously endorses the cult of individualization. Parkin and Craig (2006:7, referring to the work of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim), describe

Figure 5. A spa advertisement

people's urge to increasingly construct their own biographies in contexts where traditional ways of life and identities are under pressure: 'appreciation of the knowledges', as they argue, 'customs, tastes and pleasures of previous times are becoming part of the plurality of life options to individuals in constructing their own life narratives.' But constructing one's own life narrative is the perquisite of the happy few, and Parkins and Craig (2006:13, quoting Giddens) add that nowadays 'access to means of self-actualization becomes itself one of the dominant focuses of class division'.

Indeed, the newly rich of Southeast Asia are constantly looking for new ways to acquire cultural capital by carefully selecting what to consume and which places to frequent, but also by adopting a particular life style or being generally obsessed with lifestyle itself. Ariel Heryanto (1999) argues that these new Asian affluent classes are trying to restyle themselves as a new aristocracy by partaking in specific cultural events, poetry readings or, for that matter, all things 'cultural'. A New Asian life style that is partly based on regular visits to spa resorts might in this sense not only be a means for self-preservation or self-actualization, but most of all for self-aristocratization. Not very surprisingly the link with aristocratic values is indeed often made in spa culture, portraying the new leisure elite as all too willingly identifying itself with former elites and vice versa. Thus Benge (2003:51) describes how both the Mandara Spa at the Ibah hotel in Bali, and the Tjampuhan and Pita Maha Private Villa Spa are the property of Balinese royal families. Elsewhere also other aristocratic families have transformed their former palaces into small spa resorts.

Similarly Benge (2003:15) describes how 'many of the natural treatments that are now commonly used throughout tropical Asian countries trace their origins to the palaces of Central Java.' Traditional *lulur*, a body polishing process using spices and yogurt, has reportedly been practiced in the palaces of Central Java since the seventeenth century. Martha Tilaar, the mother of natural cosmetics mentioned earlier, is reputed to use it as one of her ancient palace secrets that are now also available to the common woman in both the East and the West. Another example is Mooryati Soedibyo of Mustika Ratu, another famous Indonesian brand of natural cosmetics. Mustika Ratu's *jamu* (herbal medicine) and traditional cosmetics are based on recipes that originated in the Surakarta Hadiningrat royal palace, and President Director Soedibyo herself is a princess turned business-woman. The story told on the company's website is illustrative:

B.R.A. Mooryati Soedibyo was born in Surakarta, Central Java on January 5th, 1928. She is a princess that grew up inside the Surakarta Keraton (palace) under the watchful eyes of her grandparents. The aristocratic traditions of the keraton were a part of the princess' daily life from the very beginning. She was patient in her study of blending of ingredients to make Jamu and other preparations for health and beauty care, as well as giving careful attention to other traditional arts.

From her grandmother, B.R.A. Mooryati learned how certain plants could impart their restorative powers to those who use them in the proper fashion. This was typical of the kind of traditional wisdom that had long been known only to members of the keraton aristocracy. By the age of fifteen, the young princess had mastered the art of herbal making and making up faces. She used this knowledge in preparing the Bedhaya and Serimpi dancers for their performances at the Surakarta Keraton. At the same time, she was also trained in the Javanese art of body care-known as Ngadi Saliro Ngadi Busono as well as time-honored traditions of courtly ethics and manners.²⁴ B.R.A. Mooryati began a new chapter in her life in 1956. With her marriage that year, she left the charmed life at royal keraton and moved with her husband, Ir. Soedibyo Purbo Hadiningrat MSc., to the city of Medan in North Sumatra.

With this new life, came new opportunities. During her spare time, B.R.A. Mooryati began formulating her own Lulur (body scrub), an exfoliating masker designed to lighten the complexion. She also began to make Jamu according to traditional recipes. These she gave to the wives of her husband's colleagues. In 1978, Mustika Ratu's products began to be distributed to local stores through salons chosen to be the company's agents. The public became far more aware of the value of traditional health care and beauty products through magazine and advertising campaigns.²⁵

Today, Mustika Ratu is an international bestseller, with its own spa resorts and a separate spa cosmetics line, 'enchanting the world with royal beauty'. Maybe, *AsiaSpa* (January 2005) magazine wonders, 'its time to consider your spa experience as a ritual rather than a luxury', a ritual that provides the New Asian well-to-do with the aristocratic values and cultural practices so eagerly desired. And there is more to that, as spa culture in many ways seems to contribute to a new Asian lifestyle that tries coming to terms with the fast pace of modernity without necessarily looking to the West.

24 Presumably this refers to beautifying one's appearance (*sarino*) and dress (*busono*) (Robson and Wibisono 2002:25).

25 See <http://www.mustika-ratu.co.id/> (accessed September 2006).

SPA TIME II: ALTERNATIVE TEMPORALITIES

The tropical spa (Benge 2003:43) advertises the Jimbaran Spa in Bali as a resort ‘maintaining its indigenous sense of the exotic; gamelan music, eastern aromas and a soul soothing atmosphere where time has no role to play’. Yet there seems to be an overall obsession with temporality in spa culture, as the process of taking time, the experience of time, but also past times, are stressed time and again. Using the splendor of ancient palace secrets, nostalgic nudes and a pre-modern Asia where life seemed simpler and more pure, spa owners seem consciously to evoke the past. Following MacCannell (1989: 8), one could argue that ‘the final victory of modernity over other socio-cultural arrangements is not the disappearance of the non-modern world, but its artificial preservation and reconstruction in modern society.’ In a similar vein, Benge (2003:135) seems to over-idealize a near but almost forgotten past in which nature is a place where times gone by can be retrieved. The book could be hinting at a way to cope with the uncertain future that many newly developing Asian countries face nowadays, but part of it might also point at a more general fear of modernity itself, particularly the directions it should locally take.

Eriksen (2001) has pointed out the acceleration, so typical of Western information society, which threatens to eliminate distance, space and time. While not a reality for most Southeast Asians, the new rich in Asia’s cities surely will recognize much of what Eriksen describes. Similarly, they are unhealthily rushed and becoming victims of what he characterizes as the ‘tyranny of the moment’. In the Western European context Eriksen asks for a re-appreciation of slow time, a temporal regime that differs radically from that fragmented rushed regime that regulates so much of our lives. We need to take charge of our own rhythmic changes to get the best from both worlds – to balance between ‘the hyperactive, overfilled, accelerated temporality of the moment, and, ... a serene, cumulative, ‘organic’ temporality’ (Eriksen 2001:164). In its most extreme forms spa culture, associated eco-chic practices and the New Asian lifestyle that spring from it, remind us of a similar critique of an ever-accelerating global culture. An attribution of positive value to certain kinds and uses of time seem to occur in spa culture, as it does in eco-chic generally: it is chic to be modern and to be modern is to be fast. At the same time it is very ‘eco’ to question this speed and to think of more conscious and sustainable modes of using time.

In spa culture ideally an effort is made, even while only temporarily, to get ‘back in touch with nature and so with [your] spiritual souls, which have little role in day to day urban existence’ (Benge 2003:15). Most tropical spas therefore employ a strict

Figure 6. Inside a Javanese spa

etiquette to ensure that their guests enjoy the promised peaceful sanctuary. This includes discouraging the avatars of global fast-life like mobile phones, pagers and other electronic devices. In describing the atmosphere at the Bali Hyatt's spa, *The tropical spa* (Benge 2003:47) summarizes it with 'like so many Javanese words, *leha-leha* says it all succinctly.²⁶ It says peace, relaxation, day-dreaming, an empty mind and lying prostrate gazing at the sky'. Spa time in this perspective thus hints at timelessness, and the therapies are recommended as having been used for centuries by Javanese princesses as an elixir of youth, 'having been unchanged since Thailand's Ayutthaya period', or as one advertisement offering Kerala's 500-year old *ayurveda* system says, 'your trip to eternal youth'.²⁷ 'Taking time' is yet another often used expression that explains spa culture's advocating of a slower if not different

26 The Javanese words here presumably refer to Old Javanese that for long was the language of literature and learning in Bali. *Léha-léha*, means to do at one's leisure, or *dolce far niente* (Stevens and Schmidgall-Tellings 2004:569).

27 *Ayurveda* is an ancient Indian system of holistic health care that according to some (Crebbin-Bailey, Harcup and Harrington 2005) dates back to 5000 BCE. It provides, as they argue 'the foundation for a lot of therapies practiced in spas today'.

temporality.²⁸ Taking time, for example, in such sanctuaries of spiritual silence as the tranquil room, the quiet room, or in the absolute void of the flotation tank, where half an hour's relaxation is equivalent to eight hours of sleep. These are the places where, as Bengé (2003:27) puts it, 'the sound is waves, the view is seashore, the smell is spicy and the mood is thick with calm'.

Spa time means retreating into the self, and by getting attuned with the surrounding spa-scapes the inner landscape should be explored. Spa time is offered here as an alternative temporality, an articulation of the present and one's presence therein (Parkins and Craig 2006). The visit to the spa thus promises an instant experience of spirituality that is so difficult to come by in modern life. It is an inner beauty, but achieved at the speed of an extreme make over from the inside out.

Comparable to lifestyles based on New Age or Slow Living, spa time therefore does not so much offer a complete break with modernity, nor a continuous parallel temporality, isolated from the rest of global culture, but rather is its obverse. By slowing down just temporarily as long as a visit or a holiday to a resort may take, it helps one to recharge and to cope with the speediness of everyday life. Or as *AsiaSpa* magazine of January 2005 puts it, 'Being able to get away from the outside world, retreat inside and relish some well-deserved time out is vital for our physical, mental and spiritual health'. Significantly many spa brochures, books and magazines promise an explicitly modern experience, advertising urban spas where you can 'maintain your equilibrium in the city'. *The tropical spa* shows people enjoying a hot stone massage while overlooking Shanghai's skyline, and the Thai therapists of the Oriental Spa are said to live as 'Buddhists in the urban tumult of Bangkok' seeking to 'understand the nature of tranquility' (Bengé 2003:61).

Spa culture, from resorts, to books, websites and other forms of advertising, excels in a reflexive negotiation on using the pleasures of previous times in the present, at times also projecting utopian possibilities, 'in the sense of a longing for a different, and better way of living, a reconciliation of thought and life, desire and the real, in a manner that critiques the status quo without projecting a full-blown image of what future society should look like' (Parkins and Craig 2006:8). Spa culture might serve here as a key to a new age, a new age with Asianism as its preferred life style.

28 It is obvious that in reality this does not always seem to work. During our own holidays in a Balinese spa resort, for example, my wife was struck by the careful attention constantly being paid by employees to a clock that was centrally positioned in the main treatment room. The clock constantly seemed to remind her of common time that was ticking on outside and that eventually would signal the end of the treatment.

THE SPA AS SOURCE OF A FUTURE ASIA – SOME CONCLUSIONS

Resort companies increasingly seem to realize the potential of Asianness, praising the attention that natural health and beauty have traditionally received in local societies.²⁹ Besides the revaluing of local traditions this also leads to newly created identities. One of these is cosmopolitan in character. The book *Spa style Asia* (Lee and Lim 2003) uses the term cosmopolitan to refer to ‘a kaleidoscope of international cures’ consisting of such therapies and treatments as *lomi lomi* (Hawaiian massage), Swedish massage and the like. These are by no means associated with their original localities nor are they seen as exclusively Western. Rather, they are global and are thereby rendered less threatening to Asian culture. The latest and most hip therapies are, moreover, advertised as being New Asian, or again, to quote the *Spa Style Asia* guide, ‘Asia’s paradigms revamped’. Whereas ‘Cosmopolitan focuses on international treatments which are offered by Asian spas (e.g. Western therapies domesticated) [...], New Asianism is devoted to traditional Asian treatments updated with a modern twist’ (Lee and Lim 2003:71), or, as *The tropical spa* puts it, the spa is a concept ‘as old as the hill it springs from, rewritten for the contemporary scene’. Many of the therapies variously known as Asian Approach, Oriental philosophy, or more aptly here, New Asian, are therefore based on traditional oriental healing systems ‘that have been practiced throughout history’. *Watsu*, or water *shiatsu*, for example, is a Japanese form of massage re-invented in America but further developed as an aquatic body therapy for tropical waters by the Breathing Space Company of Singapore. The Java wrap, as offered by *The tropical spa* (Benge 2003:94), is yet another example of ‘a global beauty phenomenon waiting to happen: an age-old process for a new age answer to slimming’.

Rather than focusing solely on local traditions, globalization has thus triggered a newly emergent regionalism in which the idea of Asia is used as a counter to the take on modernity and globalized fast life that the West is known for. As I have sketched here, eco-chic and most notably the latest trend of tropical spa culture is

29 Although not yet part of spa advertising there is indeed a long tradition of praising beauty and seeing it as a quality with which heavenly beings are endowed and attributing king and rulers with a similar beautiful appearance. Malay *hikayat* proved the king to be a worthwhile and legitimate ruler due to his strength and extraordinary beauty (Hadijah Rahmat 2001:83). The protagonist of another classical tale, Prapanca’s king in the *Desawarnana*, is described by Taylor (2004:94) as very attractive to women. When he passed by in royal procession, the narrator says, ‘some village women rushed so fast to see the king that their breast-cloths fell off’. Ugliness and sicknesses on the other hand were often symptomatic of a disturbed relation between the ruler and his realm (Jordaan and De Josselin de Jong 1985).

importantly contributing to the lifestyle industry New Asianism is steadily becoming. In the process spa culture seems to have gained different meanings to different groups of visitors. Western but also East Asian visitors praise spa resorts for their paradise-like qualities and their consumer friendly approach in representing the tropics/Asia, complete with its beauty, health and to a lesser extent spiritual practices. However, locally spa culture is at the same time contributing to a new pan Asian lifestyle that is eagerly consumed by the Southeast Asian new rich who are looking for the shared values they were lacking hitherto. New Asianism is therefore typically a process that occurs at the interface where cultures meet, and the tropical spa is its successful shop window. To quote Leo Ching (2000:257), 'Asianism no longer represents the kind of transcendental otherness required to produce a practical identity and tension between the East and the West. Today, "Asia" itself is neither a misrepresentation of the Orientalist nor the collective representation of the anti-imperialists. "Asia" has become a market, and "Asianness" has become a commodity circulating globally through late capitalism.'

But why the spa as the popular choice in celebrating this new Asianism, why health and beauty, practices that so often are associated with the Western evils of individualism and the cult of hedonism?

One explanation of the spa's popularity as a source for Asian identity construction might be the assumption that the spa is merely popular culture and leisure activity and therefore a 'soft' cultural form that is relatively innocent. At the same time, culturally it seems far more effective than the often-politicized Asian values debate³⁰ of the mid-1990s or today's economic approach of ASEAN and similar organizations. In the aftermath of such top down approaches, as Chua Beng Huat (2003) suggests, a genuine reinvention of Asian cultural identity is now being undertaken, not only by governments but also by intellectuals, artists and commercial enterprises. New Asianism has thus far led to new approaches in filmmaking, fashion and media regionalism.³¹ In this process

30 'Asian values' is these days usually associated with the leaders of East and Southeast Asian nations, its most prominent advocates being the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir, and Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore. Asia has a unique set of values that sets it apart from the West. These values include a stress on the community rather than the individual, the privileging of order and harmony over personal freedom, refusal to separate religion from other spheres of life, an insistence on hard work, respect for political leadership, and an emphasis on family loyalty (Milner 2000).

31 On Sony's media regionalism and other forms of Asianism, see, for example, Iwabuchi 1999. On Singapore pop star Dick Lee's Asian music, see Wee 1996. At the same time the new Pan Asian culture of manga, pokémon and J-Pop (Japanese pop culture) is predominantly East Asian in character, leading to assertions of neo-colonialism (Thomas 2004:178).

an Othering of the West takes place by stressing the uniqueness of being Asian, a feature that is also clearly present in the mediations of tropical spa culture we are considering here. As such, Sophie Bengé's *The tropical spa* (2003:99) characterizes Asian people as more intuitive, stating that 'low touch Western society keeps tactile expression behind closed doors, while Indonesians touch all the time [...] they carry compassion in their hands'. Elsewhere Bengé (2003:11) notes: 'In Indonesia, the birthplace of many tropical health and beauty secrets, there is an ancient Javanese expression; *rupasampat whaya bhiantara*. It roughly translates as 'the balance between inner and outer beauty, between that which is visible and that which is within and it is the parable by which women in this part of the world live without even thinking of it'. Which brings me to a second possible explanation.

Significantly it is mostly women who are participating in spa culture and therefore mostly depicted in the mediations of spas as well. In their *Re-orienting fashion*, Niessen, Leshkowich and Jones (2003) allude to the construction of the feminine in Asia as the bearer and wearer of national tradition. In the spa publications, however, it is not so much a national as a pan-Asian identity that is stressed by the women portrayed. The photographs in *The tropical spa* and other coffee table books and magazines like *AsiaSpa* mainly show women, both as visitors and as therapists. These women are rarely recognizably Western. Most often it is Asian women of indeterminate nationality who are featured in the photographs. According to Steve Kemper's study (2001) on advertising in Sri Lanka and Malaysia, they may be called pan-Asian models. Kemper notes that during the heydays of the New Economic Policy, in the 1980s and early 1990s, advertising in multicultural Malaysia was not to privilege any single ethnic group (Malay, Chinese, or Indian), lifestyle, or profession. Advertising agencies therefore promoted an all-Malaysian identity by recruiting pan-Asian models whose origins are often complicated but who are mostly of Eurasian descent.³² Away from a Malaysian context also in other South-east Asian societies Eurasian or mestizo women continue to set the beauty standard (Rafael 1995), leaving those dark of skin to

32 The models resemble a neutral, unmarked race of Southeast Asians. To the Asian audience, moreover, the models are attractive as they resemble Western Hollywood stars but are also a bit like the Asians themselves. As for the here referred to Malaysian ideal, obviously much has changed since the demise of the New Economic policy. With the emergence of more orthodox Islamic powers, especially in the Malaysian state of Kelantan, new beauty ideals are promoted publicly, and in outdoor advertisements women are now suitably covered up with a veil (Ismail 2004; Wong 2007). Strikingly, many of these Muslim advertisements continue to depict very 'white' women.

take their recourse to whitening cream or other measures. Ideally, women are a bit of the East meeting a bit of the West and the 'pan-Asian models' depicted in the coffee table books therefore seem to again highlight the complexities and contradictions present in new Asianism.

Lastly, the popularity of spa culture as the carrier of New Asianism might be explained with reference to the long tradition of adopting ideas on beauty, health and spirituality in the Asian countries under study, but also the neighboring East Asian societies. Many of these ideas have been exchanged for centuries and could to a certain extent be regarded as cosmopolitanism *avant la lettre*, but also as an early form of a pan-Asian culture. They are an easily recognized hybrid that, again due to its outward innocence, can serve perfectly as the foundation of an imagined regional community.

The question remains to what extent Asianism as a lifestyle and its associated practices of eco-chic and tropical spa culture will remain a minority cosmopolitanism, a new form of exclusion that helps the consuming classes to define what is hip and modern. Will it eventually trickle down to the now-excluded masses? If it does it might well be incorporated as some sort of new ecology that, next to pride in local produce and its being used as a basis for identity, might also stress the much needed sustainability and environmental consciousness that still seems to be lacking in many parts of Southeast Asia.

For now, the wellness industry, eco-chic and the tropical spa cultures seem to be involved in constructing a possible new post-national imagery in which life style and the leisure industry increasingly play a role. Here the new Asia is presented as collectively facing the West, a collectivity in which race, religion and nation become mere nuances in an overall taste that is Asia. The New Asia is in many aspects still an idealized Asian landscape, a dream of identity in a time when all identities seem increasingly to be under pressure. Above all, New Asianism is a way to reflect on a possible near future, a future that *The tropical spa* (Benge 2003:111) posits as a break with 'a time, not so long ago, when the notion of beauty was literally skin deep...[but now] not anymore. Recent decades of materialism have given way to a caring millennium and new approach to beauty that stems from within.'

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