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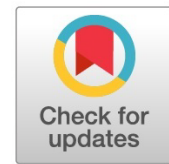
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The Role of 'Sense of Place' in the Revitalisation of Heritage Street: George Town, Penang, Malaysia

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Abstract

In revitalising heritage sites, understanding 'sense of place' is important as it represents a layering of histories, tangible heritage, and intangible heritage. This study examines the relationship between local communities and the cultural heritage in George Town World Heritage Site, Malaysia. Semi-structured interviews with local communities, observations and digital photo analysis were conducted. It is in the intricacies of intangible heritage practices and their authentic expression, the local communities feel attached to and claim ownership of the place. Understanding this and how it translates into the site's stewardship is critical in protecting its value, management, and ongoing revitalisation.

Keywords: Sense of Place; Urban Revitalisation; Heritage Street; World Heritage Site

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1.0 Introduction

Sense of place broadly refers to the emotional attachment that local communities form with a particular environment, and it is frequently associated with the notion of distinctiveness. A sense of place is also referred to as place attachment, place identity, the spirit of place, genius loci, insiderness, and topophilia (Tuan, 1974; Relph, 1976; Norberg-Schultz, 1980; Cross, 2001, 2015; Gospodini, 2004). In revitalising heritage sites, understanding 'sense of place' is important as it represents a layering of histories, tangible heritage, and intangible heritage. Earlier studies linked the concept of a sense of place to material and immaterial cultural heritage (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996; Smith, 2006), and Harrison and Rose (2010) contend that it is the immaterial heritage that ties people to a place. According to Robertson (2012), local communities construct their heritage which differs from the official discourse on heritage. He emphasises the significance of intangible heritage and links to local communities, including experiences, oral history, daily activities and practices. The 'sense of place' defines the community's heritage (Smith, 2006; Hawke, 2010; Apaydin, 2018), and McClinchey (2016: 8) discovered that the sense of place in multicultural societies is 'individual, personal, intimate, simple yet extremely complex'. Tucker and Carnegie (2014) believe that World Heritage is a space of various viewpoints, and UNESCO's universal values need to accommodate multiple meanings and perceptions about the place. Therefore, this study aims to examine the relationship between local communities

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and the cultural heritage in George Town World Heritage Site, Penang, Malaysia. The objectives are to investigate the relationship between the intangible heritage and the tangible heritage values; and understand how local communities are attached to the cultural heritage. A grounded theory methodology incorporating semi-structured interviews and observational work was chosen due to its practical and flexible approach to investigating complicated social phenomena.

2.0 Literature review

Skounti (2009) asserts that heritage is closely linked to a region, a locality, and communities. Heritage is also connected to identity, belonging, and experience (Smith, 2006). Swensen et al. (2013) argue that narratives enable people to connect with cultural heritage; however, Taha (2014) argues that experiences, memories, and associations should also be explored. Schofield and Szymanski (2011) assert that cultural heritage affects the sense of place. Sense of place is a comprehensive concept which is important when revitalising a heritage site. Sense of place is referred to as 'the affective, cognitive, and/or attitudinal relationships between people and places' (Eaton et al., 2019:1). According to Hawke (2010), people attached to a place vary from one person to another, and locals' significance and value accorded to a place vary from those assigned by national authorities. Cross (2015) states that place attachment is an active experience, and she suggests seven interactive processes of place attachment: sensory, narrative, historical, spiritual, ideological, commodifying, and material dependency. Rifaioğlu and Şahin Guchan (2013) believe ownership is crucial for establishing meaning in an urban setting, particularly when investigating authenticity, identity, and a feeling towards a place. They emphasise three aspects of property rights: usage, ownership, and copyright, all of which contribute to preserving a sense of place. A place may reflect ownership (Agnew, 1987). Ownership is inextricably linked to a human relationship to a place that can provide a feeling of seclusion, security and belonging. Jones (2009) emphasises how items are authenticated – depending on how they are presented – and how people manage ties with the item and place over time. Authenticity is a complex notion, and in this rapidly changing world, it should be recognised as a constantly changing idea (Khalaf, 2018). Brown and Hay-Edie (2014: 48) suggest that good stewardship of WH sites requires two aspects: 'management and governance.' Management refers to the organisation's objectives, actions, and outcomes, whereas governance refers to the principles, norms, and regulations that guide decision-making. Chapin and Knapp (2015) contend that a sense of place is vital to motivate long-term stewardship. Even if values and meanings evolve through time, the relationship between local communities and the site endures because the communities engage with the site daily (Apaydin, 2018).

3.0 The case- George Town World Heritage Site

George Town was a former British free trading port that attracted traders and migrants, e.g. from Europe, China, India and northern Sumatra, and was once home to minority ethnic groups, e.g. Jews, Arabs and Armenians. George Town World Heritage Site (henceforth referred to as the George Town WHS) was included in the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2008. The site (refer Fig. 1) met three criteria of the Outstanding Universal Value or OUV: Criterion II III and IV, which centred on the 'multicultural trading town, multicultural heritage and tradition of Asia and European colonial influences, and a mixture of influences which have created a unique architecture, culture and townscape without parallel anywhere in East and South Asia' (UNESCO, 2008b).



Fig. 1. George Town World Heritage Site.

(Source: Special Area Plan – George Town Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca (Town and Country Planning Department Pulau Pinang, 2016).

The study concentrated on the 'Street of Harmony,' formally known as Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling, which was one of four thoroughfares in George Town's original grid when the British established a commercial town on Penang Island in 1786. The street is lined with houses of worship and activities associated with various ethnicities and religions, townhouses and shophouses. The street depicts George Town's

three major ethnic communities (Malay, Chinese, and Indian), and it represents a microcosm of a heritage community whose sense of place operates within a postcolonial and multicultural context.

4.0 Research Methodology

Data was gathered within eight months of fieldwork, from September 2016 to April 2017. Semi-structured interviews with 52 members of local communities and participant observation were used to find out how local communities use and feel about the place and its heritage. The study adopted a purposive sampling method, and the local communities were characterised as those who lived nearby and those who have shared interests, commitments, interactions, experiences, resources, values, information, and causes related to the site. Participants in semi-structured interviews range from 23 to 81 years old, with 71% male and 29% female participants. They include e.g. cultural and heritage activists, residents, tradesmen, heritage advocates, community-based organisation representatives and community leaders. Participants were given a participant information leaflet and requested to read it before signing a consent form. Each interview lasted around 30 to 75 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed.

Observations of daily life in the street were conducted to understand how unique and recurrent events and practices shaped a sense of place. For example, the main author happened to be in the area at the perfect time to observe a protest, and the Chingay parade, on the other hand, was an annual scheduled event advertised to the public through banners placed on the street (refer Fig. 3.). Notes, videos and digital photos were taken during observations and analysed.



Fig. 2. (a) Selection of participants which focused on local communities; (b) Most interviews were conducted within site, e.g. at the compound of the places of worship.
(Source: Bakri, 2017)



Fig. 3. (a) Observations on the protest against discrimination of Rohingya people in Myanmar; (b) Chingay parade along the street.
(Source: Bakri, 2017)

5.0 Findings and Analysis

The 'Street of Harmony' elicits a multi-layered emotional response related to its tangible and intangible heritage, which is consistent with the notion that sense of place is unique, personal, simple yet very complicated (Mcclinchey, 2016). Sense of place at the street can be explained by five attributes: stewardship, place attachment, belonging, authenticity and ownership.

5.1 Stewardship

As a WHS, the custodianship of the site is under the Department of National Heritage, Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture Malaysia; however, day-to-day management is entrusted to George Town World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI), which also serves as caretaker of the OUV. The Penang Island City Council (MBPP) is adhering to its legislative commitments to safeguard the OUV. Participation and

empowerment of local communities are two approaches that can enhance the sense of place and ensure long-term stewardship. The findings support Chapin and Knapp's (2015) assertion that a sense of place can inspire long-term stewardship and Brown and Hay-Edie's (2012) assertion that effective WHS stewardship requires a focus on two components: management and governance. However, there is significant concern about the site's stewardship, as several interviewees believe the site's vision is overly centred on tourism.

5.2 Place Attachment

It was discovered that seven main processes lead to a person becoming attached to the place: sensory experience, narrative connection, historical connection, ideological connection, commodification, and material dependence. The majority of interviewees had multiple types of relationships to the 'Street of Harmony.'

5.2.1 Sensory experience

At the 'Street of Harmony,' certain sensory experiences are more likely to result in place attachment than others — several respondents spoke about what they see, hear, and smell. Many participants pointed out specific, visual elements, such as places of worship, religious and cultural activities, and even street performers and beggars. The smell of 'nasi kandar,' or steaming rice with side dishes, burning joss sticks at Kuan Yin Temple, and the smell of flowers from flower garland vendors were among the smells described by many. Numerous respondents also recognised the sound of the 'azan' (call for prayer) from the mosques and the sound of the Sri Mahamariamman Temple's metal bells.



Fig. 4. (a,b & c) Sensory experience at the 'Street of Harmony'.
(Source: Bakri, 2017)

5.2.2 Narrative attachment

A place becomes especially meaningful to its inhabitants when they have a narrative connection, including place names, oral histories passed down through generations, and family history. Not many people outside of the declining Malay community are aware of the role of Acheen Street Malay Mosque as a meeting spot for Malays concerning the hajj heritage, according to a representative from GTWHI. Since the colonial period, pilgrims from Southeast Asia met at the site, regarded as a 'Gateway to Mecca,' to embark on their sea voyage to Jeddah and Mecca. The place was also where hajj courses and Islamic studies were conducted. He also mentioned the downfall of Lebuh Acheh as a hub for Hajj travel in the 1970s and later the decline of the Malay population in George Town due to development pressures.

An elderly Malay resident shared another narrative on the dispute between two mosques: Acheen Street Malay Mosque and Kapitan Keling Mosque, over the date of Eid. The dispute caused a fight between the communities, and to mend ties, alternating Friday prayers were introduced, a tradition since the 1850s that eventually solved the problem. His narrative shed light on how attachment ties to the identity of the Malay Muslims and Indian Muslims. Other stories relate to histories of trade. According to a jewellery store owner, the street was formerly known as Penang's Gold Bazaar due to its bustling gold trading and retail centre. A revitalisation project was launched in 2005, but the initiative failed due to managerial challenges.

5.2.3 Historical connection

Historical connection relates to histories, significant life and community events, and the individual's connection to their country of origin. An Indian Muslim community leader reflected on his memories from the 1950s when he lived in the neighbourhood along the 'Street of Harmony'. He recounted a unique Maulud festival or Prophet Muhammad's birthday celebration, which lasted until 2000. He included details on a flag pole in front of the shop, the serving of 'sharbat' [a sweet flavoured drink], elderly Indians who stayed to play small drums, and how they prepared ghee rice pots for distribution to the public. One of the tenants of the Acheen Street Malay Mosque waqf land kept a significant collection of historical photographs, newspaper clippings, and prints of his family and the mosque from his late father.

5.2.4 Ideological connection

It is critical to uphold ethical principles and respect diverse cultures, where persons from diverse origins, ethnicities, and cultures coexist. A resident Indian Muslim youth leader of Masjid Kapitan Keling recognised the significance of preserving the Indian Muslim identity, history,

and tradition. He led various programmes for youth that assisted them in discovering their roots while proudly displaying their Indian Muslim culture. This involves presenting an oral history on their website and other materials like books and seminars. Another perspective on living in the 'Street of Harmony' is to consider the street as a place of people who share common values. The 'Journey of Harmony' project launched in 2014 was a collaborative effort between Think City (an urban regeneration organisation), Arts-ED (a community-based organisation that focuses on arts and creative education), and the local communities. Light, moon, vegetation, and water were the elements found to symbolise the site, and the project's outcome is a pamphlet (refer Fig. 5.)

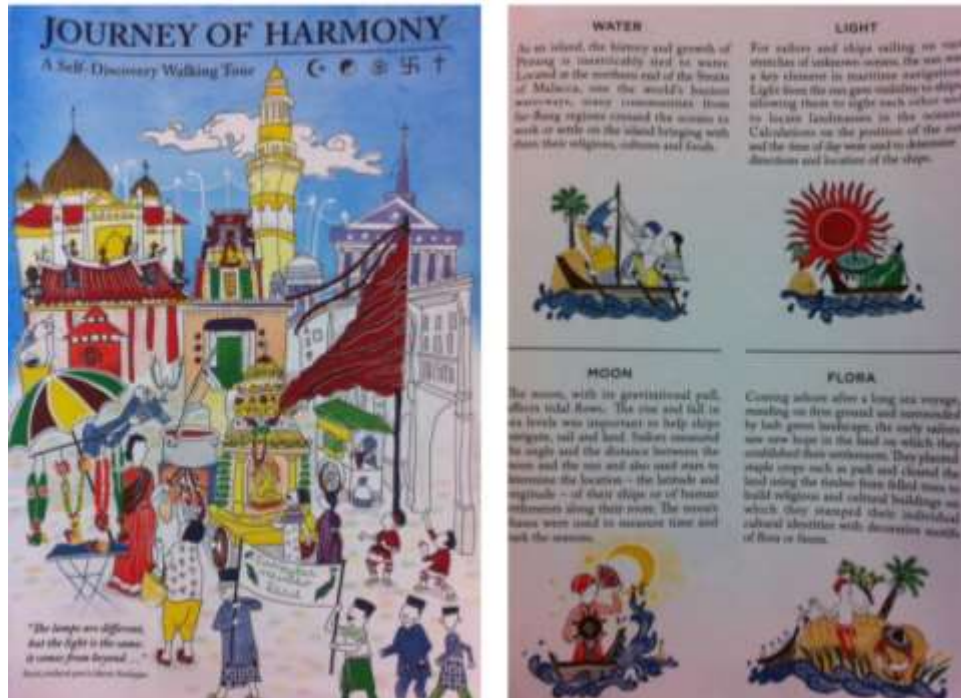


Fig. 5. 'Journey of Harmony' pamphlet which promotes the multicultural street as having shared values. (Source: Journey of Harmony- A Self Discovery Walking Tour pamphlet (Arts-ED and Think City Sdn. Bhd., 2015).

5.2.5 Commodifying

Certain people developed a commodifying connection to the street since it had all the characteristics they needed in one location. In response to questions about why he chose the 'Street of Harmony,' a bookshop owner explained that the street is a historical artery of George Town and is easily accessed. His decision was also influenced by the street's history, which dated back to the late 1800s and was once home to bookstores and the Malay publishing and printing industry.

5.2.6 Material dependence

The 'Street of Harmony' contains characteristics corresponding to particular people's material and social needs and desires. A cultural interpreter emphasised her reliance on location, as her previous office was situated on the street, and her current office is located very close to the 'Street of Harmony.' However, material dependence may fluctuate over time due to constraints, individual decisions, and the resources available in the area. Based on the study, it is clear that the participant's attachment to place inclined towards the intangible heritage rather than tangible heritage. This is consistent with Harrison and Rose's (2010) findings that the non-material heritage connects people to a place.

5.3 Belonging

Individuals who regularly or actively engage in place-related activities express a greater sense of belonging to their surroundings. A cultural interpreter described her involvement in heritage conservation projects and cultural activities on the 'Street of Harmony,' including direct interaction with practitioners and information sharing, which has fostered a sense of belonging. People may also have a sense of belonging through social activities outside of work. One Arts-ED staff described how she developed a sense of belonging while working with local communities on the 'Journey of Harmony' project since 2014. An owner of a traditional trade shop explained that his sense of belonging grows as he and his father participated in numerous activities, including religious activities at the mosque, and participated in George Town World Heritage Day. Belonging also relates to the experience of being a newcomer. A bakery owner described how she overcame her fear of rejection a few years ago by making an effort to be a part of the community. Individuals' sense of belonging also extends to their ethnic groups. It is found that a place's sense of belonging evolves through time.

5.4 Authenticity of place

The 'Street of Harmony's' authenticity is tied to tangible and intangible heritage. Considering OUV has established a baseline for the site's values, connecting them to authenticity and integrity is critical. The authenticity of 'Street of Harmony' is defined by how local communities and authorised groups display it and how the relationships between 'objects, people, and places across time' are managed (Jones, 2009: 11). Religious pluralism is evident in the places of worship and the associated events and programmes; however, the site has suffered displacement and population loss since 2000 with the repeal of the Rent Control Act. A representative from GTWHI expressed concern regarding the impact of tourism activities on OUVs, particularly those with multicultural aspects. This sentiment is also shared by a heritage advocate who believes sustainability is the key to preserving the site's values, and local communities should be the primary focus of a place.



Fig. 6. Restriction at the Kuan Yin Temple prohibits the use of joss sticks inside the temple. (Source: Bakri, 2017)

Authenticity is also related to those who have authority over the heritage assets. The ritual performed at the Kuan Yin Temple has been changed in response to tourism and focussed on the temple's aesthetic value. The temple's Board of Trustees has opted to keep the ground smoke-free; as a result, lit joss sticks are prohibited within the temple, causing some worshippers to feel disconnected from God, and raising the issue of ritual authenticity (refer to Fig. 6.). The dilemma of gentrification, in which building owners have repurposed their structures to accommodate economic development and tourism needs, is another issue of authenticity. It is challenging to balance the local needs with external interests, and GTWHI must manage such changes to ensure they do not jeopardise the WHS's values.

5.5 Ownership over the place

Although ownership is deeply ingrained on the 'Street of Harmony,' there are distinct forces at work for various ethnic groups. For example, as a Muslim minority community in Malaysia, the Indian Muslims feel it necessary to express their existence and contribution to the place. A trader who operates a traditional coffee shop on the 'Street of Harmony' acknowledged his ownership of the place by outlining his shop's future. Although his shop is located on waqf (endowment) land, he retains control over the place even though he does not possess property rights. He expressed his dissatisfaction with the term "Street of Harmony," believing that the street should be known simply as Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling, reflecting the mosque's history and his ethnic origin. Local communities also demonstrate ownership of the site through self-investment and accountability. On the opening day of a new book store, a heritage advocate planted a coconut tree in front of a book store to remind people of the history of the place. Locals used to refer the street as the 'place with coconut trees,' and he saw his efforts as contributing to the street's identity. Self-investment through personalisation of space is also considered a form of ownership. Ownership relates to administrative, social, political, and economic issues, and while physical ownership is straightforward to establish, discussing ownership of intangible elements is challenging. Penang Heritage Trust (PHT) has produced an inventory of the intangible heritage in George Town WHS, but the list may change over time due to reproduction issues, heritage manipulation, or the death of the tradition bearers. The preceding discussion of use, ownership, and property rights conforms to Rifaioğlu and Sahin Guchan's (2013) understanding of how these three criteria contribute to a sense of place.

6.0 Limitations of Study

This is a micro-scale study focuses on the 'Street of Harmony' rather than the entire George Town WHS. Another limitation is related to the sample of study for semi-structured interview, where several potential interviewees were reluctant to participate due to language barriers and time constraints.

7.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

The main aim of this study was to understand the relationships between the World Heritage designation of George Town and its local communities. The research demonstrates the complexities of the interactions between tangible and intangible heritage and how this relates to 'sense of place'. Though it is the tangible heritage of George Town that has been recognised through its UNESCO World Heritage inscription, it is the intangible aspects which are more meaningful to the local communities, as stated by Harrison and Rose (2010). As our work along the 'Street of Harmony' has shown, it is in the intricacies and intimacies of intangible heritage practices and their authentic expression, that local communities feel attached to, and claim ownership of, the place. The vast majority of our interviewees did not identify with the site because of the grand narratives of its World Heritage status, but rather because of the longstanding, everyday, intangible practices and performances which have become an integral part of their lives. The stronger the sense of 'ownership' and appreciation of 'belonging' to a place, the more likely it is that local stakeholders will participate in its protection and management. The recognition of the value of the intangible, in addition to that of the tangible, is an important lesson for planners and policy-makers working on the management and revitalisation of (World) heritage sites. Future research is needed to address the development of new approaches to site management which go beyond material concerns and embrace the rich diversity of the meanings and expressions that underpin living heritage.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper contributes to understanding the sense of place and revitalisation of the World Heritage Site of postcolonial, urban and multicultural context.

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