Creative Heritage
Melaka and Its Past
Ooi, Can-Seng; Shevren, Lai

Document Version
Final published version

Published in:
Creative Districts around the World

Publication date:
2014

License
CC BY-NC-ND

CREATIVE HERITAGE: MELAKA AND ITS PAST

MELAKA, MALAYSIA

CAN-SENG OOI (COPENHAGEN BUSINESS SCHOOL, CENTRE FOR LEISURE AND CULTURE SERVICES, DENMARK)
SHEVREN LAI (COPENHAGEN BUSINESS SCHOOL, CENTRE FOR LEISURE AND CULTURE SERVICES, DENMARK)

Despite the celebration and promotion of the creative economy, there is still a "dark" side to creativity. Creativity entails experimentation, chaos and failures. A creative space blends the aesthetics with chaos, sleek design with experimentation, and economic development with failed ideas. This case looks at the ambiguous and ambivalent interfaces of history in the historical city of Melaka (also known as Malacca) in Malaysia.

History, by its definition, is a documentation of the past. Any historical documentation can be contested and revised. This case will not engage in the debate on revisionist history. Instead, it will show how history and heritage is negotiated and appropriated under present circumstances in the historic city of Melaka. The re-interpretation and revision of history is part of the everyday creative response to changing circumstances. Such contemporary responses to the past, however unclear and acrimonious, are the essence of a creative place.

A short history of Melaka

Melaka was a maritime powerhouse and gave its name to the world's busiest shipping lanes, the Straits of Malacca. It is also where the founding story of Malaysia unfolded. Malaysia is said to have started as the sultanate of Melaka in 1396 when Parameswara, a Sumatran Prince set foot on the small fishing village (Wee 2009; Worden 2003). Today, the state of Melaka is 1,664 km² in size, located 148 km from Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia.

Sitting on the maritime highway that connects Europe to Asia, Melaka has attracted merchants and traders over the centuries. It thus was and is a confluence of diverse cultures from the West and East. Because of its maritime importance, the city was sought after by

European powers. Melaka was colonised by three European powers, starting from 1511 to 1957. The first was by the Portuguese for 130 years, then the Dutch (154 years), followed by the British, who colonised the whole of Malaya for 162 years. Today, Melaka Historical City is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, designated so since July 2008.

Histories

The rich past of the historical city is a resource for Melakans and their leaders to imagine and envisage the city. But since the country's independence in 1957, the national authorities have an ambivalent relationship to the country's colonial pasts. The colonial past is a reminder of the weaknesses of its earlier rulers but the colonialists, especially the British, have left behind useful legacies, such as English as a working language, a functional bureaucracy and a well-oiled legal system. Melaka is the seed of this colonial past, and thus embodies this ambivalence.

The Portuguese ruled Melaka for 130 years, and the remnants of the walls of St. Paul's Church are visible reminders of this past. Outside the ruins, a white marble statue of St. Francis Xavier, a Catholic priest who manned the church in 1545 until his death in 1553, stands tall (Wee 2009). Also, the remains of the front gate of the fortress 'Porta De Santiago', built in 1512 by General Alfonso d' Albuquerque to protect the Portuguese colony, has become a tourist icon for the city (see Williams 2010, Picture 1). Such heritage sites sit uncomfortably with the authorities because they are reminders of a colonial past and indicate a strong previous presence of Christianity in the now Muslim country. Regardless, such remnants are central in recognising Melaka as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Figure 1. Locals doing morning exercises in front of the fort and St. Paul's Church (on hill). Photo: Can-Seng Ooi.

A response to the highly visible Portuguese past is to assert the presence of other histories. The St. Paul's Hill Civic Area where the fort and church reside, and is part of the designated world heritage site has been transformed into an area with numerous museums. Colonial architectural buildings acquire new use and meanings. For instance, the Stadthuys building, the former Dutch town hall is now the Museum of History and Ethnography, which showcases the history of pre-Malay Sultanate of Melaka to the present; the emphasis, however, is on the injustice and cruelty of colonialism and the glory of a newly independent Malaysia. The building itself is reduced to a shell telling politically acceptable stories of the present.

There are about twenty other museums – e.g. Kite Museum, Melaka Stamp Museum, Malay and Islamic World Museum, Architecture Museum of Malaysia – in Melaka, all managed by the Melaka Museum Corporation, a statutory agency in the Melakan government. Most of these museums are housed in beautiful colonial buildings. Essentially, new social, cultural and historical contents are injected to these old spaces. The 'museum district' highlights Malaysia's

journey from feudal state into modern nation, and celebrates a Malay-Muslim oriented view of the world. Thus new stories and histories are creatively embedded into old physical heritage.

Such official views of the past draw responses from the local communities, too. In the current social engineering programme in Malaysia, the Malays are given more privileges and rights. Minority ethnic groups, including the Chinese and Indians, lament that they are treated as second-class citizens. In response to the state-supported museums, private individuals and firms are now creating their private museums to celebrate their own non-Malay and Muslim-oriented heritage. For instance, the Baba-Nyonya Heritage Museum celebrates the *Peranakan* or Straits Chinese culture. In a nutshell, *Peranakan* culture is a blend of Chinese and Malay culture. There is also the Indian-Malay *Peranakan* culture. Nearby, Singapore has celebrated *Peranakan* culture because it is considered an indigenous evolution of a local community (Ooi, 2010). But in Malaysia, the *Peranakans* are seen as a threat to the official view that the Malays are the true indigenous people.

Figure 2. Inside a Chinese Peranakan restaurant, besides food being served, one can buy souvenirs. Photo: Can-Seng Ooi.

Regardless, locals and local businesses soon discovered that the authorities may tolerate the accentuation of *Peranakan* culture, especially if it is presented in a non-political manner. In fact, the *Peranakan* community during the British colonial times was well educated, English speaking and largely pro-British. After more than half a century, the presented *Peranakan* heritage seems to be devoid of politics and has been reduced to social cultural interests, even

by non-state supported and private enterprises. There are at least two reasons for this. The first is that members of the community are subjected to the Malaysian social engineering programme, as they are educated to speak Malay and see their country through the struggle for independence led by the Malay community. Many younger Malaysians do not know of the *Peranakan's* political and historical contributions. The second reason is that private enterprises have experimented and now have learned not to arouse the ire of the authorities. So, a depoliticised *Peranakan* culture has been translated not only through the private museums but also restaurants, hotels and tourist souvenirs (Picture 2). *Peranakan* culture flourished under the tourism trade, as it has been translated into objects for tourist consumption. This fits nicely into the official "Malaysia – Truly Asia" destination brand of the country, which communicates that Malaysia is home to a blend of various Asian cultures.

Lessons have also been learned from best practices in the regeneration of urban areas and urban planning, and consequently the authorities encourage initiatives, and now enliven the city through the beautification process. One of the most prominent projects is the colourful murals along the river (Picture 3). People taking the river cruise will enjoy the walls of old buildings painted with tropical flowers, local foods and Malaysians in different ethnic costumes. This celebrates a non-politicalised and tolerant multi-culturalism.

Photo 3. Colourful wall murals along River Melaka. Photo: Can-Seng Ooi.

Conclusions: Creativity with Malaysian characteristics

The picture we have presented tells about the politics behind a heritage city. History and heritage is political. Nonetheless, we want to highlight how history is not only politically contested, it has become an arena for creative responses to current social political reality.

St. Paul's Church and the fort are focal points for the local community, which the authorities cannot ignore. The response is to layer other stories and histories to show that Melaka is richer than its colonial past. These other stories and histories tend to tow the official Malay-Islam-oriented lines. As national policies explicitly discriminate other ethnic communities in Melaka (and Malaysia), locals have responded in different ways. Many non-Malay opposition politicians call for an overhaul of Malaysia's ethnicity-based politics, others in the ruling coalition merely want to draw concessions from the government. In the case of Melaka, local enterprises have found ways to celebrate and draw economic gains from local heritage. As in the case of the *Peranakan,* their rich past is gloriously presented, albeit devoid of political contents.

What this case shows is that creativity is as much about aesthetics, ideas and economic growth, as it is about dealing with local circumstances and political realities. With this in mind, Melaka has become a creative place at various levels. The residents and other stakeholders use the city's heritage in ways that do not threaten the current political reality, while pushing the limits; they have expanded their spaces for cultural expressions. Non-official histories authentic to Melaka have now emerged, serving social, cultural and economic needs. In turn, the authorities find new boundaries for their social engineering efforts; non-political but culturally-rich expressions do not seem to threaten the system but offer economic potentials, and an image of a tolerant society. Such expressions are thus largely accepted, if not encouraged.

References

Ooi, C.-S., (2010) Histories, tourism and museums: Re-making Singapore. In Hitchcock, M.; King, V.T. and Parnwell, M. (Eds.) *Heritage Tourism in Southeast Asia.* Copenhagen: NIAS Press. 83-102.

Wee, B., (2009) *Malacca: A World Heritage Site, Historically Majestic*. Kuala Lumpur: Purple Production & PR Consultants (M) Sdn Bhd.

Williams, T., (2010) Melaka and World Heritage Status. *Conservation and Management of Archeological Sites,* 12(3), 197-208.

Worden, N., (2003) National Identity and Heritage Management in Melaka. *Indonesia and The Malay World,* 31 (89), 31-43.