

**INTERPRETING
GEORGE TOWN WORLD HERITAGE SITE
THROUGH
SENSORY ETHNOGRAPHY**

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GEORGE TOWN WORLD HERITAGE SITE
THROUGH
SENSORY ETHNOGRAPHY**

by

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MENGINTERPRETASI TAPAK WARISAN DUNIA GEORGE TOWN MELALUI ETNOGRAFI SENSORI

ABSTRAK

Perkembangan bidang antropologi persepsi dan pengetahuan (*anthropology of perception and knowledge*) mutakhir ini memperlihatkan perhatian yang meningkat terhadap kepentingan pengalaman multisensori (*multisensory experience*) individu dalam berhadapan dengan realiti sehariannya. Kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan etnografi sensori (*sensory ethnography*) untuk mengkaji hubungan antara masyarakat dan tempat di George Town, Pulau Pinang. Bandar ini telah diwartakan sebagai Tapak Warisan Dunia UNESCO (WHS) pada tahun 2008 atas warisan kepelbagaian budayanya yang unik. Kajian ini mengkonsepsikan kehidupan pelbagai budaya di George Town sebagai suatu siri pertalian yang bersifat multisensori (*multisensory correspondence*) melibatkan hubungan antara individu, tempat, dan persekitaran budayanya. Menurut Tim Ingold, konsep pertalian antara manusia (*human correspondence*) merujuk kepada ‘ikatan’ yang terbentuk apabila dua jiwa bertemu atau bertaut lalu mencetuskan penghayatan mendalam antara satu sama lain; dan penghayatan inilah yang kemudiannya mengikat kedua-dua jiwa tersebut. Dalam konteks kajian ini, “kehidupan pelbagai budaya” dapat difahami melalui penelitian terhadap beberapa ‘ikatan’ pertalian multisensori yang ada di George Town iaitu makanan, perayaan, bahasa, dan tempat. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa corak pertalian multisensori di George Town adalah berasaskan nilai-nilai perkongsian yang sentiasa berubah pada satu-satu masa. Konsep “pertalian” (*correspondence*) yang menjadi teras kajian ini dapat menyumbang kepada perancangan dan pengurusan warisan budaya yang lebih bersifat mesra masyarakat bagi menjamin kelestarian

GTWHS. Sebagai tambahan, catatan auto-etnografi turut dilampirkan bagi menunjukkan sikap pengkaji terhadap subjek kajian ini sejajar dengan tradisi etnografi sensorial yang mementingkan nilai reflektif yang ada pada pengkaji.

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ABSTRACT

Following recent development in the anthropology of perception and knowledge that increasingly acknowledges the importance of multisensory experiences, this study takes a sensory ethnography approach to study people and place at George Town. George Town was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008 for its unique multicultural heritage. This study aims to offer an alternate way to conceptualise multicultural way of living in George Town as a series of multisensory correspondence. Borrowing from leading anthropologist, Tim Ingold, the concept of human correspondence is based on the understanding that when two lifelines meet or correspond to form a knot, they produce an inner feeling for each other. This inner feeling is what makes the lifelines stick together. In order to make sense of the “multicultural way of living”, this study identifies and investigates several knots of multisensory correspondence in George Town. These knots are food, festivals, language and place. By unpacking the meanings of the knots, this study reveals that the trend of multisensory correspondence in George Town is based on shared values, which is changing according to the specific given time. It is hoped that the concept of “correspondence” in this study will inspire more people-centred approaches in heritage planning and management for a sustainable future of GTWHS. Finally, following the tradition of sensory ethnography that emphasises on reflexivity, an autoethnography account is included to reflect on the ethnographer’s position in the study.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Prologue

I am a cultural worker in the George Town World Heritage Site, Penang, Malaysia. I am often asked to introduce the site to scholars and students interested in heritage. Here, let me take you on a sensory walk. This is going to be a feast for the senses because George Town is rich in tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

Imagine we are now at the Esplanade. This is where Francis Light landed on Penang Island in 1786 and raised the Union Jack to claim the island as a British possession, under the name of Prince of Wales Island. Around this area, you can see beautiful colonial architecture such as the Fort Cornwallis, the Town Hall, the Old Municipal Building, the Old Court House and the Legislative Assembly Hall. The spatial layout is typical of a British administrative enclave, that is, a public square surrounded by public buildings.

Let's cross the street to Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling, also popularly known as the Street of Harmony. This is because along this street of less than 1km, there are five active historical houses of worship, namely, St. George's Church, Goddess of Mercy Temple, Sri Mahamariamman Temple, Masjid Kapitan Keling and Masjid Lebuah Acheh. And you can still see worshippers at each place performing everyday rituals and practices freely and amiably. During religious festivals, the experiential elements in each site will be heightened by more colourful rituals and practices, such as parades and traditional performances. This is a testament to the multicultural way of life in George Town, where people have lived side by side peacefully for more than two centuries.

Now we enter St. George's Church. Look at this beautiful church which is built according to the Palladian style, with the interior layout following Anglican traditions. Listen, someone is playing the pipe organ there. If you come on a Sunday, the church will be crowded with worshippers attending mass.

Let's walk a few hundred meters to the Goddess of Mercy Temple. The temple architecture is a hybrid of Hokkien and Cantonese styles, representing the two biggest Chinese dialect groups on the island from the early days of settlement. Look at the dragon on the roof and the floral carving on all the door panels, this temple is very rich in cultural symbolism. Feel the different sensations here – can you smell the burning joss sticks, can you hear the hum of whispered prayers? As the oldest Taoist temple in Penang, this place is always crowded with worshippers, and the courtyard where worshippers place their joss sticks of various sizes will always be filled with smoke and the smell of incense.

Now, we walk another few minutes to the Sri Mahamariamman Temple. Can you feel the different sensation here? The temple *gopuram*¹ and the interior are full of colourful sculptures of Hindu mythological beings. Most of the worshippers here are Indian Hindu, they usually come in traditional dress. Worshippers here use incense too, but the smells are different from those at the Goddess of Mercy Temple that we just visited. And the sounds of bells and chanting in Sanskrit or Tamil during rituals performed by the temple priest are distinctive. See someone breaking coconut in front of the temple? It is one of the rituals of purification.

Next, we come to the Masjid Kapitan Keling (“Captain Keling Mosque”) named after its founder who was an Indian Muslim community leader. The mosque,

¹ A *gopuram* is the ornamental tower structure at the entrance of a Dravidian style Hindu temple.

with its giant dome, is a spectacular example of Moghul architecture. This mosque is mostly frequented by the Indian Muslim community who live in the neighbourhood. Sometimes, the sermons are conducted in Tamil for this community. How do you identify an Indian Muslim? See the old man walking into the mosque? Look at his beard which is dyed red? This is the most prominent and traditional feature of an Indian Muslim man. Of course, nowadays many young ones do not follow this fashion.

Finally, we reach the Masjid Lebu Acheh, our final destination on the Street of Harmony. Instantly, you can see that the building is of a different architectural style from that of the Masjid Kapitan Keling. Indeed, it is built in the fashion popular in the Malay Archipelago. Situated within a small compound, where few *kampung*² houses are also located, it is said that the spatial layout accords with the Medina tradition. Hear the call for prayers from the mosque minaret? And the echoing sound of call for prayer from Masjid Kapitan Keling? It is time for noon prayer. As a Malay mosque, undoubtedly you can see more Malay worshippers coming here and the sermons are conducted in the Malay language – *Bahasa Malaysia*.

We have come to the end of our sensory walk. This is how I usually introduce the George Town World Heritage Site (GTWHS), by highlighting some visible tangible heritage (such as buildings) and intangible cultural heritage (such as religious practices) of the site. This is because the rich and diverse sensory experiences afforded by the tangible and intangible cultural heritage along the walk presents a spectacular showpiece of harmonious multicultural coexistence, the “Outstanding Universal Value” (OUV) identified by UNESCO³ as being worthy of proclamation as a world heritage. In order for a heritage property or heritage site to be eligible for listing a

² *Kampung* is a Malay word that means village.

³ UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

UNESCO World Heritage Site, it has to meet one or more of the criteria listed in the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*, 2005. Meeting the criteria will entitle a property to lay claim to having OUV.

Melaka and George Town, as a joint UNESCO World Heritage Site, have met Criteria (ii), (iii) and (iv) of the Operational Guidelines as enunciated below:

Criterion (ii): Melaka and George Town represent exceptional examples of multi-cultural trading towns in East and Southeast Asia, forged from the mercantile exchanges of Malay, Chinese, and Indian cultures and three successive European colonial powers for almost 500 years, each with its imprints on the architecture and urban form, technology and monumental art. Both towns show different stages of development and the successive changes over a long span of time and are thus complementary.

Criterion (iii): Melaka and George Town are living testimony to the multi-cultural heritage and tradition of Asia, and European colonial influences. This multi-cultural tangible and intangible heritage is expressed in the great variety of religious buildings of different faiths, ethnic quarters, the many languages, worship and religious festivals, dances, costumes, art and music, food, and daily life.

Criterion (iv): Melaka and George Town reflect a mixture of influences which have created a unique architecture, culture and townscape without parallel anywhere in East and South Asia. In particular, they demonstrate an exceptional range of shophouses and townhouses. These buildings show many different types and stages of development of the building type, some originating in the Dutch or Portuguese periods. (UNESCO WHC, n.d.)

Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling is often used as the altar piece of multicultural heritage in George Town. This is because the physical sensations of different cultural sights, sounds, smells, touches and tastes on a single street reflect the popular assumption of a “harmonious” multicultural site. However, arguably, this assumption based on experiential aspects at different religious sites does not represent the entire meaning of multiculturalism in Penang. This is because people’s lives are not confined

to their religious sites and practices. In everyday life, people from different faiths and ethnic backgrounds meet and cross paths with each other in a non-religious context as well. As such, the purpose of this thesis is to investigate how the multicultural population meet and interact in meaningful ways. As the “Street of Harmony” walk demonstrates that George Town’s lifestyle is rich in sensory experiences, I will use a sensory ethnographic approach for this study. The aim is to foreground the significance of the senses in uncovering the meanings of the multicultural way of life in George Town beyond the superficial.

1.2 A Narrative of Multiculturalism

Over two hundred years ago, Sir George Leith, the then Lieutenant-Governor of Prince of Wales' Island (Penang), said of George Town:

There is not, probably any part of the world, where, in so small a space, so many different people are assembled together, or so great a variety of languages spoken. (Cited in S.N. Khoo, 2007, p.12)

Two hundred years later, George Town together with Melaka were listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, in 2018. Below is the inscription testifying to the OUV of the site.

Melaka and George Town, Malaysia, are remarkable examples of historic colonial towns on the Straits of Malacca that demonstrate a succession of historical and cultural influences arising from their former function as trading ports linking East and West. These are the most complete surviving historic city centres on the Straits of Malacca with a multi-cultural living heritage originating from the trade routes from Great Britain and Europe through the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent and the Malay Archipelago to China. Both towns bear testimony to a living multi-cultural heritage and tradition of Asia, where the many religions and cultures met and coexisted. They reflect the coming together of cultural elements from the Malay Archipelago, India and China with those of Europe, to create a unique architecture, culture and townscape. (UNESCO WHC, n.d.)

The texts quoted above, recorded more than 200 years apart, provide the quintessential image of the GTWHS, as a “multicultural” place. This narrative that emphasises the co-existence of communities from diverse backgrounds since the late 18th century testifies to its heritage of multiculturalism. Furthermore, this narrative is repeatedly told by using stories of early migrations of individual ethnic groups and their community pioneers. This is what I always do in the “Street of Harmony” walk. However, I argue that the “multicultural” narrative which is often used to interpret the connection between people and place is too generic and taken for granted, with assumptions that are not carefully examined.

Firstly, following UNESCO’s canonical approach, it is easy to assume that the harmonious multicultural coexistence in George Town is a given phenomenon. This assumption is based on the observation of existing tangible and intangible cultural heritage in the site, for example, the seemingly peaceful coexistence of different places of worships and religious practices on the Street of Harmony, as outlined in the Prologue. Because this assumption is based on visible evidence, i.e., the cultural elements as identified by UNESCO, it does not see multicultural coexistence as a result of the dynamic mediation among different groups of people. Thus, the negotiation process is not being highlighted. I argue that the negotiation process should not be taken for granted. Multicultural coexistence in George Town is hardly a given because communal tension once ran deep in the early society (see Chapter 5 for further elaboration). In today’s society, inter-communal relationship has improved a great deal compared to the situation during in the 19th century. However due to cultural differences, people are still active in micro-negotiations in their daily interactions with others. Harmonious multicultural coexistence should not be assumed but, rather, scrutinised further. My study will focus on the everyday dimensions of

multiculturalism, because as proposed by Semi, Colombo, Camozzi, and Frisina (2009), a more refined concept of multiculturalism is one that “assumes the necessity to ground in daily routines the practices of dealing with difference” (p. 81).

The second assumption is from a totally opposite perspective, that there is no real intercultural integration due to the ethnic-oriented mainstream political system in Malaysia. Thus the popular assumption is to perceive multicultural relationship as “unity in separation” (Giordano, 2016). This assumption is valid in various aspects of public life, especially in matters relating to religion. However, peoples’ lives are not strictly bounded by formal structures or systems. In everyday interpersonal dealings, there is room for genuine interaction and integration. Thus, it is the aim of this research to foreground the different forms of multicultural “correspondence” (Ingold, 2016) which are embedded in everyday lives, to be discussed in more detail below. By doing so, the research aims to counter the assumption of “unity in separation”.

With the inscription of George Town as a WHS comes different challenges as a result of increasing developmental pressure and conservation needs. It is thus timely to examine and reinterpret the “multicultural narrative” for better heritage management. Giordano (2016) explains the role of the multicultural narrative in terms of heritage conservation:

In Penang, guidelines have been formulated for the restoration of the most important buildings.... Interestingly, this conservation policy is also based on the principle of accommodation and identity bargaining. The monuments to be restored were carefully chosen according to criteria that can be described as ‘multicultural’. (p. 147)

In addition, S. N. Khoo and Jenkins (2002), Jenkins (2008), and Giordano (2016) highlight the consequences of inadequate understandings of people and place that cause poor performances in heritage conservation and management policy in

George Town in the past. The earliest attempt at heritage conservation was the Lebuh Aceh, Lebu Armenian Heritage Development Project (LALA) in the mid-1990s, in an area that traditionally comprised of pockets of Malay, Chinese and Indian settlements. Despite the careful selection criteria, Jenkins (2008) argues that the project was not sustainable due to a lack of public-private collaboration:

The [LALA] project did not serve as a catalyst for the conservation of historic building as was hoped. With government funding, foreign expertise, and a government organisation as a tenant, the project failed to reflect the realities of the city. In the private sector an owner would have to remove AKS tenants at a heavy cost, local expertise for conservation work was negligible, and new tenants were considered untrustworthy; there was distrust on both sides. (p. 206)

Although the discussions above took place during the pre-UNESCO inscription period, the emphasis on maintaining the connection between people and place is still relevant in contemporary heritage discourse in George Town. This is because the erosion of the city's intangible cultural heritage caused by local population loss and gentrification have become the biggest threat to the sustainability of the site (C. Chin, 2019; Ferrarese, 2018; Kharas, Zeufack, & Majeed, 2010; S. N. Khoo, 2012, 2016; Lim & Pan, 2017; Shaiful, 2018).

In her analysis and critique of the heritage process in George Town, Jenkins (2008) raises the contestations of “Whose Heritage?—Whose Culture?—Whose Space?”. She concludes that a successful and sustainable project must be “culturally owned” (p. xxi), which means projects, policies and practices intended to encourage awareness of cultural heritage identity should relate to the value systems of the communities themselves. She further explains that,

(a)s a challenge to the interpretation of a prescribed cultural value, it is important to understand that each culture ‘sees’ their environment according to the spaces, places, sites, sounds, and smells that create the cultural *genius loci*. (p. 19)

From the above, I understand that people create meaning or cultural value of the place they dwell in through their senses. Thus, in order to understand the connections between a place and its people, the senses is a valid entry point of study. In the context of this research, the discussions thus far have highlighted some key themes: people, place and senses. I argue that linking the key themes together requires an anthropological conceptualisation of people and place, as well as a sensory approach to unpack and interpret the meaning of a “multicultural George Town WHS”. To guide the research direction and process, the following two research objectives are identified:

- i. to explore and apply anthropological theories that conceptualize the multicultural way of living in GTWHS;
- ii. to understand, analyse and interpret the *becoming* of the multicultural way of living in GTWHS using a sensory ethnography approach.
- iii.

In order to achieve the objectives, in the sections below I will discuss and define the scope of this study in terms of time period, as well as place and people. In section 1.4, I will elaborate on sensory ethnography.

1.3 Time Period

According to L. E. Tan (2009), George Town’s story is marked by three significant conjunctures, or points of dramatic change: i) the British takeover of the island in 1786, signalling the advent of new forces of economic and political change for the peninsula and the region; ii) the Japanese invasion in 1941 and changes

following the end of the World War II; and iii) the local, regional and global changes that began in the 1970s. I suggest a fourth conjuncture to be in 2008 following the inscription of George Town, together with Melaka, as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, for its socio-economic implications. As Khor, Benson, Liew, and James (2017) explained, George Town's fortune as a trading centre lasted from 1786 to the 1970s, after which it suffered a sharp decline due to the relocation of its port operations to the mainland in the 1970s, and dislocation of the local population as a result of the repeal of rent control in 2000. At the end of the last millennium, the prospects for George Town in terms of heritage conservation were gloomy. However the tide changed in July 2008, when George Town was awarded the UNESCO World Heritage Site status.

In 2008, when it received its heritage listing, George Town's remnant building stock of more than 5,200 monuments and shophouses along with community rich in cultural tradition had the basic foundations for a model urban regeneration effort. This potential revitalisation could significantly enhance Penang's appeal for new capital and talent. (Khor et al., 2017, p. 19)

L. E. Tan (2009) argues that within the first three historical conjunctures, Penang had demonstrated "a unique interstice of socio-cultural transformation from a port city into a 'Silicon Island', and the important part lies in the diversity of ways the people of Penang have lived out their lives" (p. 18). My preliminary observation is that the people of Penang will continue to live in such diversity, adapting themselves and transforming the place according to their contemporary socio-economic environment.

However, regardless of the various turns in history as outlined above, the multicultural narrative is often built by freezing a distant past and lacks connectivity to the present day. As observed by Giordano (2016) of a State Museum exhibition, "there is a pronounced and somewhat nostalgic expression of goodwill towards ethnic

and cultural differences that belong more to the past than to the present” (p. 146). This poses a challenge as pointed out by S. N. Khoo (2016) “The influx of new urban population means that there is a ‘new Penang’ which does not share the memory of ‘old Penang’” (p. 10). Comparing between the X and Y generations of Penangites, Khoo states that while the former is familiar with the streets and activities of George Town; the latter, who is at the centre of the trend of urban influx, is unfamiliar with the traditional street names, for a start. This poses a challenge to the well-being and sustainability of the heritage site because the newcomers may not comprehend its heritage values.

In order to instil heritage awareness among the younger generations, both Giordano (2016) and S. N. Khoo (2016) indicate the relevance of connecting the past to the future for meaningful interpretations of the site. This is because only by understanding the different layers of history can one fully understand the becoming of George Town into what it is today. More importantly, by studying how the people relate to each other across different periods, one can develop contextual insights into their current relationships. As such, I propose that anthropological understanding on how “people live their lives” is crucial for the future sustainability of George Town during the “fourth conjuncture”. Following the periodisation as discussed above, this study is situated within the fourth conjuncture with the context of heritage as the primary force of change in George Town.

1.4 Place and People

“Place” has long been a problematic concept in anthropology because it is so fundamental in daily lives that it is often treated as a “taken for granted” setting for many scholars (Feld & Basso, 1996; S. M. Low & Lawrence-Zuniga, 2003; Rodman, 1992). The various conceptualisations of place will be discussed further in Chapter 2. Primarily, this study follows Ingold’s (2000) “dwelling perspective” that sees place as a dynamic rather than a fixed entity. Ingold (2007) uses the “line” metaphor to conceptualise human life as a travelling lifeline. He further conceptualises places as “knots” where lifelines meet, and the world a “meshwork” of interweaving lifelines. Ingold (2015) explains that in a knot, lifelines “co-respond” with one another. And in the process of correspondence, people will develop an inner feeling for each other to form a “sympathetic union”.

Following Ingold’s perspectives, I understand that people of different ethnicities are active in making their “lifeworld” in George Town. As this study intends to understand George Town’s multicultural way of living, I will specifically look for and study the knots where the people from different cultures cross paths or “co-respond” in meaningful ways.



Figure 1 2008 Map of George Town World Heritage Site
 Source <https://www.mypenang.gov.my/culture-heritage/heritage-zones/?lg=en>

Where is GTWHS? In Figure 1, the yellow area is the 109.38-hectare core zone, and the pink area is the 150.04-hectare buffer zone of the George Town UNESCO World Heritage Site, officially inscribed in 2008. The borders of GTWHS are demarcated by Transfer Road, Jalan Dr. Lim Chwee Leong, and the coastline of the north-eastern cape of Penang Island. Within this area there are several historic community enclaves centred around their religious monuments or communal spaces.

I argue that the geographical boundaries of a WHS is merely a conceptual invention to suit the UNESCO’s application conditions. In reality, the long-time

residents have different perceptions of George Town’s physical locality. Most notably, the term “George Town” is not even a common name among the older generations. Place-naming will be discussed further in Chapter 6. For the context of this study, I only use the UNESCO-defined geographical boundaries (Figure 1) to delineate a physical area for my research fieldwork. To understand a place, one has to look beyond official demarcations, to take into consideration nuanced details of people’s connection with the locality.

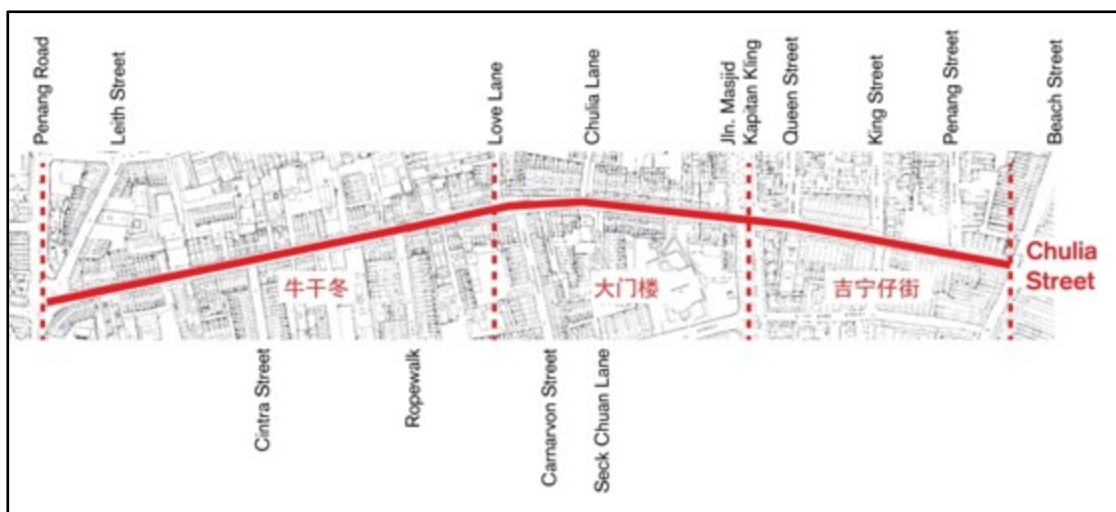


Figure 2 Different Boundaries of Chulia Street

The argument above is supported by personal experience in a project entitled “Cherita Lebuh Chulia”. The project team was tasked to ask the local residents where is Chulia Street? The answers varied depending on the location of their house/shop and their everyday mobilities. According to Su Nin Khoo (2007), Chulia Street has three traditional names, each referring to a section of the street with distinctive demography and activities. The result of the abovementioned project which was conducted in 2013 revealed that it is still common for the long-time residents to associate the street with its traditional names and boundaries (Figure 2). In other words,

the traditional meanings of a place are still very much intact among the older generations.

The traditional meanings of George Town are rapidly fading away due to rapid socio-economic changes. Among the major changes are the boost in the heritage tourism industry (Mohamed, Omar, & Zainal Abidin, 2015), and the out-migration of local inhabitants due to developmental pressure (Khazanah Research Institute, 2017; S. N. Khoo, 2012; Lim & Pan, 2017; Mok, 2015a; Nungsari & Hamdan, 2010). According to the *George Town Baseline Study 2010*, GTWHS had a residential population of 10,159 by 2010. However, follow up baseline studies in 2013 indicated a decline in the number of local residents (Khor et al., 2017).

From real-life experience working as a cultural worker in George Town since 2008, I see the local residents as the most vulnerable group in the face of the contemporary socio-economic changes. However, they are also the most valuable group as the bearer of memories, living traditions, and local wisdom. In the context of this study, they are significant as the correspondents of multicultural knots. This leads to the next crucial question: who are these people often indiscriminately labelled as the “local residents” of George Town?

I find that the concept of “people” in George Town is as elusive as the concept of “place”. In modern times, George Town had received various waves of human movements. People came to the island from different parts of the world. They crossed paths with each other in George Town at different time-spaces, and formed strategic relationships to survive and prosper. For example, during the first historical conjuncture as defined by L. E. Tan (2009), there were the native Malays, the British colonialist, the wealthy Chinese, Indian and Arab traders from the region, the

indentured workers from India and China, and the Peranakan communities (descendants of century-old interracial marriages). Over time, the Asian counterparts formed various alliances among themselves according to blood lineage, dialect groups, occupations, etc. Besides, for the purpose of political and commercial gains, strategic collaborations between ethnic groups were also common during the early days (Mahani Musa, 1999, 2007).

During the second conjuncture, the outbreak of WWII had abruptly changed the demography of George Town. During the war, many of the old elite families had fled and eventually settled down in their new homes in the suburbs, or even migrated to other cities. After the war, their empty properties in town were rented out to an influx of working class population. The opportunities of livelihood had attracted rapid urban migration which soon resulted in a housing shortage in town. The population grew faster than the government's residential development and so the Control of Rent Ordinance was introduced to restrict rentals for all properties built before 1948. Jenkins (2008) describes the living conditions during this period:

(a) typical rental arrangement would have seen a family renting one room within a shophouse in which they would sleep, sharing the kitchen and washing facilities whilst socializing on the five-foot-way or street. (p. 61)

The original layout of a shophouse, when it served as a family home, was often altered with partitions to accommodate more tenants. From conversations with long-time residents, it was not uncommon to find a 3-storeyed shophouse housing up to 50 tenants at one time. Many of the post-war populations continued to live or work in George Town at least until the Repeal of the Rent Control Act in 2000.

During the third conjuncture, the fortune of post-war boom ended in 1969 when Penang lost its free port status and a deep-water wharf was built in Butterworth to take over the cargo handling function of the port on the island. This had severely affected the city's commercial and social health with unemployment rate soaring up to 15.6 percent (Jenkins, 2008, p. 94). As a result, during the 1980s and 1990s, many local residents had to move to the suburban industrial area for new livelihoods. In order to revitalise the city, the then State government decided to repeal the Rent Control Act in 2000. This was because although the more than forty years of rent control had kept the culture of George Town intact, with low rent enabling long-term tenants to reside in the city centre, it had caused negligence among the owners to upkeep and upgrade the buildings. Many old buildings were left to deteriorate. According to S. N. Khoo (2001) the repeal of the Rent Control Act in 2000 impacted about 12,000 houses, causing a mass wave of evictions due to sharp increase in rental. With the decline in both the built and living heritage at the beginning of the 21st century, George Town was gradually decaying into a dilapidated place.

As explained before, the fourth conjuncture was catalysed by the UNESCO WHS inscription in 2008. The prestige this brought attracted new interests to invest, work and stay in the heritage site. From my experience working on the field in George Town since 2008, I observe that the newcomers during this period are foreign investors, expatriates who wish to retire in Penang, local retirees or young people who are drawn by the romantic idea of living in a nostalgic heritage town, young entrepreneurs who are attracted by the tourism-related prospects, and young professions such as myself who come for heritage-related career opportunities. As discussed before, these groups of people are quickly replacing generational residents or traders who cannot afford the hiked up rents of the premises in George Town. Because many of the newcomers are

outsiders or returnees who are detached from the traditional way of life in George Town, they tend to introduce adaptive reuse of buildings and activities that contribute to a new way of living in George Town. However I also observe that despite the urban influx, today one can still find a small number of generational residents and traders who maintain their daily lives and business activities in the city as they have done for decades.

While the old-timers from the first conjuncture had bestowed George Town with a rich built heritage, it was the post-war working class populations who shaped the living heritage and defined the “multicultural way-of-living” as seen today. As a result of the urban decline during the third conjuncture, the people of George Town today comprises the remaining post-war populations, as well as the post-2008 newcomers and returnees. I suggest that in the fourth conjuncture, it is important to keep a good balance between the two. This is because while the former defines the unique identity and values of a place, the latter has the skills and know-how to drive the future of George Town. However, as stated by Khoo (2016), there is a stark difference in the ways the two groups relate to the place. The discontinuity of traditions and values has raised issues of gentrification that will eventually threatened the OUV of George Town as a WHS. This study, in a way, is a personal response to this problem in which I intend to explore and interpret the “old traditions and values” to new audience. As such, I will specifically focus on the residual post-war populations because they are the endangered group. Below, I will explain my approach further based on personal knowledge and experiences of working with different people in heritage projects in George Town since 2008.

Heritage processes in George Town typically involved several levels of people/stakeholders. At the macro level, there are the federal government and state

government who are in charge of management of the overall heritage site, including planning and investing for sustainable development, monitoring compliances with conservation regulations, programming for public outreach, as well as research and documentation. At the community level, there are the traditional community clan houses and associations which are in charge of upkeeping of their individual communal premises and traditional practices; the heritage non-profits who champion good conservation practices for the built heritage and safeguarding of the living heritage; as well as the George Town diasporas who still remain closely connected to the city. In addition, there are also private investor groups who purchase and renovate rows of shophouses, as well as introduce new uses of the shophouses. The majority of the decision-makers from the macro and community levels are not familiar with the site and its multicultural population. They hold different, and sometimes incompatible, interpretations of heritage, making decisions that have implications for every level of the society.

Finally, at the micro level there are the people comprising individual residents, traders and other users of the site. Among this multicultural population are a sizeable number of generational dwellers. They are the practitioners of the diverse long-standing cultural traditions in George Town. The voices from this group, which is also the target group of my study, are the weakest in determining the heritage direction and process. The reason, according to my observation, is the inability of the other stakeholders to decode the multitude of voices from this group, and make sense of them as a meaningful whole for informed decision-making. I reckon that voices from a single cultural background are already difficult to understand, let alone making sense of the “multiculturality” from the coming together of different voices. Due to the multilingual nature of the people, the “voices” may not be their primary way of

correspondence. I suspect it takes multisensory correspondence to establish meaningful connections/knots among the multicultural people of George Town. To explore and understand multisensory correspondence, I will use a sensory ethnographic approach in this research. This approach is deemed suitable because according to Pink (2015a), sensory ethnography

leads us to the normally not spoken, the invisible and the unexpected—those things that people do not perhaps necessarily think it would be worth mentioning, or those things that tend to be felt or sensed rather than spoken about. (p. 53)

1.5 Sensory Ethnography

According to Pink (2009) since the early twenty-first century, there have been calls for new ways of doing ethnography. This trend foregrounds the roles of the senses and experiences. According to Howes (2006, 2013), this trend has emerged after a series of paradigm shifts or “turns” in the social science and humanities. He describes how during the linguistic turn in the 1960s and 1970s, culture was being conceptualised as language or text. The pictorial turn in the 1980s focused on visual imagery and its role in the communication of cultural values. On the other hand, the material turn in the 1990s emphasized aspects of embodiment and materiality in cultural analysis. And finally, the “sensory turn” in the beginning of the twenty-first century approaches culture as “ways of sensing”. Under the “sensory turn”, a sensory experience is not neutral. Sensory meanings and values are subjected to how a culture “make sense” of the world. Howes (2013) argues that unlike the previous turns that only emphasised one modality, the sensory turn offers a holistic and *relational* approach by focusing on the interconnectedness of the senses. It has developed new ways of understanding different aspects of society and culture.

Following these movements, Pink (2009) introduces the term “sensory ethnography” to refer to an interdisciplinary approach that attends to the multimodality and multisensoriality of human experience. According to Drysdale and Wong (2019),

(s)ensory ethnography is often characterised by a shift away from solely observing participants and towards using researchers’ own experience and bodily sensation to gain insight into the lived relationship between people, practices and places. This recognition is perhaps the major point of difference between traditional ethnography and sensory ethnography – where the former could be understood as a mix of participation and observation, the latter produces collaborative multisensorial and emplaced ways of knowing as part of the overall ethnographic encounter. (p. 2)

This implies an active role for an ethnographic researcher, and that the engagement of his/her five senses throughout the entire research process is essential in knowledge production. An example of a sensory ethnography is Kelvin E.Y. Low’s (2010) study, which focuses on the multisensory experiences of National Service in multicultural Singapore. He foregrounds the role of the senses as “effective mnemonic devices” (p. 89) that have shaped and continue to shape Singapore’s national identity. By using the Armed Forces Museum as a case study, he argues that the production of sensorial military encounters in the museum has strengthened memory recollection and identification with the nation’s shared heritage among visitors.

Rhys-Taylor’s (2010) is a sensory ethnography of a multicultural innercity neighbourhood around the Ridley Road Market in London. He analyses how everyday multisensory engagements have reinforced existing social strata, and developed transcultural social formations in the area. Rhys-Taylor calls for ethnographers to “come to our senses” (p. 214). He explains that “coming to our senses” is about developing sensibilities while reflexively engaging in the multicultural world around us. According to him, this will allow ethnographers to

become far more able to move beyond simply stating that a situation, space or event had a ‘peculiar feel’ or ‘ambience’ to it. Rather, and critically, we will be better able to express what that particular ‘feeling’ was, and to articulate what makes ‘it’ peculiar, why we ‘felt’ it to be worth remarking upon, and what the sociological [in this case, anthropological] significance of that feeling was. (p. 215)

Following the sensory approach, the ethnographer takes on an active role in co-producing data on the field. For example, Kelvin E.Y. Low (2010) relates his own army experience to interpret the memory-making process. Rhys-Taylor (2010) foregrounds the need for reflexivity as part of the process of knowledge production. He argues that the ethnographer’s sensibilities and reactions on the field are also valid responses to everyday multicultural encounters, and thus should be inserted into the ethnographic writing. Indeed, Drysdale and Wong (2019) argue that reflexivity may be the core of the entire sensory ethnography process. Pink (2015b) explains that reflexivity is to consider the process through which

we not only make ethnography, but also how we make methods and learn to know in ethnographic sites, analytical activities, and in the making of representations. (p. 267)

I suggest the biggest advantage of the sensory approach for this study is its ability to make meaningful cross-cultural connections. This advantage is obvious in both Kelvin E.Y. Low (2010) and Rhys-Taylor (2010) that study shared heritage for the former, and shared social norms for the latter. In George Town, all ethnic groups are fundamentally different in their kinship systems, social structure, religions, practices, etc. The main connection is that they share the same physical space, thus I assume that they will share some living experiences either voluntarily or involuntarily. In this way, the sensory approach is an effective method because, as elaborated in the Prologue (pp. 1–5 in this thesis), living in George Town is full of multicultural sensory experiences. The intention of this study is then to investigate the multisensory knots

that the multicultural communities of George Town share, and the meanings behind the knots.

Pink (2011) describes the sensory approach as an ‘innovative’ ethnographic method that focuses on “mobility, affect, empathy, and knowing” (p. 273). In addition, Pink (2015a) explains that this interdisciplinary method has the advantage to understand “experiences, values, identities and ways of life” (p. 53). Pink’s extensive experience of working in interdisciplinary projects has proven the versatility of a sensory ethnographic approach in contributing alternate ways of knowing not common in those fields. Some of her interdisciplinary projects can be found in the field of art practice (Pink, Hubbard, O’Neill, & Radley, 2010), consumer research (Pink, Mackley, & Moroşanu, 2015), design (Pink, Mackley, Moroşanu, Mitchell, & Bhamra, 2017), digital technologies (Pink, Lingard, & Harley, 2017), architecture (Pink, Burry, Akama, & Qiu, 2018), traffic and noise (Pink et al., 2019), and healthcare (Sumartojo, Pink, Duque, & Vaughan, 2020). She has demonstrated the imaginative use of a wide range of research strategies, ranging from the conventional sitting interview and observational approach to participatory video and autoethnographic dialogues. This study will also follow Pink’s approach of mixing various research strategies to understand different sensory experiences. This will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

1.6 George Town, Penang: A Literature Review

In this section, I will explore some notable existing literature on George Town that are related to the study of people and place. I will show that while there is no lack of scholarly works on George Town and Penang, there is a gap in sensory ethnographic study on the multicultural way of life.

In the field of anthropology, it is popular to focus on bounded ethnic groups (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992). For example, B. L. Goh (2002) is an anthropological narrative of the Eurasian community in Pulau Tikus that describes their cultural struggles amidst rapid socio-economic changes, and the eventual displacement and dislocation of the community. On the other hand, DeBernardi's works (2009, 2011) are anthropological studies on Chinese popular religious culture in Penang and identity formation of the local Chinese community.

Another popular approach is to focus on a specific locality, for example, the clan jetties is a popular research site in George Town. Bideau and Kilani (2009) studied the transformation of Clan Jetties from a marginalized place to becoming part of the core zone of GTWHS. They discussed how the local stakeholders responded to the then newly introduced heritage policy, and the strategies they devised to achieve their respective aims. Similarly, Y. C. Pan (2012) drew on the concept of borderlands to examine how the local inhabitants of the Clan Jetties lived their lives through the various socio-economic changes that transform their identity from being marginalized, sea-bound, working class, "Weld Quay" dwellers to becoming more sanitised, tourism-oriented, "Clan Jetties" dwellers. Although being place-specific, studies on the clan jetties are also very much ethnic-oriented because the dwellers are all Chinese. These types of ethnic-specific studies provide useful reference to understand cultural behaviour of specific groups.

Jenkins (2008), is an anthropological study of George Town, covering the period from 1786 until 2008. As an active conservationist and resident of George Town, her study provides detailed records of the heritage discourse in George Town and serves as an important background reference for this research. However, it is lacking on the local residents and their voices. Jenkins (2019) is a revised edition

published a decade later with a new section dedicated to the period from 2008 to 2018, the first 10 years of George Town's inscription as a UNESCO WHS. In general, documentation of events in Jenkins (2008, 2019) corresponds with L. E. Tan's (2009) suggestion of three significant conjunctures in the history of Penang, and my argument for a fourth conjuncture beginning from 2008. Besides the general timeline, Jenkins contributes local knowledge of micro heritage processes and elaborates on real challenges faced during the heritage processes involving communities from different cultural backgrounds. To ensure sustainability as a living heritage site, Jenkins highlights the importance to understand, interpret and mediate cultural values from the multicultural communities.

The literature above are valuable background materials for this study as they provide rich historical resources for understanding the early development of George Town and its multicultural communities, as well as insights into the formation of some unique social norms and cultural phenomenon that are still detectable until today. Penang has and continues to attract scholarship from diverse disciplines because "the island has a seemingly inexhaustible potential to provide fascinating material as grist for the mills of theory, history, and cultural understanding" (Zabielskis, Yeoh, & Fatland, 2017, p. 11). Before the inscription of George Town as a World Heritage Site, there already existed a considerable amount of scholarship in the last few decades especially in the field of history. Some notable examples include Turnbull (1972); Mahani Musa (1999, 2007); Su Nin Khoo (2007); and K. H. Tan (2007).

According to S. N. Khoo (2016), there is increasing interest and effort in "writing Penang into the national and international awareness" (p. 10) and this can be seen through the abundance of new research writing and publications. Among the Penang-focused publications are Yeoh, Loh, Khoo, and Khor (2009); Langdon (2013,