Experiences of Two UNESCO World Heritage Cities:
National and local politics in branding the past

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the relationship between federal and local-state level governments in interpreting and presenting the World Heritage brand at two Malaysian World Heritage sites, George Town and Melaka. The World Heritage status is internationally recognised. Although the World Heritage brand offers many advantages in tourism development and destination marketing, what and how the local heritage is conserved, interpreted and appreciated remains open. This article shows that the mechanisms of interpreting and presenting the WH status vary according to the agendas and needs of authorities. This working paper also shows that material heritage and heritage stories are highly politicized, and the World Heritage recognition has inevitably become a tool for further ideological intentions.

Introduction

Heritage accentuates the history of a place and thus also asserts the place's uniqueness. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage scheme recognizes places of valuable and unique heritages. The recognized sites vary in size and scale, for instance, the Colosseum in Rome is an ancient sporting arena, Yosemite National Park is a massive nature reserve, and Dubrovnik is a city. This working paper focuses empirically on two cities – George Town and Melaka – in Malaysia.

Since the formulation and adoption of the *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* in 1972 by UNESCO, more than 1000 sites are recognized. An important outcome of the convention is the introduction of the World Heritage List. Sites listed are from all over the world and possess ´Outstanding Universal Value` as evaluated by professional heritage experts (World Heritage Convention, UNESCO 2014). Each ´World Heritage Site' has a responsibility to conserve and manage its heritage in ways stipulated in the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* (World Heritage Convention, UNESCO 2013). Getting listed is not easy.

In order to nominate a site into the World Heritage List, the sponsoring country has to first rectify the Convention and be a member of UNESCO. Adherence to protocol and

criteria is essential in the UNESCO accreditation scheme (Hall, 2006). A set of rules comprises of several stages, beginning with acceptance into the Tentative List. Stages of document preparations and submission, expert evaluation and inscription are then 'supervised' by experts from UNESCO, World Heritage Committee and its agencies (see *World Heritage Information Kit*, UNESCO, 2008). The whole process takes years before an evaluation is completed by the World Heritage Committee. In Malaysia´s cases of Melaka and George Town, the process began in 1986 and went through many consultations and preparation processes before final approval by the World Heritage Committee was given on July 7, 2008.

Despite the difficulties in getting listed, there are many advantages that follow. The World Heritage (WH) brand opens up many possibilities for sites, especially in tourism (Hall and Piggin, 2002, 2003). The site will attract more tourists (Buckley, 2004; Huang *et al*,2012; Yang *et al*, 2010), and the recognition will shape tourists' perceptions and evaluation of the place (Poria *et al*, 2011). The status will give new opportunities for destination marketing (Boyd and Timothy, 2006) and open access to additional markets (Fyall and Rakic, 2006). Even though the WH status brings global recognition, it does not necessarily translate into benefits for residents and local development (Ryan and Silvanto, 2009, 2010). Sites may even choose to desert their WH recognition (e.g see Ashworth and van der Aa, 2002). Besides achieving tourism goals, the site must also bring about socioeconomic development for locals. Achieving such goals requires careful planning (Kaltenborn *et al*, 2013). As will be discussed later, studies have concentrated on the evaluation process and on the impact of WH recognition on local development, there is scant research on the WH recognition as a brand, and how that brand has become part of national political posturing. Such political posturing affects local communities and transmits particular ideological messages behind the heritage, something the Convention does not address, and place branding scholars have largely ignored.

The outline of this paper is as following: After this introduction is a review of knowledge on world heritage branding. A short methodological note follows suit. The cases of George Town and Melaka will be presented, followed by the analysis and conclusions.

World Heritage branding in context

To be recognized as a WH site has many advantages. First, a WH site has a globally recognized accreditation that stands out against places without the recognition. It brands the place (Ooi, 2011, 2014). Implicitly, second, a WH brand indicates intrinsic value that should be preserved, and thus suggests special values, exclusivity and distinction (Hall and Piggin, 2003; Ryan and Silvanto, 2009, 2010). Third, the WH title cannot be developed nor created by marketing experts as it is evaluated and awarded by UNESCO; it means the heritage site is authentic and not just a commercial and marketing gimmick. This however does not mean that site and place branding authorities do not involve in enhancing and promoting the site (Klijn *et al,* 2012;

Westwood, 2011). Furthermore fourth, visitors to WH sites are found to be better acquainted with cultural and symbolic products and are also higher yielding tourists (Shackley, 1998).

Within the field of tourism development, a range of literature has shown that spatial changes, commodification of material and immaterial heritage, recreation and reproduction of local histories often come with the reification and maintenance of the WH title (Dearborn and Stallmeyer, 2009; Heldt-Cassel and Pashkevich, 2011; Tucker and Emge, 2010; Yasuda, 2010). Maintaining and using the WH brand needs coordination and management, like in all other place branding projects. It entails a flexible approach of adopting, adapting, modifying, revising, and adjusting policies, strategies, techniques and programmes (Hankinson, 2004; Jetter and Chen, 2011; Kemp *et al*, 2012). It is eventually a ´strategic lens, a decision-making tool´ (Allen, 2007, p:61). In the circumstances of WH branding, the complex and difficult task arises from several areas.

One, cases have shown that the designation of the WH status does not conclusively translate into a coherent brand and brand message for the heritage site (Hazen, 2008; Huang *et al*, 2012). Residents, visitors and the global public do not necessarily know and understand the basis behind the WH status. Like other many cultural tourism products, the knowledge and information has to be packaged and communicated to residents and global audiences (Ooi, 2002).

Two, the process of attaining the WH recognition is often distant from residents' experiences (Buckley, 2004; Poria *et al*, 2011). The processes of applying for the WH recognition need formal institutional support and a great deal of planning but not extensive communication with locals on potential negative impacts (Chakravarty and Irazábal, 2011). Local support is important to get the WH recognition, and the consultation process is often open and positive but not frank and critical. A misalignment of residents' expectations and the eventual outcomes may result.

Three, different groups of people have different agendas and views. For instance, the WH recognition can draw attention but the site has to be conserved, improved and promoted to draw attention. The attractiveness of the place must be accompanied by increased accessibility, better facilities, clearly espoused stories on the historical and cultural significance of the site. For instance in India, Agra Fort and Fatehpur Sikri did relatively poorly in these issues (see Chakravarty and Irazábal, 2011) as compared to Luang Prabang (see Starin 2008). A WH status becomes invisible without communication and marketing (de Chernatony and McDonald,1998, p:20). Commercialization then becomes a staple issue in WH sites. So for example, local residents may have developed emotional ties and have personal stories of a site that branding authorities, foreign tourists and businesses may not appreciate. Tourists gazes and experiences are often considered shallow by locals, and draw derogatory local responses. Like all place brands, a WH stamp of approval can be interpreted differently

by diverse audiences (Harisson, 2004; Ooi, 2014; Smith, 2011). What is promoted and celebrated can and will always be criticized by different parties.

Following that there will always be contested views and interpretations of the site. Four, debates on heritage inadvertently arise on the period of history to showcase, what physical heritage to conserve and how should new amenities, facilities, structures and interpretations be incorporated (Aas *et al*, 2005; Ooi, 2001; Winter, 2007). These choices reflect ideological structures. The universal values of WH sites are thus also politically embedded and should always be critically evaluated. This is often not done in practice and in scholarship.

Underlying the points of contention raised above, the consensus is that the key to successful WH site management, place branding and tourism development rests on the joint-involvement of multiple stakeholder groups (Buncle, 2011; Day, 2011; Kavaratzis, 2012; Konecnik-Ruzzier and Petek, 2012). This position stems from Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984). Using the organization as the unit of analysis, Freeman (1984) suggests that an organisation is characterised by its relationship with various groups and individuals outside the organization that can affect and be affected by the achievement of the organisation's objectives (Freeman, 1984, p:46). As already highlighted, managing stakeholder relations in a WH site project is much easier said than done. The challenges are essentially fourfold. First, stakeholder identification is not an easy process as many groups do not necessarily demonstrate any interests until when they are affected (e.g see Garrod *et al*, 2012; García *et al*, 2012). Furthermore it is difficult to define a stakeholder group, as for instance, local residents would consist of different groups with overlapping and conflicting interests. So, second, tensions often arise when discussions among stakeholders take place, as they have different interests that prevent them from collaborating closer in place branding projects (Ooi and Pedersen, 2010). Third, building consensus on branding is time consuming and requires resources. These two factors may prevent stakeholders from agreeing to proposed ideas if they do not gain equal benefits from the branding activities (Ooi, 2012). Fourth, negotiation between leadership and decision making among stakeholders is another issue. To be inclusive is an objective when consulting different stakeholder groups but not everyone is willing to lead or those in position often want to have the final say (Allen, 2007; Budeanu, 2009).

This paper addresses a number of these issues in the context of George Town and Melaka. The mechanism of interpreting and presenting the WH status vary according to the needs of the designated sites and visions of the authorities (Millar, 2006). The two cases will accentuate the politics behind two major stakeholder groups, namely the Malaysian federal government and the local state-level governments. They will also highlight the stakeholder management challenges and inform how material heritage and heritage stories are politicized within established ideological structures.

Introduction to George Town, Melaka and Malaysia's cultural-political economy

George Town and Melaka are lively cities. Because of their locations along the Straits of Malacca (Melaka), both are historic maritime ports albeit their maritime importance has dwindled over the decades.

Map of Malaysia: George Town and Melaka are on the
west coast of Peninsular Malaysia

The name 'Melaka' is often used interchangeably between Melaka-the-historic-city and the state of Melaka in public. A clear distinction is not necessary in this paper, as the context of usage will indicate if the historic city or the state is referred to when 'Melaka' is used. It is the historic city of Melaka that has been bestowed with the WH status, and this old city was once the maritime centre of the Malay Archipelagos and attracted traders from Asia and Europe. Its economic and geographical importance is clear in its colonial past. It was colonized by the Portuguese in 1511 (for 130 years), followed by the Dutch for 154 years from 1641. The British took over in 1824 (Wee, 2009). Malaysia, where Melaka is part of today, became independent in 1957.

Competing colonial powers in the past has also shaped George Town. George Town is the capital of the state of Penang, and in public perception, talking about Penang often means George Town. It is where the state was founded. The official history of George Town started with British Captain Francis Light's acquisition of Penang Island in 1786 for the establishment of a base for the English East India Company (see Turnbill, 2009). In 1824, Penang, together with Melaka and Singapore formed the British's Straits Settlements, effectively allowing the British to control the strategic Straits of Malacca (Webster, 2010).

Melaka and George Town were thus confluences for economic, social and cultural exchanges. They are now multi-cultural cities, as are evidently clear in their heritages, ranging from their mix of buildings to the blending of food kitchens, the cacophony of local vernaculars to the co-existence of different religions (Zawawi, 2004). It is against this rich backdrop of Asian and Europeans influences that both cities are formally recognized as World Heritage Sites in 2008 (World Heritage Committee, 2008):

1. Exhibit an excellent example of historic colonial town on the Straits of Malacca that have endured and experienced a succession of historical events.
2. The most complete surviving historic cities on the Straits of Malacca with a multi-cultural living heritage
3. A living testimony to the multi-cultural heritage and tradition of Asia, where the greatest religions and cultures met.

The WH designation offers opportunities and challenges for these two cities. One of the first tasks is to make linkages between their new recognitions and their established tourism destination brands and images. The authorities in Penang and Melaka have to leverage the newly gained WH statuses and their destinations' existing brands and images. This is easier said than done because expectedly, the different stakeholders – including residents, local businesses, local authorities, federal government bodies, various tourism businesses and bickering politicians – have diverse and contradictory agendas. The relationships between the federal and state/local governments are the focus here. In contrast to Melaka, Penang is run by the opposition coalition at the state and local levels since 2008, the same year George Town became a WH city. The antagonistic federal-local government relations in Penang resulted in contrasting WH management strategies against that of Melaka's.

Setting the context, Malaysia consists of 13 federal states. The national government, state governments and local public agencies are major players in conserving heritage and tourism development in the country. The 1957 Malaysia Federal Constitution mandated the Malaysia governmental administration into three tiers: federal, state and local. Federal control over state affairs is entrenched in the National Council for Local Government (NCLG) in 1960 and Local Government Act 1976, among others (Loh, 2010; Morrison, 1994, cited in Phang, 2008). These restrict the involvement of local authorities in many local areas because of the top-down distribution of power through public institutions (Azizan, 2008). As will be discussed soon, this is reflected in the diverse ways state authorities in Penang and Melaka interpret their World Heritage titles.

Even before Penang elected the opposition into the state government, the local authorities have been revitalising the island-state's urban landscape, with the aim of becoming an international manufacturing hub and an attractive tourism destination. National economic policies such as the New Economic Policy (1970-1990), the New

Development Policy (1990 -2000), and Vision 2020 have shaped Penang and the island-state's branding strategies (see Teo, 2003). Economic development and cultural preservation do not necessarily go hand-in-hand. Heritage buildings were cursorily replaced by new ones in realizing the prevailing economic development plans. Conservation-related legislations and policies are put in place but eventual heritage conservation plans are predominantly selective and unsystematic (Jenkins and King, 2003). Many local people even objected heritage conservation because it is perceived to slow down economic development (Teo, 2003). The lack of appreciation by the state government and local people in heritage conservation even resulted in George Town being listed in the World Monument Watch 100 Most Endangered Sites in 2000 and 2002 (Nasution, 2008). Eventually, efforts were directed at conserving the rich heritage of George Town, with the aim making the city more liveable and attractive for investments and tourism.

In contrast, Melaka has a different experience. The state government´s interest in tourism started in the early 1980s (Ismail and Baum, 2006). The idea is to transform Melaka into a tourism destination by concentrating on improving accessibility, and connecting the towns in the north of the country to Malaysia's southern neighbour, Singapore (Ismail and Baum, 2006). Tourism is targeted as the main economic driver of the state. And to improve the city's image, Melaka State has formulated several urban planning strategies. A number of prominent agencies are part of the project, including the Melaka Museums Corporation (PERZIM), Melaka Historic City Council (MBMB), the Melaka State Town and Country Planning Department (JPBD) and the Chief Minister Office. Melaka City was to be transformed via ´museulogical methods´ (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2006). New urban planning and renewal efforts are to enhance the image of this historic Malaysian city (Cartier, 1998, 2001). In this process, old quarters were refurbished with new urban design ideas. Streets were renamed to bring about the mystic and historic elements of the city, for example, the Street of *Hang Jebat* (named after a legendary 15th Century palace guard who rebelled against the Melaka Sultan because of injustice) and *Tan Cheng Lock* (founder of the Malaysia Chinese Association, a prominent Chinese Malaysian politician who played an important role in negotiating for the independence of the country from the British in the 1950s).

Before 2008, Melaka City has already revitalised itself into a historical city adorned with modern infrastructure and public amenities. The city was also zoned and 'themed', such as the heritage city, garden city and friendly city. There is a concerted effort in bringing colonial historical buildings into the approved local historic narratives in the re-imagining of Melaka as a tourist destination (see *Melaka City Image,* 2003). Regardless, the Melaka City revitalization process largely supports the national Malay-centric Malaysian identity social engineering project (Worden, 2003, p: 31). The Malay ethnic group in Malaysia has a special status and Malays are privileged in economic and political spheres in the country. The other two main ethnic groups - Chinese and Indians - are deliberately marginalized.

As mentioned, there was a twist of fate for heritage conservation in March 2008 after the country's general elections and when the cities received their WH statuses. Penang voted in the opposition, and the state government has since been run by the opposition coalition. And cooperation between federal and state governments in Penang became uneven and bumpy. Melaka remained under the control of the ruling coalition, and it was 'business as usual'. Federal support for the Melaka State continued, and the narratives behind the branding of the historic city continued as before. The federal government has since limited its cooperation with Penang and resulted in the cancellation of collaboration between federal and state´s agencies in tourism (*The Star online*, 3 April, 2008). Federal funds for development were not channelled through the state-level administrative system. The Penang state government and Penangites (residents of Penang) were compelled not only to find new ways of revitalizing their island-state's economic fortunes, they wanted to demonstrate that they could govern better and they listen more to residents and local civil society. As a result, the branding of George Town and its heritage takes on a different path from Melaka's. The differences will be discussed next.

Branding George Town and Melaka as World Heritage Cities

In any place branding programme, a clear mission and vision is necessary (Hankinson, 2007). George Town and Melaka are no different but their execution of the branding missions is complicated and convoluted. Like in many other cities, George Town and Melaka have a number of city branding initiatives. Politicians and branding authorities often sound positive and encouraging through their official visions and missions. The WH statuses of these cities are central and have come to dominate various branding initiatives of these cities.

For George Town, it is the capital of Penang and takes the lead in making the island-state into an internationally-recognized developed and highly liveable place. The Chief Minister of Penang in October 2009 outlined three objectives for Penang: One, a location of choice for investors; two, a destination of choice for tourists; and three, a habitat of choice for sustainable living (Lim, 2009). These three aims are the so-called '3Es' people-centric mission: Enable, Empower and Enrich. The 3Es mean that people are given equal opportunities, regardless of their ethnicity, social class, political alliance or religion. Such an explicit statement on equality to all ethnic groups contrasts against the national policy of privileging the Malays. The opposition state government accentuates Penang as different from parts of Malaysia run by the ruling coalition. To the politicians, the WH recognition is an international acknowledgement that George Town has a long and glorious history of multi-ethnic interaction.

The economic development plan of Melaka state has largely concentrated on tourism. Since the 1980s, the authorities have promoted Melaka as a destination with a rich cultural heritage. Nonetheless, the state government has also introduced a vision to transform Melaka State into a modern and progressive city-state by year 2020. The

mission supposedly bore fruit when in October 2010, the Malaysia Prime Minister said that Melaka is a "developed state" (Sin Chew Jit Poh, 21 October 2010). Along this trajectory, the authorities are visualising Melaka as a world-class and sustainable city-state, driven economically by tourism. With the Melaka´s WH status, the authorities continue to celebrate a preserved past. But a number of tensions arise: conservation of material heritage versus new material heritage; top-down and bottom-up visions; local versus international recognition.

Planning and buildings

The tension between the federal and state governments in George Town is expectedly fierce. That is not the case in Melaka. The Melaka conservation programmes are run under the care of the Melaka Chief Minister Office. For George Town, the federal government established a company in December 2009 to shape and influence heritage conservation in the city. Instead of working with the Penang state authorities, the company – Think City – was given federal grants for conservation as outlined in the 2009 Malaysia annual budget report (Badawi, 2009). Think City and the Penang State authorities however have the common interest of revitalizing the built heritage because the WH recognition is indeed a boon for Penang and also for the country as a whole. An antagonistic relationship between the federal and state-level governments is not fruitful. But still with the support of Think City and its George Town Grants Programme (GTGP), a federal urban regeneration programme, the Penang government carried out conservation programme for 10% of the 4,000 heritage buildings in the city in 2011 (Ooi *et al*, *Penang Monthly,* February 2011, p: 12).

Indirectly, the WH recognition brings about opportunity for Penang state. The main objective of GTGP is to educate, encourage and involve local people, government agencies and private sector to sustain the city´s WH status and to transform the city into an international liveable city. It seems that through Think City, the federal and state governments learned to work together. The national Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006-2010) and Tenth Malaysia Plan (2011-2015) prioritize city development with the goal of enhancing economic prosperity and quality of life for residents. George Town and surrounding cities were and are incorporated into the national strategies. Hence, for the federal agencies, cooperating closely with state-level governments is necessary to realise the plans and vice versa.

The GTGP aims to make George Town into a more vibrant city that attracts tourists, investors and domestic migrants. Learning from other cities such as Paris, Shanghai, Singapore and Hong Kong, George Town is to incorporate conservation principles with cultural production and heritage creation in the bid to showcase its traditions and its contemporary cultural importance. So, as part of the plan, material heritage conservation is central. Dilapidated built heritage is restored. The building façades reflect their former glory although the buildings behind are literally rebuilt. These heritage buildings have also found new uses, such as being turned into restaurants,

souvenir shops and designer boutiques. Cultural and arts related businesses are considered particularly relevant for such restored spaces (Capel, *Penang Monthly,* 17 June 2013).

The restored buildings do not stand in a spatial vacuum. Strategies are devised to affirm a healthy, green and sustainable image for George Town. These include greening projects along the main streets. Fancy street lightings, standardized signage, colourful pathways, and new facilities and amenities to serve the public need are introduced.

Efforts are also spent on educating residents on maintaining and treating their surrounding environment well. Besides the beautification and illumination projects, cooperation from residents and visitors is considered necessary to maintain the physical environment and to live up to the hard-fought WH status. As a WH city, George Town is to `reflect a new social order' (Negrete, 2009, p:35), as advocated by a government-supported research report *Positioning Penang* (Kharas *et al*, 2010). George Town will be the nucleus of urban aesthetics, with highly liveable conditions that drives economic development, retain local population and attract international talents. The WH status is interpreted liberally.

Criticisms of the plans in Penang are however also plentiful. In the Penang Forum, a coalition of civil society groups, a dominant gripe is the appropriation of ´people centric development´ by big corporations and developers. Residents observe that more high-rises, shopping complexes, commercial offices and infrastructure are constructed but they cater mainly to the wealthy (Lim, *Penang Forum 5*, 2012 ; Lim *et al*, *Penang Monthly,* 2013). Uneven conservation of the city is another criticism of the state government; incidents are highlighted where heritage buildings beyond the inner city were neglected, defeating the idea of creating a socially inclusive and sustainable city (Lim, *Penang Forum 5,* 2012). Penang has a strong civil society which constantly criticizes the state government and agencies. This is partly contributed to the time of the British; as an international hub for trade, local people have come to adopt a more global outlook and also learned to vocally address local issues (Loh, 2009). Also during the colonial period, Malay and Chinese secret societies rule local politics and had control over a large swath of the economy (see Tan, 2009). Just as importantly, local civil society supported the state government in the past two general elections, and has been emboldened.

The case is quite different in Melaka. A senior officer in his 40s from a Melaka state agency observed (personal communication):

> Penang people are more vocal than [in Melaka]. They dare to protest. We [in Melaka] are more worried with what will happen if we oppose government projects.

Like George Town, Melaka follows a broad strategy. Melaka however has a steady and established relationship with the federal government because the state-government is

also run by the ruling coalition. The task of presenting and branding the historic city rests upon the Melaka World Heritage Office, MBMB and JPBD, all of which are under the Melaka Chief Minister Office. After the WH recognition, the authorities in Melaka decided to update the city's brand image, by incorporating a wider range of images, including one that says Melaka is modern, exciting, fun, adventurous and sustainable. This moves away from the past branding strategy of highlighting only the glorious history of the Malay Sultanate; Melaka is considered the founding spot of Malaysia.

The inner city was renovated and refurbished over the years according to series of urban design policies. The latest plan is for the maintenance and upgrading works in the city, with financial support from federal grants. But the support can still be distributed in a bipartisan manner. After the general election in May 2013, the authorities decided to close the refurbished Friday to Sunday night market in the city's main thoroughfare, *Jonker Street.* This decision is primarily considered political. Night market traders in *Jonker Street* were predominantly Chinese and the government seemed determined to punish Chinese voters for not supporting the ruling coalition (see Shukry, *freemalaysiatoday,* 26 June 2013). The former Melaka´s Chief Minister lost his seat in the 2013 elections and has blamed the Chinese voters (*The Malaymail online,* 15 May 2013).

And although the state-level and federal governments belong to the ruling coalition, there are also challenges in coordinating the conservation efforts. Due to the many government agencies involved in the activities, there are misunderstandings and disagreements on prioritization and management of resources for heritage conservation. There are also overlapping responsibilities among public agencies, and a lack of single leadership behind the development process. A senior officer from a state agency responsible in heritage conservation said (personal communication):

> It is always difficult to have a common say. There are too many agencies, each has its own idea and nobody wants to take the lead. Everyone is just waiting for somebody to propose projects, and the ideas ended up in the filing system.

Sections of the public are also disillusioned with the bureaucratic process and the seeming imprudent ways of spending on government sponsored projects. A Melaka tour operator who is in the business for more than 30 years lamented (personal communication):

> The government just spend and spend. The Chief Minister thinks that money is easy to get. He does not know the government has no money. Government agencies are always taking things for granted

Melaka is often considered more touristified than George Town in its conservation efforts. The government is less enthusiastic in diversifying the state's economy from tourism. And as a tourist destination, Melaka is to be a Mecca for consumption and pleasures. Thus, the branding strategies are rendered into several packages according

to tourist areas and products. The urban renewal strategy involves real estate developers, big corporations and international urban planners without highly audible protests from local people; a petty trader in his 70s voiced his resignation:

> The government is strong. We cannot say much and nobody will listen. But (the development) is good for tourism. The tourists like it.

With images of Las Vegas, developers and planners campaign for expensive and adventurous projects. For instance, Porto Historia, a huge US$ 29 million commercial complex facing the Melaka River was built for showcasing local cultural crafts. It is a joint venture between a state government´s company and the private sector (*The Star online,* 20 November 2012). Melaka accentuates the impression of being grandiose, expensive, modern and yet historical for three purposes. One, it is assumed what tourists want. Two, it celebrates the Malay history, as part of the national social engineering programme. Three, the authorities can afford them with full federal support.

Even though George Town and Melaka have similar urban regeneration strategies, what is preserved, what is accentuated and what messages the physical landscape communicate are different. George Town takes a more global outlook. Its WH status is used as a stepping stone towards building a more diversified economy, and without the aim of communicating the national version of history. Melaka is modernizing but the purpose is still to attract tourists, to showcase the Malay founding of the nation, and to assert the primacy of Malay heritage. Melaka seems to have become a cultural theme park, with a particular past frozen and a city created largely for tourist consumption. Regardless, even though relations between federal and state governments in Malaysia are smoother than in Penang, there are still diverse and vested interests within the system.

Heritage stories from top and bottom

While physical heritage can be conserved and enhanced, histories can be reformulated and revised. And as a heritage site evolves, new stories are added. Presenting coherent brand stories for George Town and Melaka is a challenge even though their WH statuses focus minds of various stakeholders.

In Penang, as already alluded above, the situation is complicated by the federal and state-level government contrasting agendas. The development and management of the branding of George Town is under the purview of the Penang Global Tourism (PGT), an agency established in 2010 by the Penang sate-government. PGT as a local tourism promotion bureau is expected to support Tourism Malaysia (the national tourism marketing agency) but Tourism Malaysia is 'reluctant' to promote an international image for the city. The national agency has its own set of narratives for Penang. PGT wants to celebrate the local multi-cultural heritage in its branding efforts and it should

be more than just ´a tropical island with white sand´ (Teo, 2003, pp:555-556). So for instance, local residents and associations were asked to suggest and nominate their own cultural events to be included in the state´s tourism calendar. The first step taken to promote Penang´s multicultural stories started in May 2011. It takes the WH status forward. The ´My Penang, My Experience´ campaign was launched in Singapore (Chua, *Penang Economic Monthly,* July 2011). Through this campaign, internationally-oriented and local stories were presented, including Jimmy Choo, a successful international shoe designer from Penang, and George Town as an authentic and living WH city.

This more bottom-up attempt is an expression of the opposition to the national government. The Penang state government engages local civil society, which largely supported it in the elections. Tourism Malaysia is perceived as having a top-down formulaic way of promoting Malaysian cultures and heritage. The national top-down version of history glorifies a Malay past and highlights the achievements of the ruling coalition, as articulated in Melaka.

Melaka's brand narrative is *´Melawat Melaka Bersejarah bererti melawat Malaysia',* or loosely translated as ´visiting Melaka is equivalent to visiting Malaysia´. The official iconic tourist experience will be the Melaka River cruise (Melaka Street Map, 2011):

> Visiting Historic City of Melaka is not complete without taking forty-five
> minutes cruise down the historic Melaka River

The boat ride tells a particular multi-cultural story of Malaysia. The official images of Malaysia are presented on the walls of old buildings by the banks. The diversity of Malaysia is presented through paintings of tropical flowers, local foods and Malaysians in different ethnic costumes. This celebrates a non-political and tolerant multi-culturalism.

This modern presentation of Melaka contrasts against the presence of some original tangible heritage in the city. The Portuguese ruled Melaka for 130 years, and the remnants of the walls of St Paul 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 till 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. 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 recognizing Melaka as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

A response to the highly visible Portuguese past is to dilute its presence by asserting other histories. The St Paul 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 uses 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 an independent Malaysia. The building itself is reduced to a shell telling officially sanctioned stories of the present regime (See Picture).

Picture: A banner honoring the Malaysian Prime Minister and his government in one of the museums in Melaka.

Emerging local stories and getting local involvement is sporadic in the branding of the WH city. The WH brand and story is weaved around the official narrative of the country. A tour guide in his 50s, who now works in Penang but has extensive experiences in working in Melaka said (personal communication):

> Melaka is different from Penang. You can see they purposely put up stories on the glories of Melaka and the Malay Sultanate. As a licensed guide, I have to tell my tourists (often foreigners) about Melaka and this is what Tourism Malaysia wants me to promote.

The Malay-slanted story is also observed by Sarkissian (1998). She observed that official cultural shows always feature pseudo presentations of other ethnic groups which distort the significance of their cultural practices and histories. The WH recognition does not dictate how heritage is eventually presented, and its veracity is defined by the powers-that-be.

Lessons and conclusions

Both George Town and Melaka are branded as World Heritage cities. Pursuing and attaining the WH status is an accreditation strategy in place branding (Ooi, 2011, 2014). The WH accreditation supposedly provides international and independent recognition of the place. Such an international recognition is flattering but the two cities in this study show that the interpretation, reification and maintenance of this status can go in divergent ways. There are lessons.

First, the WH brand is a focal point for politicians, public agencies and local communities. It is also a brand and resource for branding a city. But that resource is open, as history is revised. Furthermore, a WH city is also a 'living' space that develops and modernizes. How that should be done is up for discussion and debate. How should the WH brand and status remain authentic? The answer lies partly in the politics of the place.

So second, in reifying the WH brand and status, sections of local communities are worried about the uneven distribution of benefits and welfare. This is a salient issue in the literature. In both George Town and Melaka, for instance, big business and real estate developers have drawn the irk of local residents. UNESCO as the accreditation body has stated that the good that comes out of the recognition should be given to local communities. Unfortunately the cases of Malaysia show that means very little in measurement and enforcement. This is an institutional and systemic problem. And the danger is that the WH brand may become hollow and meaningless.

Third, the WH brand is used by politicians and officers as a rallying call, and that can also be the case for civil society. Local protests and laments in Melaka and George Town have adopted the narratives around their cities' WH statuses to seek more social equity for all. In this manner, the WH narrative enlivens the political discussion in local places on how communities should develop and emerge.

Finally, while this study highlights the relationships between federal and state-level governments, stakeholder relations are always sources of contention. Even in Melaka, conflicting agendas surface under a strong federal top-down mechanism. The branding of WH sites, like in other place branding projects, will always be messy and contentious.

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