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Politicization and Commodification of Tourism: Implications for George Town World Heritage Site

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Abstract

The inscription of World Heritage Status to both George Town and Melaka in 2008 had given tremendous impacts in terms of tourist arrivals and the growth of economy. While the inscription has pinned Malaysia on the global tourism map, the rapid pace of tourism development has resulted in a series of problems brought by tourism commodification. Tourism gentrification, outmigration and change of building uses are among the common symptoms of commodification. Taking George Town as a case study, this paper aims to explore the implications of tourism commodification, particularly on the physical impacts and local residents. This study is essential to identify the stage of commodification of the study area, whose development are based on the heritage commodification. Based on the site observations and semi-structured interviews with the residents, administrative staffs and business owners in the study area, several arguments are put forward in this paper. First, a phased process of tourism commodification has taken place in George Town, and triggered significant changes in lifestyle, community development, property market values and land use development. Second, George Town has shifted from a free trading port to a productivist heritage-scape, with local government being the principal influencing factor. Findings of the study reveal that commodification does not necessarily destroy the meaning of heritage in urban heritage destination, but also helps to improve economic status and quality of life of the local residents. Future research on commodification should be conducted in other World Heritage Sites and compare with the commodification stage in George Town World Heritage Site.

Keywords: Tourism, Commodification, Authenticity, World Heritage Site, Malaysia

Introduction

The emergence of commodification has been critically discussed in many international studies recently (Can et al., 2017; Meekaew & Srisontisuk, 2012). There are in-depth discussions on the effects of commodification among previous scholars which include standardisation of

culture and products, reduces cultural originality, destroy local identity as well as turn a local phenomenon into a global one. All these issues indirectly result to cultural conflicts, which later create social imbalance and reduce destination attractiveness. Past studies showed that commodification emerged due to the increasing demand of tourism activities, with regards to tourists' behaviour who want to seek for different culture experience from their own. As a result of uncontrolled tourism, authentic cultures are slowly replaced by a single monoculture, led by the process of 'McDonaldization' or 'Disneyfication' that transforms everything into a theme park and make travel experiences impossible (Ritzer, 2008; Ritzer & Liska, 1997). It becomes a serious matter when even the locals feel that due to commoditisation, they have lost their original meanings and become inauthentic. As a result, it creates fundamental social, cultural changes and the emergence of a new-created culture. Tourists who visit a destination would want to experience a real, authentic culture of the place and not the 'staged authenticity', where their original culture is put up to gain business profit and are taken out of context, different from the original ones. This situation can be seen in many heritage destinations such as in Bali (Indonesia), Morocco, Chiangkhan (Thailand) as well as Luang Prabang (Laos).

Many scholars believe that the designation of a World Heritage Site (WHS) is the catalyst to rapid tourism development due to the increased publicity of those destination areas (Li et al., 2008). Hall and Piggin in Li et al (2008) conducted a survey of 44 WHS, in which the site managers reported that there had been an increase in visitor numbers after the sites gained the WHS status. Although the heritage listing appears to contribute to heritage preservation and attract tourism investments, Smith (2002) argued that WHS can be perceived as a double-edged sword. Many of the 1,052 destinations across the world that have been awarded with the WHS status have been struggling to balance their economic benefits in catering the visitors and preserving the cultural value that drew the recognition (Barron, 2017). The heritage designation started in 1972, with the aim to identify and preserve the historic sites but urges than it then attracts a burgeoning of tourists that the unique culture of the sites is destroyed. Luang Prabang, for instance was once resided by 50,000 people, has been visited by nearly 700,000 tourists in 2018. The historic houses have turned into hotels and restaurants. In fact, the street markets are no longer unique and quite similar to the street markets in other tourist destinations. Besides that, the locals are losing their sense of culture and remained complaint of tourists' rude behaviour. Despite warnings that tourists should respect the local customs, some tourists may thrust their camera to the monks' faces as they go on their rounds. Perhaps in the next future, we might see some fake monks act during alms giving for tourists show.

In Malaysia, the emergence of commodification may be observed at several popular destinations, such as Melaka, George Town, Langkawi and Johor Bahru. Research by Salim and Mohamed (2018) provides a vivid example of tourism commodification in Melaka World Heritage City. Previously, the heritage buildings along the Melaka River used to be residential areas, has now transformed into commercial uses such as boutique hotels, restaurants and cafe. In Heeren Street, for example, many of the residential buildings have been converted into boutique hotels, private museums and restaurants run by the descendants of the Peranakan families. In addition, back lanes are improved, and the creation of creative sidewalks along the river has attracted tourists to enjoy the view of the river. The growth of tourism along the Melaka Waterfront leads to the existence of more branded stores and cafes such as the H&M store, a Swedish multinational clothing retail company, and Hard Rock Café to attract more tourists to the city. The development and location of the new Hard Rock Café

building are seen as inappropriate with the preservation of historic structures within the core heritage area. The tourism industry may be a catalyst for economic growth and cross-cultural exchange for the state government; however, this has created a social imbalance between modern design buildings and the existence of historic structures.

The inscription of World Heritage Status to both George Town and Melaka had given tremendous impacts in terms of tourism arrivals and the growth of economy. Different heritage trails were established and promoted since the inscription, specially designed heritage routes, exhibitions and events were held. Nonetheless, due to the rapid transformation of the cities with a sense of commodification for economic purposes, heritage sites in Malaysia, particularly in both George Town and Melaka are reconstructed at various levels. In George Town for example, tourism arrivals to the state increase to 7.23 million in 2017, compared to only five million in 2007 (Sustainable Tourism Research Cluster, 2017). The burgeoning numbers of tourists visiting George Town due to the heritage status may positively increase the economic growth, however, the effect from the listing has caused high rental properties. While some keep their original forms, others are renewed and built to serve newer purposes. Between 2009 and 2013, around 231 residential properties have been repurposed to accommodate other commercial activities. Within that time, the number of hotels and tourist accommodations in the area had increased from 61 to 97 premises. In 2015, there were 211 vacant properties. One of the reasons is due to the increase in rental by property owners that had driven out most of the original tenants out of the city, taking along their social and cultural history with them. As a result, a change in social fabric occurs that will create imbalance among community sustainability. Waterfront area in George Town is also one of the affected areas. With greater benefits of tourism, many fun art museums can be seen flocking at the city centre. Fun art museum is an example of commodification, where its establishment is mainly created to lure in tourists. This situation if not prevented, George Town may hold the risk of losing its heritage status. Thus, this paper tends to study how commodification changes the development of urban heritage destinations. This research is important for those who seek to understand how tourism commodification is linked to local economic change and physical changes at the heritage site.

Tourism and Commodification

Previous research in tourism revealed that tourism activity can have a significant impact on destination area. Destinations with diverse social and cultural background are likely to attract more tourists, especially those with historic environment. The tourism industry in Malaysia, particularly in Penang is one of the major contributors in sustaining valuable historic resources. However, the burgeoning numbers of visitors can be self-defeating, if they impact adversely on the heritage that attracts them. In the concept of tourist-historic city, Ashworth and Tunbridge (2008) mentioned that heritage resources attract tourism which later contribute to revitalization of the heritage town. The growth of heritage tourism led not only to an increase in tourist demands, but also contribute to an increase in the supply of cities attempting to cater tourist demands and gain profit from such demand expansion. Besides that, the Malaysian government also recognized that heritage can be used to encourage and strengthen an identification of people with localities. The effort can be seen when the National Heritage Department of Malaysia initiates the application for World Heritage Sites for both Melaka and Penang from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Different stakeholders may have different views on this but, heritage cannot be sustained if no improvement is made to preserve it, especially when future

generation lacks heritage awareness (Rahman & Omar, 2018). The emerging of heritage tourism has caused a city branding of heritage destination that offers intangible and tangible heritage products. As a result, this phenomenon has led to the commodification of built historic environment to serve tourism market demand. Commodification as viewed by Chhabra (2009); Caton and Santos (2007) is modification of heritage resources or products and to promote a particular destination.

Research on commodification has been documented in various field of studies including from the perspective of culture (Bui & Lee, 2015; Fiaux, 2010; Meekaew & Srisontisuk, 2012; Ritzer & Liska, 1997), language (Suryanarayan, 2017), social lifestyle (cited by Dogan in Can et al., 2017), economic as well as built environment (Rahman & Mohamed, 2013). The concept of commodification is often discussed in tourism research as an outcome of tourism industry. Cole (2007) viewed commodification as culture being turned into a commodity, packaged and sold to the tourists. Commodification refers to a process by which services or goods previously outside a market enter a market, gain exchange value and afterwards produced for profit or the movement of items' production and exchange into a monetized economy (La Grange et al., 2006). Commodification exists when goods or services become tradable in the market. In order to make a market system function effectively, it must commodify those goods and services that are valued by the consumers (Sternberg, 2000). From the aspect of economy, commodification is best described as when an object is brought to the market to be transacted in exchange of money (Davis & Dolfsma, 2015). Commodification is an issue that is closely related to the concept of authenticity. When unbridled, it is generally perceived as negative and devalues an experience or cultural activity. As a process, commodification shifts things that were formerly freely available to the local community into an economic domain where exchange value is overt and exclusions set in (Hannam & Knox, 2010). In the context of this study, commodification can be best defined as changes or adaptive use of tourism products that are commercialized to suit tourists' interest without losing its heritage value.

It is argued that inauthenticity is often derived from the commodification processes, which give a phenomenon an alienating and particular exchange value (Halewood & Hannam, 2001). The commodification of tourism occurs when tourism turns culture into a commodity, packaged and sold to tourists, resulting in a loss of authenticity (Cole, 2007). It becomes a serious matter when the locals feel that they have lost their cultural meaning and become inauthentic. As a result, it creates fundamental social, cultural changes, and the emergence of a new-created culture. Tourists who visit a destination want to experience a real, authentic culture of the place and not the 'staged authenticity,' where performances are put up to gain profit and are taken out of context, different from the original ones. When communities modify and change the heritage sites and traditions to meet the needs of the visitors, it directly leads to a less authentic representation of their heritage. Over time, the burgeoning of investment and commodification may decrease the authenticity in terms type of product offered to the tourists and the destruction of a community's identity in the long term (Sullivan, 2010).

Commodifying Heritage Destinations

Akhoondnejad (2016) believes that tourism slowly turns culture into a commodity, which often results in a loss of authenticity. Research by Xu et al (2013) on the commodification of Chinese heritage villages revealed several symptoms of commodification. The symptoms include large numbers of tourists, the modern shops and hotels, and the indifferent attitude

of the local people towards tourists. With the increasing potential of the tourism industry, there has been a change of building use from residential to commercial uses. Many heritage buildings have been repurposed into boutique hotels, bed-and-breakfast lodgings, cafes, galleries, museums, guest houses and many other businesses to cater to the increasing number of tourists. Another example can be observed in the historic town of Lijiang, China. Lijiang had become an important heritage destination since the late 1980's when it was designated as one of Yunnan's four official tourist destinations. The ratification of awarding the World Heritage status by UNESCO in 1997 had taken its toll when the town slowly turned into a tourist hot spot. The success of the World Heritage nomination and its branding as a World Heritage Site has given a new 'name card' for Lijiang. With a steadily increasing flow of domestic tourism, business investment and migration, the town successfully attracted 7.6 million visitors in 2009, ten years after its inscription, and received 8.8 billion yuan in revenue from tourism (Zhu, 2016). The increasing tourism revenue was indeed an achievement for the state government of Lijiang. However, the influx of tourists to Lijiang has brought dramatic changes to the place and its culture. From the perspective of the tourism market, the positive and negative impacts of commodification are quite controversial. Rahman and Narendra (2017) mentioned that the alteration of resident's houses could also be regarded as one of the impacts of commodification. Their research on creative tourism in Tenganan Pegriingsingan Village, Bali, revealed that majority of the residents' houses have turned into selling places for souvenirs. The houses have changed into a place where visitors can see handicrafts or learn how to make it, leaving the original view of the house to become unclear. In addition, some buildings are expanded into areas that are prohibited from being developed by heritage law.

While most of the previous literature view that commodification reduces the value of authenticity, some authors argued that commodification helps in saving the tradition from extinction (Cohen, 1988; Halewood & Hannam, 2001; Abd Hamid, 2017). Some people may positively accept commodification as a tourism product, whereas some people negatively perceived commodification and reject the changes brought by tourism commodification (Mbaiwa, 2011). Prideaux and Timothy in Nguyen and Cheung (2017) offer a further interesting thought on commodification. Rather than openly assuming that commodification has a negative impact on authenticity, they argue that commodification provides a new symbol of culture, which can be used as a marketing tool. Cohen (1988) supports this idea by taking the example of Balinese dance. He argues that tourists are usually prepared to accept tourism commodification as authentic, and a few traits of authenticity are sufficient for tourists' acceptance of an authentic product. Hence, both tourists and performers are willing to pretend that a commoditised product is authentic.

Methodology

Based on the previous studies related to the issues on commodification of heritage destinations, this paper investigates how tourism commodification impacts the development of George Town, by evaluating its changes before and after the inscription of the World Heritage Site. Primary and secondary data were used to obtain the appropriate outcome of the study. Secondary data were derived from various references such as historical books, journals, government documents as well as proceedings to oversee the evolution of waterfront development at the study area. Primary data on the other hand were derived from semi-structured interview with business owners, local people, government officers and non-governmental agencies related to tourism industry. Data collection for this study is

conducted into two stages, which include observation (first stage) and semi-structured interviews (second stage). However, this paper only focused on the analysis from observation only. For the first stage, direct observation is employed and any changes in urban tourism planning on the streets and buildings at the waterfront area are studied. Building inventory consists of building use is recorded to identify the variation of urban forms.

Findings

Findings of this study start with the brief introduction of waterfront evolution along the Weld Quay and how its development slowly changed the urban form of the waterfront. The analysis continued with identifying the impacts of commodification based on the literature review mentioned earlier in this paper. This process is important to evaluate how tourism development have affected the facade and use of the adjacent buildings.

1. Evolution of waterfront

Evolution of George Town starts during 1786, where the development of George Town was focused on along the Weld Quay waterfront. Since water is the main transportation mode, port activities were busy, and the waterfront has been a starting point and well-known trading centre for regional and international merchants. During 1811 until 1820, there was no major change in along the waterfront area. The development of shop houses, residential areas, Masjid Lebu Acheh and administrative buildings created an urban form of George Town. In 1821, the urbanization of George Town continued to spread towards the inner city as more administrative buildings were built.

During 1901, both main land and water transportation system were improved. The road networks were developed by Light from Fort Cornwallis towards the inner city. Most of the buildings at that time are generally 15 feet wide by 40 to 100 feet deep to allow for maximum number of property ownership along the waterfront (Zubir & Sulaiman, 2004). During this period, the development of road networks slowly changed the urban form of George Town, which initially focused on the Weld Quay waterfront into the inner city (refer to Figure 1). The reclamation project along the waterfront has caused the development directed towards Weld Quay waterfront. In 1920, the development of George Town was distributed away from the waterfront as a result of major improvement of land transportation. The function of water transportation becomes less importance during the period except for port and trading activities.

In 1960s, tourism came in light when Muslims from north Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand would come to George Town for pilgrimage to Mecca. However, tourism was perceived negatively by the society due to the spread of drugs and social problems. Revocation of free port status in the 1960s has given a tremendous impact to the waterfront development. The state suffered economic decline and immense unemployment. In 1974, the Penang Port was relocated from George Town to Butterworth, to allow for the berthing of larger container and cargo vessels. Tourism continued to expand until the Malaysia government seen its potential in cultural heritage and submitted application for both George Town and Melaka for the World Heritage Sites.

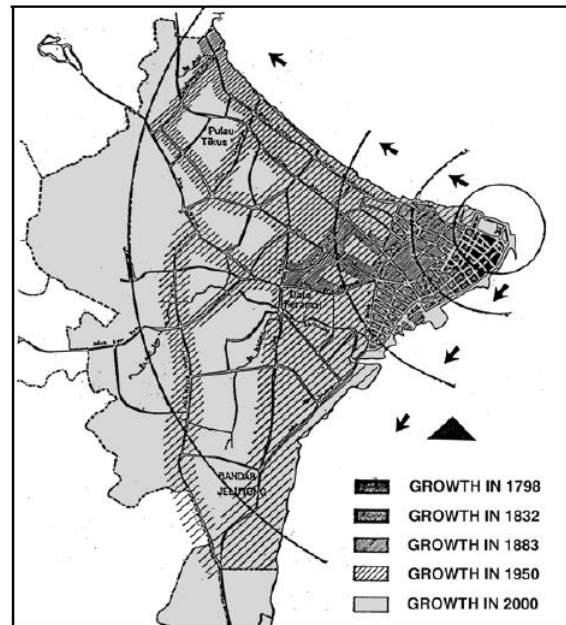


Figure 1: Urbanization of George Town waterfront move inwards the inner city
Source: Zubir and Sulaiman (2004)

Impacts from the World Heritage Status

The inscription of World Heritage Status to both Melaka and George Town on 7th July 2008, has given a new direction to tourism industry. As for George Town, the World Heritage status has caused tourism commodification on built heritage environment and economy of its surrounding area. One of the impacts of tourism commodification can be seen from the aspect of building use and business activities. Previously, most of the buildings along the waterfront area used to be residential areas. Nowadays, the increasing potential and lucrative benefits gained from the tourism industry have turned these heritage buildings into commercial use such as boutique hotels, bed-and-breakfast lodgings, cafes, galleries, museums, guest houses and many other businesses to cater the increasing number of tourists. The following findings revealed several physical impacts as a result from tourism commodification in the study area:

Change of urban form and activities

Based on the content analysis from history books and Special Area Plan of George Town, old and current street photographs are compared to understand the physical changes of the town and evolution of the way of life brought upon modernization. For example, the colonial administrative buildings along the Weld Quay (refer to Figure 4) were demolished during the war and now replaced with a replica of the colonial buildings which house several commercial activities. At present, the buildings have been renovated into hotel (Royal Bintang Hotel), fun art museum (3D Art Museum), shops as well as restaurants. Back in those days, Weld Quay used to have vibrant trading activities happening along the street, making George Town as the main trading port centre. Today, parts of waterfront have been reclaimed for landscaping and car parks. Trade activities have been replaced with vehicular traffic movement.

a. Change of building use and social fabric



Figure 2: Weld Quay (then and present situation)
Source: Langdon (2014) and George Town Special Area Plan (2016)

Godown

Godowns or 'Gudang' in George Town are warehouses used to store goods back in 1950s. Nowadays, instead of letting the buildings to become vacant, the State Government has taken some measures into turning the godowns into creative hubs. For example, Gudang@Cecil Street is a warehouse concept event venue. The Gudang have hosted many cultural and modern events that attract many visitors. In addition, some godowns near Victoria Street are also will be converted into rentable areas for future animation studios as an initiative by the State Government to preserve historic buildings.

Clan Jetties of George Town

Clan Jetties, located along the coastline of Weld Quay, are water villages with rows of wooden houses on stilts built above the sea which connected by planked walkways. In the late 19th century, the Clan Jetties became dwelling places by Chinese immigrants who shared the common surnames and originated from similar towns in mainland China. The establishment of clan settlement was rather unplanned. Back in the old days, the jetties were used by the clan members to loading and unloading of goods and for mooring of the sampans. Simple sheds were built to provide shelter and rest for those waiting for the arrival of 'tongkang'. The simple sheds were later converted for into residential and the number of houses increased henceforth.



Figure 3: Current map of Clan Jetties
 Source: George Town World Heritage Incorporated (2017)

The clan jetties previously were the settlement of the clan members. The Clan Jetties constantly faced the threat of demolition by the authorities who saw the clan quarters as slum area. Originally, there were seven clans (Ong Jetty, Lim Jetty, Chew Jetty, Tan Jetty, Lee Jetty, New Jetty, Yeoh Jetty, Peng Aun Jetty and Koay Jetty). However, in 2006, Peng Aun Jetty and Koay Jetty were demolished by the state government to allow for new development. Residents of the jetties were relocated at the outside of the city. Nowadays, the Clan Jetties have been gazetted as Penang Heritage Village, being the conserved as part of George Town's heritage legacy.

The inscription of World Heritage Status has given greater impacts to the local residents at the Clan Jetties. Some residents are seen to venture into tourism business and turned their home into souvenir shops. 54% of the residents involved in tourism business, while the remaining villagers work in manufacturing sectors. Being the biggest and most visited water village among other Clan Jetties, Chew Jetty is more or less becoming the living human zoo for the tourists. Although each of the jetties has their visiting time (from 9.00 am to 9.00 pm daily), some villagers felt disrupted when visitors would simply take pictures without their consent. Informal conversation with some of the villagers revealed these,

“Not to mention that tourism does give lucrative income to me but it is getting more competitive as more people would sell the same products as yours. I used to get many customers but now I hardly get to sell my things”

Respondent A from Chew Jetty

“Chew Jetty is the only jetty that welcome and involve in tourism business. As for other jetties, we are more comfortable with what we have now. We want our jetties to live in harmony and quite environment”

Respondent B from Lim Jetty

Visual Impacts

Before Melaka and George Town are gazetted as World Heritage Site (WHS), some of the building façade at the heritage area were modified to cater development needs. However, after inscription of WHS, all heritage buildings are preserved, and any changes are restricted under UNESCO's conservation law. Since the Clan Jetties fall under Building Category 2, any inhouse changes are permitted as long as it complies with the National Heritage Act and does not change the façade of the buildings. Some villagers take the initiative in beautifying their home wall into something creative to attract tourists. These creative wall paintings attract many visitors to the place, and at the same time, help in insisting awareness among tourists. This initiative is seen as an effort by the locals to preserve the heritage buildings.



Figure 4: Some stilt houses were turned into café and decorated to attract visitors to Chew Jetty.



Figure 5: Vacant space and wall are decorated to attract visitors to Chew Jetty.
Picture taken by the researcher on 17th July 2018



Figure 6: Panorama view of Chew Jetty
Picture taken by the researcher on 17th July 2018

Discussion and Conclusion

This study is carried out to explore the implications of tourism commodification at George Town World Heritage Site. Based on the findings above, the issue of commodification can be clearly seen at the study area. This includes outward migration, change in building uses, disrupted daily routines, increasing dispute within the community, loss of traditional trades and higher price of goods. The study findings on the impacts of commodification are in line with those reported by Zaidan and Kovacs (2017), who argued that loss of local identity, and higher price of goods and services, are among the adverse impacts of tourism commodification in the urban heritage destinations. Despite negative impacts derived from the tourism development, commodification of tourism gives a new life to heritage culture and adaptive use. In addition, George Town managed to improve its local economy and quality of life of the local community.

George Town has been recognised to be a developed, unique heritage city with a booming tourism industry due to its unique history, people and heritage value. However, appropriate measures must be put into consideration to ensure a sustainable tourism development in years to come. Since tourism contributes half of the state's economy, the state government should set some top-down initiatives to incorporate the environmental and economic regulations of the city's tourism development. This approach is essential especially for case studies that require Management Plans for the heritage preservation, entwined with tourism activities that influence the state's development.

Future research should focus more on the aspect of building commodification on the other parts of heritage buildings in George Town World Heritage Site, such as The Blue Mansion and Fort Cornwallis. Besides that, commodification on heritage products at the study area such as *songkok* making, joystick-making as well as local beaded shoes should be studied to identify types of commodification and improvement can be made to ensure sustainability of the products. In addition, future research should also be directed on the impacts of commodification at Melaka World Heritage Site and a comparison study between these two heritage sites would be great.

Finally, it is important to highlight that this study was conducted between 2018 and 2019, before the outbreak of Covid-19. Since the pandemic has dramatically hit the tourism sector, future studies should consider this aspect and the following effects.

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Declaration of Interest

This manuscript has not been submitted to, nor under review at, another journal or other publication venue. The authors have no affiliation with any organization with a direct or indirect financial interest in the subject matter discussed in the manuscript.

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